

The Fourth Southern Labor Studies Conference

Gary M. Fink

Georgia State University

The Fourth Southern Labor Studies Conference met at the Urban Life Conference Center on the campus of Georgia State University in downtown Atlanta, September 30–October 2, 1982. Highlights of the conference included the eleventh annual Dale Somers Memorial Lecture, “The Common Laborer in the 19th Century,” delivered by David Montgomery, and Eric Hobsbawm’s conference keynote address, “The Making of the English Working Class, 1879–1914.”

The opening session of the conference, entitled “E. P. Thompson and *The Making of the English Working Class: A Twenty Year Retrospective*,” featured an analysis of the historiographic impact of Thompson’s classic study on both sides of the Atlantic. In his retrospective review of *The Making of the English Working Class*, Richard Price argued that because Thompson’s book is as much an interpretation of the historical process as it is a provable thesis, only those historians willing to grapple with the relations between theory and history have been able to offer effective critiques. These analyses, Price concluded, “have turned upon Thompson’s notions of culture as the central agency in history, upon his failure to enter capital into the process and upon his hostility to theory.” Analyzing Thompson’s influence on American historians, Michael Cassity, “After Two Decades: The English Model and the American Context,” concluded that Thompson’s work, along with that of other English social historians, has provided a model of historical analysis that numerous American historians have used effectively; but, he noted, the efforts of American historians to find an American working class comparable to that identified by Thompson have thus far proven futile.

Insights drawn from the “English Model” were apparent in many of the papers read at the conference. This was especially obvious in the analyses of class organization in the urban South provided by Jim Leloudis, Robert Korstad and Clifford Kuhn. Leloudis discussed the development of class consciousness in Charlotte textile mills; Korstad examined the work and culture of black women in Winston-Salem tobacco factories; and Kuhn used 1880s Atlanta to discuss the role of labor and politics against the backdrop of the New South creed. Meanwhile, John Beck placed his emphasis on working-class culture in an analysis of workers’ children in Highlander junior camps during the early 1940s, and Neil Basen concentrated on socialism and feminism in the Southwest.

Black workers and/or the role of race in union organizing campaigns were examined by several participants. In a discussion of United States Steel's welfare capitalism, Dennis Dickerson examined the experiences of black welfare officers and southern black workers in Pennsylvania during the period of 1916–1940. Merl Reed, also focusing on black workers in Pennsylvania, discussed the activities of the Fair Employment Practices Commission during World War II. Dolores Janiewski, Horace Huntley and Michael Honey all discussed the issue of race in southern organizing campaigns and the strategies adopted by unions and union organizers to cope with it. Janiewski examined the Tobacco Workers International Union in Durham, North Carolina; Huntley detailed the experiences of Mine Mill in Alabama; and Honey described the CIO's interracial organizing efforts during Operation Dixie. Along similar lines, Leon Fink and Jon Bloom discussed the influence of the Civil Rights Movement in strikes of southern low wage workers, many of whom were female and black. Fink's analysis focused on the Charleston hospital strike of 1969, while Bloom analyzed the 1966–67 ILGWU Kellwood strike in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Two constants in any discussion of southern labor are textiles and the hostile union atmosphere in the South. Textiles provided the subject of two papers: Bess Beatty examined the northern influences on the development of the North Carolina textile industry during the 19th century, and Robert Botsch analyzed the "politics of brown lung." Problems created by the anti-labor southern environment were described by Robert Ingalls, Philip Grant and Gilbert Gall. Ingalls discussed anti-labor vigilantes during the 1930s, while Grant and Gall focused on "right-to-work" legislation during the 1940s. Organized labor's image in the South during the 1930s was examined by Herral Landry.

On Friday afternoon, October 1, an experimental session was held in which an effort was made to combine traditional scholarly analyses, a filmed documentary, and live oral histories. Entitled "An Afternoon with the Auto Workers," the session included a showing of the film, "With Babies and Banners," formal papers presented by Nelson Lichtenstein and Seth Wigderson on the auto workers and the UAW during the 1940s and 50s, respectively, and spontaneous interviews with former auto workers and local union officials conducted by Clifford Kuhn. E. J. Hobsbawm later described the session as the "best labor history session" he had ever attended.

As with previous Southern Labor Studies Conferences, an effort was again made to bring labor activists and scholars together in as many sessions as possible. The value of this tactic is obvious to anyone who attended these sessions. Labor activists such as Frank Mont, Civil Rights Department, United Steelworkers of America, Nick Builder, ACTWU organizer, Joseph Jacobs, Atlanta labor attorney and Karl Korstad, former organizer for the Food, Tobacco and Agricultural Workers Union, provided invaluable insights on the subjects under discussion.

Although much of the conference program was constructed through the traditional call for papers and individual solicitation, several trends became apparent as conference participants read their papers. In many ways, the most intriguing development is the emergence of a "new" institutional history informed by the work of

social historians and sensitive to the interrelationship between unions and the rank and file. It would appear obvious that after a period of at least partial estrangement a reconciliation has taken place between institutional and social or working class historians. The papers delivered by Daniel Nelson on the Rubber Workers and Donald Sofchalk on Mine Mill provide excellent examples of these newer dimensions in institutional history. Similarly, Sharon Trusilo discussed a new model for analyzing labor leadership. Meanwhile, the papers of Fink, Wigderson, Lichtenstein and others illustrated yet another trend—the integration of social and institutional history.

The continued revival of narrative history as an analytical tool and a literary art form was also apparent. In his Pulitzer Prize winning *Been in the Storm So Long*, Leon Litwack demonstrated the advantages of integrating social and narrative history; and in their conference addresses, David Montgomery and Eric Hobsbawm held their listeners' avid attention with a similar approach.

What had become obvious to this observer by the end of the conference is that labor history—institutional, social, working class—has established itself as the most exciting, innovative and challenging field of historical inquiry in the United States today. For that we owe much to Thompson, Hobsbawm, Gutman, Montgomery and a host of others who led the way.