

## Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

## Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



# Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press 2020)

Tony Leah

Volume 87, Spring 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078662ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2021.0016>

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### Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Leah, T. (2021). Review of [Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press 2020)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 87, 212–213. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2021.0016>

social policy and penal transformation. At the empirical level, I see great potential for applications in the subfields of comparative criminology and criminal justice non-profits – there are undoubtedly others, but these are the two literatures with which I am most familiar.

In a contemporary moment defined by the human and economic devastation of the global COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing violence, racism, and political turmoil in the US, this book lays out what it would take to move the American social order towards greater equality and humanity. Crucially, that we will not get there by leaving the poorest of us behind.

KAITLYN QUINN

University of Toronto

**Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press 2020)**

“WHAT IS IMPORTANT in American politics today was largely shaped by the successes and failures of the labor movements of the 1930s and 1940s, and most notably the failures of southern labor organizing during this period.” (vii) This is the theme of *The Southern Key*. Michael Goldfield uses extensive research to make a compelling case that the most significant labour movement advances were marked by militant working-class struggle, solidarity between Black and white workers, and connections with broader social movements that challenged the hegemony of capital. The thread that tied these factors together was left-wing leadership, most importantly by the Communist Party. Goldfield’s book documents the ultimate defeat of labour organizing in the Southern US because these principles were abandoned and the left was defeated, partly due to its own failings. The failure to organize the South

has had profound and lasting results, because “class-based racial issues that had the potential to unite white and Black workers never got off the ground.” (380)

*The Southern Key* is anchored in detailed case studies of four industries that were important to the Southern US economy in the 1930s and 1940s – coal, steel, wood and textiles. Goldfield characterizes coalminers as the vanguard of industrial unionism. They were militant, open to radical political views, and had enormous structural power. They were also one of the few AFL unions with a commitment to racial equality. Goldfield shows coal miners succeeded in organizing due to their own efforts and strengths, refuting those who emphasize legal frameworks, like the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA).

Goldfield also presents a nuanced analysis of UMWA President John L. Lewis. Despite earlier battles with left-wing unionists, by the mid-1930s Lewis cooperated with them in the United Mine Workers Union and the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). Later, Lewis’ determination to centralize control, his vacillations on politics, his personal corruption, and his exclusion of the left undermined the effectiveness of both the UMWA and the Steelworkers – especially in the South.

Goldfield’s chapter on steel notes that Lewis initially hired some 60 organizers with CP affiliations. The Communists were well-rooted in many workplaces as a result of decades of courageous work, described vividly by Goldfield. The CP also had influence with Black workers because of their principled anti-racist practice and they had great strength among ethnic organizations, which proved vital to organizing the large immigrant workforce in steel.

There was an explosion of organizing in the major steel companies once a critical mass was reached. But Philip Murray, head of the SWOC, was even quicker than

Lewis to assert control. By the time the SWOC became the USWA in 1942, Murray had purged the left. The result was a conservative, authoritarian business union that abandoned fighting racism in both workplaces and within the union itself. Goldfield contends that much more was possible if the USWA leadership had been more democratic and progressive, and worked with left-led unions.

Goldfield believes that in the 1930s the 300,000 woodworkers in the South were "eminently organizable." (239) His evidence shows that conditions were ripe – except for the incompetence of the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) leadership and insufficient allocation of resources. "The most egregious sin" of the IWA leadership, according to Goldfield, "was their obtuseness and backwardness on questions of race, which kept them from realizing the enormous potential of an industry that was majority-Black in the South." (239)

The attempt to organize the important textile industry in 1937 did not lack for resources, but it was crippled by the ideology of Sidney Hillman, head of the Textile Workers Organizing Committee. Hillman rejected any involvement by Communists. Rather than building 'associative' power with mineworkers or social movements, Hillman relied on a misguided appeal to the mill owners. The failure to make any efforts to advocate for racial justice was compounded by an unwillingness to hire women organizers or address the issues of women textile workers. The result was a total failure of the textile drive by 1938.

The failures in wood and textiles foreshadowed the later approach and similar disastrous results of "Operation Dixie," the CIO southern organizing drive, in 1946. Van Amber Bittner, the Director of Operation Dixie, made the exclusion of the left clear. "No crowd, whether Communists, Socialists, or anybody else,

is going to mix in this organizing drive." (307, quoted from *New York Times*, April 19, 1946)

*The Southern Key* makes several important contributions. Not least is the treasure trove of inspiring stories of organizing during the 1930s and 1940s. The book also underlines the crucial role of confronting race in social movements and labour organizing. Goldfield's research highlights that it was the Communists who were most successful at putting anti-racism in the forefront of mass organizing.

One weak point in the book is the criticism of the CPUSA, which is based largely on the views of Trotsky and his US supporter James Cannon. Goldfield endorses Cannon's subjective description of the Party's actions as "moral bankruptcy" and "perfidy, unprincipled behaviour, and outright treachery" from the 1930s on. (365) Goldfield's own description of remarkable achievements by Communist-led unions and social movements throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s tends to contradict this narrow view. For example, Goldfield cites a series of exciting campaigns by the Communist-led National Negro Labor Coalition (NNLC), including forcing GE to hire Blacks, especially Black women, at their new plant in Louisville in 1951. The campaign featured demonstrations in NY, protests by UE locals at other GE plants, and pressure on the Louisville City Council.

The Southern Key provides powerful evidence that a class-struggle, anti-racist outlook by movement leaders is a major factor in determining success or failure. Goldfield ends the book with a "counterfactual" analysis. He concludes that a labour/civil rights strategy was possible that could have built a movement capable of "transforming not merely the South but the United States as whole." (382)

TONY LEAH  
McMaster University