

Searching for a Usable Past:  
Fifty Years of Writing Southern Labor History

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I would like to thank the SLSA program committee for inviting me and for doing such a wonderful job putting together this conference. Co-Chairs Traci Drummond and Alex Lichtenstein, SLSA officers Cindy Hahamovitch, Evan Bennett, and Beth English

Recently one of the deans of American labor history, Melvyn Dubofsky, observed that over the past fifty years there has been a “veritable scholarly revolution in the writing of southern labor history.” The recent founding of the Southern Labor Studies Association and the success of its parent organization, the Labor and Working Class History Association and its journal *Labor*, are testament to the great strides that have been made in the field. That scholarly revolution is still ongoing as witnessed by our gathering this weekend and the many young scholars on the program and in the audience.

The work on southern labor has not been limited to the recent past or to the persistent query—“why there are so few unions here.” Indeed, as I was preparing for this talk, I was interested to find that some of the most fascinating recent scholarship has looked at the eras before industrialization and at workers who never saw the inside of a factory or voted in an NLRB election.

- Native Americans during the times before European colonization
- Africans, those who made it and the many who didn't, in the holds of slave ships that carried them across the Atlantic to their new workplaces on southern plantations
- Proletarian seamen
- Dockworkers
- Craftsmen
- Agricultural laborers in both ante and post-bellum South

If we are going back in time, we are doing equally exciting work in the present as labor scholars, who are always on the lookout for a good fight, are in the thick of battle as conservatives and big business launch yet another attack on the nation's workers. This is a critical moment for all of us not only to do history but also to help make history by reasserting the dignity of workers and their right to organize and bargain collectively and by passing on our passion and commitment to a new generation of young scholars and activists.

A few weeks ago I was speaking to SDS chapter at UNC-Chapel Hill about the impact of the economic crisis on public education. The organizer of the conference had just spent an exciting few days in Madison. Anna Maria Reichenbach told the audience that she had seen a banner that summed up the struggle for her. "An injury to one is an injury to all." She had no idea that this was the motto of the Industrial Workers of the World or that it probably came from a Knights of Labor slogan. But her own experiences as a student activist had led her to one of the most important insights about workers' struggle everywhere. She proceeded to make a powerful and emotional statement about the need for solidarity. I'll read a bit of it in case you need reassurance that there are some dynamic young freedom fighters out there.

"An injury to one is an injury to all" stood out with me because while I was there I saw an array of people, 150,000 people, mothers and fathers, children, workers, students, graduate students, and people from Chicago, and San Francisco, from New York. People quit their jobs to join the struggle, environmentalists, teachers, people of all races, high school

students, nurses, socialists, firefighters, and even some Republicans. I even saw sick people who had come to defend their access to Medicaid and people from all over the world who had shown their solidarity by buying pizza for those occupying the building. When talking to these people it seemed to me that they could clearly understand how their own individual struggle was connected to a larger struggle of working class people. When teachers don't get paid enough we are all affected. When workers get lower wages we are all affected. When our tuition goes up the entire country is affected. When all the wealth is concentrated among the already wealthy, we all suffer a deep loss. The media and the system in general preach individualism to try to make us forget that together we can accomplish many things. If we are fighting for anything, we need to understand it this way; united is the only way we will win.

Anna Maria's story is important because the fifty years of southern labor history that I want to talk about tonight had its beginnings in another moment of political upheaval, the social movements of the 1960s. As African Americans, students, women, peace activists, and antipoverty warriors fought against the multiple injustices that constrained their freedom and limited their opportunities, they began to look to the past for lessons, heroines, and a better understanding of how the South got into the mess it was in in the first place.

As they began their glance backward, they discovered that as Herbert Gutman observed, the South suffered from a "constricted historical memory." In the introduction to a collection of essays on southern labor history, which by the way contained my first

publication, Gutman argued that a primary reason for the dearth of writing on the southern working class was the “assimilation” and “achievement” model of American historiography. All emphasis is given to those who “succeeded” and those who society considers the “losers” are simply written out of the nation’s narrative. That was part of the story, but white supremacists in the first half of the twentieth century also did a remarkable job of stripping black people of any historical agency and erasing all memory of interracial cooperation. Anticommunism similarly expunged class from most discussions of the southern past and vilified the often-heroic efforts of the left as little more than Soviet subversion. And finally, as we found in *Like a Family* and *Civil Rights Unionism*, the wounds of defeat were as effective as any muzzle. To overcome these gaps in historical memory and apply that new knowledge to the ongoing struggles, labor activists and scholars have mined the archives and interviewed people in every nook and cranny of the South.

I want to talk briefly about how some activists of the sixties began to search for a usable past; then I will turn to a discussion of what I see as some of the key insights from 50 years of southern labor history and consider what they might tell us about the battles of the future.

The beginnings of this interest in southern working class history can be found in the questions being asked by young activists in the early to mid 1960s. I will just touch on a couple of examples here: blacks most generally associated with SNCC, SCLC, and CORE and whites in SSOC, SCEF, and SDS.

Vincent Harding, an historian and religious scholar who worked closely with SNCC, SCLC, and CORE, is one example. In an article entitled “History: White, Negro,

and Black,” Harding summed up ideas he had been developing since the early sixties. He called for a new history that looked at America through black experiences that judged “the nature of the American experience . . . by the way in which the most downtrodden of the society have been treated.” “Black history,” Harding says, “is not just about black people . . . Black history speaks about seeing all of America through black eyes, about placing our definition not only on the black experience, but on the entire experience.” Harding was asking, I think, not only for a different history, but also for history done differently. A case in point was the study of slavery. “Black history says that these people were not slaves (that’s the white man’s definition of who they were). Black history says that these were our fathers and mothers who were held in bondage. It is a different kind of thing. We must know about their life during slavery. We must know about the way in which they struggled against the bonds of slavery, how they endured slavery, how they constructed their life to deal with that particular aspect of white power upon them.”

The rediscovery of the white working class South grows directly out of the frustrations of young white activists trying to engage poor whites in the fights for economic justice. In the spring of 1964, a small group of white college students from across the South met in Nashville to found the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SOCC). Most of the students had been involved in the civil rights movement, some as members of SNCC, and they wanted to mobilize young whites to support the black freedom struggle as well as to challenge the entrenched political and economic power of elites. They immediately looked to the past to find to find other white southerners “who worked to subvert the racial and economic order.” They used what they could from the

works of C. Vann Woodward, V.O. Key, Paul Gaston, and others. But SOCC members also took to the archives themselves to find what one member called “historical encouragement” for their political activism and they published historical articles in their magazine, *New South Student*, some by established scholars, others by the students themselves. In 1969, SOCC organized a history conference here in Atlanta. “Radical southern history is our history,” the conference bulletin read. “We are that struggle alive today—fighting the same oppression and many of the same problems. With an analysis of earlier struggles, we can develop a better understanding of what we are about.”

Populism was the poster child for these white, and to a lesser extent black, sixties radicals, and no one was more adamant about the need to embrace the Populist tradition than John Salter, a SCEF staff member who was active in Mississippi and North Carolina. “There can be no question,” he wrote, “but that in the South in general (or in the nation as a whole, of course) only an interracial movement of the poor can dig deeply into the root causes of poverty and exert the pressure necessary to alleviate and cure these causes – and develop a genuinely democratic society. And this means that the poor white must somehow be reached in a positive fashion. To forfeit him will be to commit a moral wrong – and to forfeit that hope of a genuinely good society. The interracial Populist vision is as valid a necessity now as it was almost eighty years ago.”

In 1970, a group of these young activists came together to found the Institute for Southern Studies. They felt the movement was at a turning point, and they wanted to know how to move strategically into the next phase of the struggle. The outward trappings of Jim Crow were gone. But what was next? As they began to think, study,

and write, they also turned to an investigation of earlier social movements and the people who led them.

They found little that was helpful in the historical scholarship. So they began to teach themselves about the past, by going into the archives and creating oral history projects that would provide them with first person testimony. These projects became the foundation of the Southern Oral History Program at UNC-CH, led by Jacquelyn Hall that continues to capture the voices of the region's working people.

In the early 1970s, the Institute for Southern Studies began publishing a magazine, *Southern Exposure*. Leah Wise, a field secretary for SNCC, and Sue Thrasher, a founding member of SOCC, edited an early issue on labor. "No More Moaning," (the issue's title—John Hancock's song about the Southern Tenant Farmers Strike and Stetson Kennedy's book on the KKK), they said, "represents a search for that part of southern history that is usually ignored or distorted, the history of people fighting for the right to lead decent and productive lives. It is not our intent to romanticize the past, but rather to place our own work and lives within an historical context." A few years later *Southern Exposure* published an even larger issue on labor history, and together the two became the basis for the book *Working Lives*.

Beginning in the early 1970s a spate of important books, some having roots in the activist sixties, others not, provided a hint of the breath of what would become the field of southern labor and working class studies.

- Melton McLaurin--Paternalism and Protest
- Archie Green—Only A Miner
- John Blassingam--The Slave Community
- Peter Wood--Black Majority
- Larry Goodwyn—Democratic Promise
- Ted Rosengarten-- All God's Dangers

- Nell Painter's *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson*
- Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County (1976)*

As these books were coming out, there was a parallel effort underway to collect and archive records of southern labor unions, an effort we are honoring tonight. Merle Reed, Gary Fink, and others worked with Atlanta labor leaders to create the Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University in 1971. In 1976, they organized the first Southern Labor History Conference. In a review of the proceedings, Daniel Nelson wrote, "If their initiative has the effect it should, southern labor historians will pay less attention to strikes, violence and the anti-union milieu and more attention to broader issues, like the number of southern workers involved in union activities at different times and in different industries. In time scholars will conclude that there is little point in beating the (nearly) dead horse of southern union leaders and campaigns and devote their energies to more promising facets of southern labor history." Reed and Fink's initiative had exactly the effect Nelson had predicted and by the early 1980s, Southern labor studies was off and running.

The past thirty years seem to have gone by in a flash. I gave a paper at the Fourth Southern Labor Studies Conference here in Atlanta in 1982. The keynote speakers that year were David Montgomery and Eric Hobsbawn, and I can still feel the electricity in the room when they spoke. The outpouring of dissertations, books, articles, documentary films, oral histories, and archival materials since then has been truly astounding.

Now we are at another critical moment. Despite nearly forty years of attacks on workers all over the United States, their right to organize, their standard of living, and

their rights as citizens, the wolves are still hungry for more as they try to balance state budgets on the backs of the region's poor and working class.

But unlike our comrades in the sixties, we do have the historical literature and knowledge that can help make the past a weapon in the battles we are fighting today and will certainly be fighting tomorrow. This rich and diverse literature can't be summarized in the time we have tonight. But I will try to sketch out some of the salient history we need to keep in mind.

I begin with the crisis of the late nineteenth century, which was created in part by an emerging southern working class that wanted a stake and a voice in the construction of the New South. Through such organizations as the National Farmers Alliance and the Colored Farmers Alliance, the Knight of Labor, the Republican Party, and the Populist Party, they contested for power throughout the region. The most successful challenge to the rule of planters, merchants, and industrialists came in North Carolina, but the balance of power could have swung either way in a number of southern states.

This populist challenge, as we know, led to a fierce attack by white elites. Through fraud, intimidation, and violence, the South's emerging business and professional class, in coalition with large landowners, instituted a new political and social order. Having disfranchised blacks and many poor whites and regained control of the political machinery of state and local government, Democrats spent the next decade hammering out the public policies that secured their "reactionary revolution." These policies, many of which remained in place until the 1960s, made clear that while racial rhetoric had dominated the electoral battle, white supremacy was a political project that

not only cloaked elite control of wealth but mandated class and gender hierarchies as well.

Although Jim Crow seemed mainly intended to prescribe the proper place and behaviors of blacks, it defined the place of whites as well. Segregation was particularly effective as a means of maintaining (or instituting) divisions between and among poor and middling blacks and whites. By prescribing where members of each race could live, work, and socialize, Jim Crow effectively bifurcated the institutions—churches, lodges, sporting teams, musical groups, labor unions—that might have served as sites of interracial cooperation and resistance to elite rule. In the end, it erected “a nearly insurmountable wall between the blacks and poor whites who had risen to challenge Democratic power.”

The New South Regime employed a number of strategies or had a number of advantages over the decades that helped it to maintain power and limit working class aspirations.

- I have already talked about the creation and maintenance of divisions between black and white working class.
- Also critical were the various ways in which southern white elites disfranchised African Americans and at the same time imposed strict limitations on white voting. Poll taxes, literacy clauses, residency requirements, gerrymandering, the white primary, and guns were some of the means used to maintain a one-party state in the South.

- Underdevelopment of human capital. Southern legislatures refused to tax themselves at a rate that would allow for adequate funding for schools and social welfare services.
  - --some of this was racist
  - --some to maintain low wages for the people who worked for them
  - --some to attract business to the South
  - --the impact was to make it difficult for working class to develop the education and skills that might self-generate local entrepreneurship and newer higher wage economic activities or attract higher skilled jobs to the region. Also made it harder for southerners to move out of the region.
- Perhaps the most cherished shibboleth of southern elites has been antiunionism. From their reaction to the first attempts by the Knights of Labor to organize textile workers in the 1870s to today's efforts to destroy public sector unions, business leaders and large land owners have sought to keep the South union-free. Lock-outs, blacklists, evictions, the use of scab labor, physical intimidation, anticommunism, automation, and the threat to shut down and move.
- Through their control of state and local government Use of the police power and legal power to enforce
- Creation of laws to limit union power and effectiveness. Right to work, prohibition on collective bargaining for public employees. Refusal of companies to abide by NLRB decisions.

- Limited development of a middle class that could be an ally to working class ambitions and a buffer against elite control
- Tightly controlled company towns, large and small, that made apostasy on issues of segregation and antiunionism impossible
- Mainstream Protestant churches not effective in supporting poor and working class folks, unlike Catholic and Jewish organizations in North and ethnic clubs and organizations.
- The steady flow of workers off the land created an often abundant supply of labor and made the development of a settled working class difficult
- The use of automation to undermine workers power at key moments, textiles, tobacco, mining, lumber
- Disfranchisement gave conservative southern elites disproportionate power in the federal government (it was even better than the 3/5's rule that gave antebellum plants power in Washington). Southern Democrats used this power to restrict federal legislation and policy that might benefit southern workers. Social security and Fair labor Standards Act. Of the 24 Democrats who voted to override President Truman's veto of Taft-Hartley only one was from outside the South.<sup>1</sup>

Thanks to 50 years of labor and working class history, we know that the reign of the New South regime has not gone uncontested. Southern workers have fought back. Uncovering the often hidden history of class struggle in the South has been at the core of our scholarly endeavors.

Perhaps the easiest history to uncover is the big public clashes, often over the right to organize unions that gained national and international attention.

- Louisiana Timber Workers Strike in
- Gastonia, Marion, and Elizabethtown in 1929.
- The 1934 textile strike
- 1935 strike by the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.
- 1947 strike by tobacco workers at R. J. Reynolds in Winston-Salem, NC
- the mine workers strikes throughout the period

Out of these struggles came some of the most important protest songs of the twentieth century. “Which Side Are You On” written by Florence Reese during at strike by coal miners in Harlan County, Kentucky in 1931. “We Shall Overcome” was first sung on the picket lines in 1946 by African American women striking the American Tobacco Company in Charleston, South Carolina. And there are many others.

Migration. Many have voted with their feet. From moving from cotton mill village to cotton mill village in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to tenant farm to tenant farm. Millions have gone North and West. This migration was so extensive that Jim Gregory calls it the Southern Diaspora. Maybe we need to include all of these workers.

Infrapolitics. Stealing time and provisions

Working class culture. Music in particular. What is the blues but a critique of plantation life. Textile mill songs. Rock and roll.

This is all to say our knowledge of southern workers is more expansive today than it was in the late 1960s and 1970s. We have discovered many heroic battles and many

heroes and heroines. But we should not lose track of how difficult it has been for southern workers to break down barriers of race, gender, region, occupation, and religion.

Embedded in this 50 years of southern labor and working class history are five principles that I think need to inform struggles in the near future.

- Embrace electoral politics from the county courthouse to the White House. Voting rights act. Given the demographics of the South, there is no reason that the region needs to remain in the grip of reactionary forces.
- Embrace the new migrants, whether legal or illegal, as part of the working class that need the protection of unions and social welfare legislation as much as anyone.
- Continue to organize the unorganized. But organize not just at the workplace, but also in working-class communities.
- Labor unions and other working class organizations need to continue to build alliances with other groups.
- Alliances across the colors lines are imperative. As John Salter wrote in 1968, “there can be no question but that in the South in general (or in the nation as a whole, of course) only an interracial movement of the poor can dig deeply into the root causes of poverty and exert the pressure necessary to alleviate and cure these causes – and develop a genuinely democratic society. And this means that the poor white must somehow be reached in a positive fashion. To forfeit him will be to commit a moral wrong – and to forfeit that hope of a genuinely good society.

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With these principles in mind labor scholars, educators, and activists can and should renew our efforts to contribute to the struggle to create a genuinely good society? As just one example, here’s what’s been going on near me.

After the November elections, in which ultra conservative Republicans took over both houses of the General Assembly in North Carolina, a group of LAWCHA members from Duke, NC State, UNC, and UNC-G began meeting to discuss how we might get involved in fighting the announced attack by lawmakers on the public sector. We formed a group called North Carolina Protecting the Public Interest. We wrote a mission statement, collected 100 signatories on a letter, developed a speakers bureau, and created a website with lots of resources and up to date news releases. We wrote op-eds, marched in Raleigh, appeared on public radio, allied ourselves to other groups who are fighting back against the cuts, and spoke to whomever would listen. But for a variety of reasons we weren’t getting much traction or attracting new people to our meeting. We met with representatives of the NC Justice Center, layers, economics, lobbyists, who told us what they needed was not policy analysis, but stories that they could use to illustrate their points and compete with the right’s efforts to control the moral conversation.

So now we are in the process of recasting ourselves as Scholars and Educators for a Progressive North Carolina. Our first effort will be a workshop to bring historians together to work on a series of presentations on the history of progressive North Carolina, including the important role of workers and labor organizations. We are also working on

presentations about how conservative forces have consistently tried to fight against progressive policies.

So let me conclude with a few suggestions about what is to be done.

- We haven't been purged from the universities like an earlier generation of scholars, those labor advocates who got thrown out of graduate school or were denied jobs. We have a responsibility to those folks to use our freedom and independence for the public good.
- We need to continue to do cutting edge research and scholarly writing
- We need to be more effective in translating our scholarship into forms that can be used in schools, unions, and religious organizations.
- We need to make better use of the new media to advocate for public policies that benefit all people, but working people in particular.
- We need to take more active roles in civic and political life. One of my teaching assistants this semester is the son of a long time southern labor and political activist. He told me the other day, some of you professors need to get out there and run for political office. These conservatives are winning office with only a few thousand votes. Certainly you professors can do that well.

So to get you all in a fighting mood I want to end with a song. No, No, No! don't worry, I'm not going to sing. But as an example of how the past continues to speak to the present, I want to play a recent version of the classic "Which Side Are You On?" sung by Natalie Merchant.



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