

# Acceptable and Necessary Treasons The Revolutionary Prophecies of Noel Ignatiev

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## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# Acceptable and Necessary Treasons: The Revolutionary Prophecies of Noel Ignatiev

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Noel Ignatiev, *Treason to Whiteness is Loyalty to Humanity*, eds., Geert Dhondt, Zhandarka Kurti, and Jarrod Shanahan (New York: Verso Books, 2022)

Noel Ignatiev, *Acceptable Men: Life in the Largest Steel Mill in the World* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2021)

IN A 2015 EXCHANGE, Noel Ignatiev and Staughton Lynd debated the difficulties of writing and viewing “history from the bottom up,” using Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh’s *The Many-Headed Hydra* as a launching pad. *The Many-Headed Hydra* sheds light on the self-activity of transatlantic proletarians working and resisting at the nodal points of the early capitalist economy: sailors, dockworkers, wood hewers, maroons, slaves, sailors, common labourers. One aspect that Ignatiev and Lynd pick through is how knowledge of revolt travels, how it is communicated and imparted. Reverting to the terminology of those radicals found in Linebaugh and Rediker’s book, they ask what role “revolutionary prophets” play in the insurgent social movements of which they are a part. In more secular terms, the prophet would be a leader or intellectual, armed with a grasp of the historical significance and collective memory of past moments of revolt. Ignatiev takes a peculiar stance: these considerations have “little role in shaping popular struggles.” When the workers of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) tested their mettle against the era’s capitalist juggernauts in the industrial battles of the 1930s, the majority of the protagonists did not have showdowns by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the Arizona copper mines or the Paterson silk strike in the front of their minds. Nor was the “memory of Abolition” a central element of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, when movement participants were holding

nightly mass meetings and sorting out the logistics of the boycott's carpool system. The activity driving these struggles, Ignatiev maintains, "did not grow out of tradition" but rather "arose out of necessity."<sup>1</sup>

And yet, there were ways for revolutionary prophets to intervene under these conditions. Trust was built not through the hardline adherence to a specific political position but through more prosaic means of support: the dissemination of information, the circulation of organizing methods, the distillation of ideas that other participants conveyed. The embers from past fights have a relatively modest function, serving as compasses for revolutionaries in whatever mass movement they are immersed in, helping them push open the window of possibility a little further or reorienting sedimented political grammars and tactics. Ignatiev continues: "Thus the memory of the IWW tradition of direct action shaped the Flint sit-down. Knowing the histories of Nat Turner, John Brown and the Underground Railroad guided James Forman and others in drawing a line between direct action and the course of legalism and reformism. Once a new level of struggle is attained, it changes the world so that a return to the old is no longer possible."<sup>2</sup> What is important for Ignatiev is that this layer of political actors, this core of radicals links up these upsurges of disruptive practice that can happen at different scales.

The posthumous publication of *Acceptable Men* and the collection *Treason to Whiteness Is Loyalty to Humanity*, edited by Geert Dhondt, Zhandarka Kurti, and Jarrod Shanahan, make it possible to revisit Noel Ignatiev's important body of work as a series of "revolutionary prophecies."<sup>3</sup> Ignatiev's writings over a roughly 60-year period offer cogent insights into the open questions and predicaments of organizing strategy, theoretical purpose, and the character and cohesiveness of white supremacy that radicals are interrogating today. After more than two years of intersecting crises, unanticipated waves of mass proletarian mobilization and rebellion, and the wide spectrum of ruling-class reaction, many are searching for ways to substantially modify existing relations of power. Ignatiev's thinking cuts against the grain of current perspectives on the prospects of social transformation and the sites from where it might spring. One of the hurdles in evaluating his corpus as a whole, however, is that many of his texts were produced "under the conjuncture," as interventions engaged with specific circumstances and actors and with an eye toward the fissures that exist in any situation of domination. The editors of *Treason to Whiteness*, Ignatiev's comrades and collaborators on the journal

1. Noel Ignatiev and Staughton Lynd, "An Exchange on History from Below," *Insurgent Notes*, 16 March 2020, <http://insurgentnotes.com/2020/03/an-exchange-on-history-from-the-bottom-up/>.

2. Ignatiev and Lynd, "Exchange."

3. Noel Ignatiev, *Treason to Whiteness Is Loyalty to Humanity*, ed. Geert Dhondt, Zhandarka Kurti, and Jarrod Shanahan (New York: Verso Books, 2022); Ignatiev, *Acceptable Men: Life in the Largest Steel Mill in the World* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2021).

*Hard Crackers*, have done readers a great service in emphasizing this interplay of continuity and discontinuity in Ignatiev's life stations and political undertakings.

Most instructive for us as a key to reading his work is Ignatiev's lengthy tenure as a factory militant, which saw him develop the principal terms of his thought in conjunction with the organization he was a part of for over a decade (from the late 1960s to the early 1980s), the Sojourner Truth Organization (STO). His experience as a worker intellectual, a shop-floor dialectician, in the setting of multiracial industrial facilities in southeast Chicago and northwestern Indiana provided the backdrop, raw material, and tone for his militant analyses. *Acceptable Men*, Ignatiev's posthumous memoir of his time working at the Gary Works steel mill, is above all a meditation on the problems for capitalism posed by workers on and off the clock, from the outside in and the inside out.<sup>4</sup> But despite a long-standing involvement in radical circles – within organizations like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the late 1960s or even earlier in an anti-revisionist caucus in the Communist Party USA – his writing through this period, with some important exceptions,<sup>5</sup> was primarily undertaken not for the benefit of other leftists but for the working class in and around these workplace milieus and, eventually, beyond them.

*Treason to Whiteness*, with thematic selections from over 40 texts throughout his life, demonstrates that Ignatiev's work did not follow a linear development but was part of an ongoing process of reflection, clarification, and refinement. Many will be familiar with the highly influential, and oft-misunderstood, analysis of white-skin privilege as a sociopolitical “control formation,” which he honed alongside and in dialogue with fellow radical and ex-Communist Party USA member Theodore Allen through texts such as “The White Blindspot,” “Black Worker, White Worker,” and his landmark book *How the Irish Became White*.<sup>6</sup> But the collection also provides insight into the ways Ignatiev revisited unresolved questions from different angles, in moments seemingly far afield from those that formed the basis for his initial studies. Through *Treason to Whiteness*, published shortly after *Acceptable Men*, we can now more readily appreciate the extent to which Ignatiev's storytelling informed his theoretical propositions and historical sensibility. Ignatiev liked to goad his interlocutors

4. David Ranney's *Living and Dying on the Factory Floor: From the Outside In and the Inside Out* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019) is another key text from a former STO factory militant. A moving remembrance of Ignatiev as a co-worker by a fellow communist cadre who had made the “turn to industry” can be found in Gary Fields, “No Condescending Saviors: A Personal Tribute,” *Hard Crackers* 8 (Spring 2021): 65–81.

5. See Ignatiev, “No Condescending Saviors: A Study of the Experience of Revolution in the Twentieth Century,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 119; Ignatiev, “Without a Science of Navigation, We Cannot Sail the Stormy Seas,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 79.

6. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (London: Routledge, 1995). See also Ignatiev, “My Debt and Obligation to Ted Allen,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 87–94. For Theodore Allen, see his *The Invention of the White Race*, 2 vols. (New York: Verso Books, 2012).

with a favourite Faulkner quote: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” – a formulation that gave him licence to mobilize his own prior experiences of struggle in exchanges with others as much as those that might be deemed more relevant for understanding contemporary political realities.<sup>7</sup>

The project of revolutionary analysis was for Ignatiev inseparable from questions of political organization. The fundamentals of each terrain needed to be learned, cultivated, and transmitted by lucid militants doing concrete work. A main ingredient in this process was the program outlined by the STO’s educational materials: training members in the art of learning “how to think” through intensive courses in Marxist theory and history, whose goal was a “*functional* ability to use Marxism.”<sup>8</sup> In developing initiatives like these, Ignatiev was firmly rooted in the legacy of small circles of revolutionaries like the Johnson-Forest Tendency and its later incarnation, Correspondence (the name of both the group and its paper), who saw the Marxist tradition as a battleground, where practical intervention in the present favoured not scholastic exegesis (though theoretical precision was fostered within the group) but the investigation and sharing of experiences of proletarian struggle.<sup>9</sup> By encouraging, pressing, and prodding his comrades – especially younger generations just beginning to navigate the routine mystifications of bourgeois society – to pick up the threads located within previous episodes of contention in popular culture and internationalism, Ignatiev strove to develop a collective capacity to identify the new society “underneath and alongside the old” in an expanded network of people.<sup>10</sup> His work in the 1990s with the journal *Race Traitor*, often in collaboration with co-editors and given an entire section in *Treason to Whiteness*, played a role similar to a waystation where activists from different cohorts and schools of the US left could analyze the features of the new struggles they were engaging with.<sup>11</sup> The themes explored in that context would frame Ignatiev’s historical investigations into abolitionism and the antislavery movement in the US Civil War and Reconstruction. The lens is trained on the unanticipated but momentous consequences that a small

7. Ignatiev, “12 Million Black Voices,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 279.

8. See the packet of readings for this study program, “Can Dialectics Break Bricks?,” accessed 15 January 2023, <https://files.libcom.org/files/How-To-Think-2009-Small.pdf>. The document has remained an influential resource for political education in anti-capitalist groups since its inception. For more information, see Michael Staudenmaier, *Truth and Revolution* (Oakland: AK Press), 220–222.

9. For a significant self-description of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, see Part 4 of C. L. R. James, Freddie Forest, and Martin Harvey, *Balance Sheet of Trotskyism in the United States, 1940–1947* (1947), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1947/balance-sheet/ch04.htm>. See also Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States* (New York: Verso Books, 1987), 202–206.

10. Ignatiev, “The White Blindspot,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 42.

11. See the earlier collection of *Race Traitor* articles in Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, eds., *Race Traitor* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

group, a determined “band of people,” or courageous “minorities” could have on the course of events when their actions linked up with and spread throughout larger currents of rebellion.<sup>12</sup>

*Treason to Whiteness* further indicates how direct the influence of C. L. R. James was on how Ignatiev and his co-thinkers understood questions of political organization. In forming revolutionary groupings, the aim was not to assume leadership over the working class but to have a body of organizers “accomplish this or that task,” however urgent.<sup>13</sup> The attention to nuclei of working-class autonomy – that matrix of activity undertaken by ordinary people, on the basis of their political intelligence and ability to collectively make decisions – did not reflect an aim to attain leadership over workers.<sup>14</sup> The contradictions between thought and action among workers did not inhibit them from generating resolutions to the problem of leadership, to become political protagonists on their own terms.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of the STO, this approach often resulted in frustrations or seeming defeats but did produce legible effects. The organization took up what others have called a “parasindical” position: not strictly opposed to existing unions, but cognizant of their failings and the strictures that union posts placed on militants.<sup>16</sup> While many STO members industrialized, gaining footholds as manual labourers at work sites in the production chain and engaging in all the many organizing activities that fell under the banner of “mass work,” the organization also ran a pro bono legal clinic in southeast Chicago, the Workers’ Rights Center, which opened in 1974.<sup>17</sup> Headed by a lawyer in the group, Kingsley Clarke, the Workers’ Rights Center assisted workers in filing and receiving unemployment claims, or navigating the ramifications of legal arrangements on job classifications and back pay, like the 1974 consent decree

12. See, for instance, Noel Ignatiev, “Needed: An Antiwhite Movement,” *Poverty and Race Journal* 9, 1 (2000): 3–4, <https://www.prrac.org/needed-an-antiwhite-movement/>.

13. Ignatiev, “The World View of C.L.R. James,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 346.

14. “The task of revolutionaries is not to organize the workers but to organize themselves – to discover those patterns of activity and forms of organization that have sprung up out of the struggle and that embody the new society, and to help them grow stronger, more confident, and more conscious of their direction.” Ignatiev, “World View of C.L.R. James,” 350.

15. Ludivine Bantigny and Boris Gobille, “L’expérience sensible du politique: Protagonisme et antagonisme en mai–juin 1968,” *French Historical Studies* 41, 2 (April 2018): 275–303.

16. See Philippe Boudreau and Rachel Sarrasin, “Les initiatives parasyndicales: Pour ou contre le syndicalisme?,” *Nouveaux Cahiers du Socialisme* 19 (Winter 2018), <https://www.cahiersdusocialisme.org/les-initiatives-parasindicales-pour-ou-contre-le-syndicalisme/>. See also Matthieu Firmin, “Les Cahiers de mai 1968/1974: Entre journalisme et syndicalisme,” master’s thesis, Université de Paris 1, 1998, 105–155.

17. On the Workers’ Rights Center, see the scattered anecdotes in Ranney, *Living and Dying*; Kingsley Clarke, “Kingsley Clarke on the Workers’ Rights Center, South Chicago,” 29 September 2019, YouTube video, 23:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qcaxd9BMxEg>.

in the steel industry.<sup>18</sup> By taking on such unromantic but necessary support tasks, the STO was able to establish a presence for itself in Chicago's industrial belt, even through internal splits.<sup>19</sup>

Through the Workers' Rights Center, the STO was also heavily involved in a bitter mid-1970s fight against the closure of the small Chicago manufacturer Gateway Industries. The company produced hand soap and seat belts at a small complex on the South Side. Its non-unionized workforce numbered a few hundred women, predominantly Mexican, who were laid off en masse when Gateway executives decided to move operations to Mexico. STO members assisted in organizing community pickets and a boycott of the soap products; they facilitated meetings, in Spanish, with the workers to talk about available strategies and escalation options. The workers then directly confronted their bosses in an alleyway and, with STO cadre accompanying, forced them to negotiate. An agreement was hashed out – and typed up by Ignatiev in the Workers' Rights Center – that gave the women an offer of first employment at a facility in nearby Michigan City. But the Gateway workers rejected the job relocation deal; they chose instead to receive unemployment benefits.<sup>20</sup> This episode illuminates the basic dilemmas of adhering to a political line that focused on workers' autonomy, and as Beth Henson, a former STO member, recalled, the women “became actors in the drama, lifted out of the daily routine. The struggle gave them a glimpse of power, a crack in a world whose order could be overturned ... Our intervention had been incidental; we had provided only the frame and the occasion.”<sup>21</sup> Even brief bursts of protest could deposit traces of a different practice of politics. Though the STO could assist in demonstrating to the bosses the power of the workers, it was the workers who had the last word.

The experiences of the STO repeatedly instilled in Ignatiev ways to temper the real astonishment generated by unforeseen developments through modest but crucial organizing practices that placed him and comrades right in the thick of things: material assistance, writing and reportage, calling and holding meetings.<sup>22</sup> Again in 1974, at a time when direct displays of worker militancy appeared to many revolutionaries globally to be on the wane, a major strike undertaken by truck drivers in the United States took off. The truckers transformed commonplace truck stops into “centers for organization” close to their

18. Casey Ichniowski, “Have Angels Done More? The Steel Industry Consent Decree,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 36, 2 (1983): 182–198.

19. See Noel Ignatiev, “Outline History of STO” (unpublished paper, 1981). Thanks to Michael Staudenmaier for making this document available to us.

20. The details here are from Clarke, “Kingsley Clarke on the Workers' Rights Center.”

21. Staudenmaier, *Truth and Revolution*, 59.

22. At a talk at Occupy Boston in 2011, Ignatiev commented that “every revolution is a surprise, above all to the revolutionaries.” See Ignatiev, “Race and Occupy: Remarks Delivered at Occupy Boston,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 370.



communities, including one central node of the strike in the majority-Black city of Gary, Indiana, near to Ignatiev's own workplace at the time. Contact with the truck drivers themselves, and with their wives, girlfriends, and families, allowed the STO to facilitate and develop more or less formal links with other participants in the strike across the country.<sup>23</sup> While the initial goal of the truckers was to lower rising fuel prices by force, Ignatiev and the STO perceived possibilities for extending the struggle into a larger political confrontation over more widely resonant demands, pushing the incipient network of truck drivers to "address not merely fuel but food prices."<sup>24</sup> As was typical for the group at the time, the STO print shop was used to produce and distribute agitational materials throughout the Chicago area. What was of interest for the group, however, was not simply that the truckers consisted of largely white and male actors whose status as owner-operators set them outside the purview of established unions and aloof from working-class identification, or even that these types of limiting factors contributed to the scope of their independent direct action. What mattered most was the non-negotiable, highly disruptive character of the action itself, its capacity to spill over into deeper sections and layers of the working class and, by the strength and trajectory of its demands, exceed geographic boundaries. For Ignatiev, "the experience proved that a small group could have a big impact" and that "if a group like STO had existed nationwide, the outcome could have been different."<sup>25</sup>

Ignatiev's time spent in the STO solidified his belief that revolutionaries should orient themselves toward discerning and coordinating forms of "dual power" as they exist into a coherent strategy that could develop, deepen, and extend them into new settings. While his use of the term could be nebulous, Ignatiev sees dual power as articulating an understanding of political practice rooted in shared antagonism and a social fabric woven from the complex inner workings of the forms of resistance that set themselves against existing authorities or governing bodies. These indications do not provide a necessary road map or set of stages that a revolutionary process would have to follow, but they do require a close attention to the force of actions already unfolding and a willingness to draw out their resonance and scope. These difficult organizational questions were also at the heart of debates for the leadership of the abolitionist movement (whom Ignatiev, following James, describes as "early Bolsheviks") leading up to the Civil War in the United States, or in the Southern Reconstruction governments, as much as it was for the professional revolutionaries of the Leninist party who were propelled into a position of influence in 1917 amid a ceaseless torrent of proletarian self-activity.<sup>26</sup>

23. Ignatiev, *Acceptable Men*, 26–27.

24. Ignatiev, *Acceptable Men*, 27.

25. Ignatiev, *Acceptable Men*, 27.

26. Ignatiev, "The Lesson of the Hour: Wendell Philipps on Abolition and Strategy," in *Treason*



Attempts to incorporate these instances of co-operation and struggle into a stable political framework in these key historical junctures are always perched on a razor's edge even when revolutionaries concertedly push events forward. In a 2010 talk entitled "Alternative Institutions or Dual Power?" Ignatiev had this to say: "Lenin and the Bolsheviks did not invent the Soviets (councils). They were invented by the workers and soldiers. In periods of upsurge ordinary people (people who do not normally spend their time thinking about how to make a revolution) do very revolutionary things, far more revolutionary than any individual or party could imagine. But they think of them in old ways."<sup>27</sup>

This idea is an important current in Ignatiev's work: that the working class, and the dispossessed subjects for whom workers will struggle, are not backward but revolutionary. In a key text written in spring 1981, the year Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency, entitled "The Backward Workers," he advances the extraordinary thesis that "when a significant body of workers or members of an oppressed group is offered a choice between several possibilities which they perceive as realistic, they always make the right choice." The crux of this claim is easily misinterpreted: it revolves around the relationship between the world confronted every day by those with nothing to sell but their labour power, the realities they will tolerate, and the possibilities that the "fact" of workers' participation in struggle, with its attendant risks, open onto. But clearly, workers do not necessarily "act in a manner designed to advance their class interests; if that were the case, capitalism would no longer exist."<sup>28</sup> Under certain unexceptional conditions – those underwritten by white supremacy, namely, in the United States – segments of workers can be swayed toward group-based compromises, thoroughly reactionary capitulations, or autonomous displays of class disavowal and disidentification, all under cover of reasonableness, thus thwarting the prospect of dual power by disowning genuine "class interest."<sup>29</sup> The "system of white-skin privileges," Ignatiev argues, is the "mortar" that binds ruling-class power in place and insulates it from resistance, the "poison bait" dangled in front of white workers.<sup>30</sup> For Ignatiev, these relative advantages accepted by white workers in particular function not only as a discrete set of choices but as a kind of reality principle undergirding the process of choice itself, working to disrupt openings for solidarity at every level, from questions around seniority and job classifications to loftier moments of social rebellion in the United States.<sup>31</sup> In an unforgettable passage, he charges that

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to *Whiteness*, 328.

27. Ignatiev, "Alternative Institutions or Dual Power?," in *Treason to Whiteness*, 364.

28. Ignatiev, "Backward Workers," in *Treason to Whiteness*, 178.

29. Ignatiev clarifies his conception of this dynamic, of how white-skin privileges are imposed historically, in "My Debt and Obligation to Ted Allen," in *Treason to Whiteness*, 87–94.

30. Ignatiev, "Without a Science of Navigation," 86.

31. See Ignatiev, "Learn the Lessons of US History," in *Treason to Whiteness*, 61–70.

any insinuation that this regime is beneficial for white workers is tantamount to “suggesting that swallowing the worm with the hook in it is in the interests of the fish.”<sup>32</sup> The notion of the “backward workers” persists through this sleight of hand in radical circles today, in the commonsense invocation of the “white working class” as a homogeneous entity with a predetermined interest in maintaining its timeless privileges.

The question, then, is not whether white workers will discard their prevailing advantages voluntarily. “The bourgeoisie pursues white workers everywhere with tokens and reminders of superior status,” and yet, as Ignatiev claims, “they cannot be given up, but must be cast off through militant struggle.”<sup>33</sup> Against the guilty conscience of what he called the “white studies racket,” the “organizing weapons” of “class pride” (the repudiation of white-skin privileges, and an expansive view of the solidarity constructed by people struggling out of a given situation) offered a set of alternatives the would-be tutors of the working class could scarcely perceive.<sup>34</sup> In fact, it is within moments of “dual power” that these openings become most conspicuous and in need of clarification, where what he would call “the algebra of revolution” renders feasible an abandonment of whiteness through abolition rather than less antagonistic paths.<sup>35</sup> Following W. E. B. Du Bois, Ignatiev would insist that any labour movement that did not tackle “the color line” head on would be defined by the most salient mode of class collaboration re-engineered in the United States after Reconstruction: white supremacy. Ignatiev, more than most, looked to Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction* for an example of how the struggle to overturn this central feature of capitalist development in the United States can become a definite possibility, part of a line of “grand experiments in freedom.”<sup>36</sup>

32. Ignatiev, “Without a Science of Navigation,” 86. As Ignatiev puts it elsewhere, in the context of a particular intervention he made while working at International Harvester, “What defines the approach I took is the recognition that the struggle against white supremacy is a definite part of the class demands of the entire working class, that it involves the choice between class struggle and class collaboration, that it is very much an immediate issue for the whole working class, and that white workers can be won to support it.” Ignatiev, “Organizing Workers: Lessons for Radicals,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 75.

33. Ignatiev, “Theses on White Supremacy,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 116.

34. On the “white studies racket,” see Ignatiev, “Abolitionism and the White Studies Racket,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 241–245. On class pride, see Ignatiev, “Organizing Workers,” 77. For reflections on the explosion of public interest in critical whiteness studies, see David R. Roediger, “Critical Studies of Whiteness, USA: Origins and Arguments,” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 98 (December 2001): 72–98.

35. Ignatiev, “The American Blindspot: Reconstruction according to Eric Foner and W. E. B. Du Bois,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 260.

36. Ignatiev, “Defining Hard Crackers,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 378. David Roediger’s engagement with Du Bois is also exemplary. See Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Freedom for All* (New York: Verso Books, 2014).

For the STO, it was the war against white supremacy – although protracted and submerged within US history and hypostatized in the “civil war” in the mind of the individual white worker – that formed both “the most advanced outpost of the new society” and “the key ingredient in a revolutionary strategy.”<sup>37</sup> And if “the waging of that struggle among whites” comprised the “distinctive task” of the STO as a revolutionary organization chiefly composed of whites, the group would find different ways to coordinate these preoccupations over time.<sup>38</sup> For Ignatiev, these conclusions were reached through careful historical study as much as on-the-job training in the various shop-floor contexts he worked in, metalworking plants, and the steel mill – contexts where the “white bloc” did mark a reliable pole of attraction for white workers but could nevertheless give way when confronted with opportunities for mass action and solidarity in heavy industry. Walkouts, wildcat strikes, absenteeism, quarrels with foremen, and more orderly displays of insubordination provided the spark but not necessarily the denouement of dissatisfaction with the colour line.<sup>39</sup>

In the context of the multiracial steel plant where Black workers had been most combative in resisting the racial division of labour, however, broader class lessons could be drawn. With the publication of *Acceptable Men*, it is possible to more directly appreciate the degree to which these lessons – the

37. “In the community, on the job, in every sphere of life, he is being faced with a choice between two ways of looking at the world, two ways of leading his life. One way represents solidarity with the black worker and the progressive forces of society. The other way represents alliance with the forces of exploitation and repression.” Ignatiev, “Black Worker, White Worker,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 98. For the latter two quotations, regarding the new society and revolutionary strategy, see Ignatiev, “An Introduction to the United States: An Autonomist Political History,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 175.

38. Ignatiev, “Introduction to the United States,” 175.

39. In “Organizing Workers: Lessons for Radicals” (1968), Ignatiev cites as one of these exemplary actions the tearing down of the walls of segregated washrooms, a tactic of the Farmworkers’ Equipment Union local in Louisville, which Toni Gilpin studies in *The Long Deep Grudge* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020). See also the cryptic story Ignatiev tells about a co-worker almost killing a foreman in “The World View of C.L.R. James,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 349–350. He discusses the mass campaign that the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit waged on behalf of James Johnson, a Black auto worker who killed two supervisors but avoided a prison sentence by making a plea of temporary insanity on the basis of unfair treatment and harsh working conditions. Johnson directly referenced the case of Ike Jernigan, a worker and shop-floor activist at a Lockheed aircraft facility in Los Angeles who killed a company foreman and two union officials in 1970; Ignatiev wrote a leaflet calling for the legal defense of Jernigan on the basis of the unfair treatment of Black workers by both management and the union, according to the slogan “an injury to one is an injury to all.” The leaflet was reprinted in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers’ newspaper. Ignatiev, “Defend Ike Jernigan,” *Inner City Voice* 2, 6 (June 1970): 9. On these framings of workplace violence as a dimension of class conflict, see Jeremy Milloy, “‘Chrysler Pulled the Trigger’: Competing Understandings of Workplace Violence during the 1970s and Radical Legal Practice,” *Labour/Le Travail* 74 (Fall 2014): 51–88.

potential for puncturing the hold of the white bloc through job actions; the singular experience Black workers brought to the workplace from the great anti-discrimination struggles of the preceding decades; the degree to which workers' control was, even within situations that appeared entirely spontaneous, long prepared by traditions of formal and informal shop-floor insurgency – informed the development of his own theoretical propositions.<sup>40</sup> During Ignatiev's time in factories, roughly from 1961 to 1983, he began to index a remarkable range of activity that took place within the labour process at the point of production, one that would forever mark his teaching. Depending on the situation, the working day could elicit humorous encounters, intense confrontations, or near-death experiences, even simultaneously. Though it contributed to a common bond, survival was not guaranteed, and some of the most dangerous jobs Ignatiev describes were done in the blast furnace division of US Steel Gary Works, where he was employed as a maintenance assistant. Indeed, the "first lesson of factory life" Ignatiev describes in *Acceptable Men* deals with the link between working conditions and the solidarity exhibited among workers on the job: "My fellow workers taught me how to run the machine and also how to sabotage it when I needed a break. They taught me what was a reasonable amount of work to turn out so that I neither broke the rate nor let my fellow workers down."<sup>41</sup> What Ignatiev gleaned was an attention to the rhythm of work and the informal, oppositional agreements among workers established for their collective benefit, agreements that could be modified and attenuated but not altogether contravened without a major struggle. Indeed, the texture of the steel mill, the prevalence of downtime, the more or less formal regulation of working conditions by workers, the patchwork forms of management supervision owed as much to the nature of steelwork itself as to the worker-led resistance to any process of rationalization on the part of the companies.

Ignatiev's STO-era tracts drew upon this *mise en scène* of the workplace with great acuity. He often inserted memorable exchanges with co-workers into his own distinctive theoretical claims. In fact, the same vignettes featured in *Acceptable Men* appear in a range of his political writings from that

40. For an excellent review of *Acceptable Men*, see Asad Haider, "Molecules and Vectors," *The Baffler*, 6 October 2021, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/molecules-and-vectors-haider>.

41. Ignatiev, *Acceptable Men*, 23. The body of literature on working-class self-activity and workers' control exploded in the 1970s with the introduction of new methodologies and political perspectives into the field of labour history. *Radical America* published many important texts on this score. See the chapters by Stan Weir, John Lippert, Dorothy Fennell, and David Montgomery in James Green, ed., *Workers' Struggles, Past and Present: A "Radical America" Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); see also Bill Watson, "Counter-Planning on the Shop Floor," *Radical America* 5, 3 (1971): 77–85. A cornerstone text for this strand of analysis was George Rawick, "Working-Class Self-Activity," *Radical America* 3, 2 (1969): 23–31.

period and later.<sup>42</sup> They were not exercises in fiction writing but clearly serve as the basis for his considerations on practical strategic questions for factory organizing and his theoretical provocations regarding the role of the working class in society, the ways in which Black workers regularly took the lead in the class struggles of the day, and the particular problems that arise when the effects of these developments are neglected or misunderstood by white workers, radicals, and historians. As Ignatiev claims, his co-workers at the steel mill “had observed that whenever the black people force the ruling class, in whole or in part, to make concessions to racial equality, the ruling class strikes back to make it an equality on a worse level of conditions than those enjoyed by the whites before the concessions.”<sup>43</sup> When the key obstacle is that “white workers are thus conditioned to believe that every step toward racial equality necessarily means a worsening of their own conditions,” prevailing strategies predicated on cursory class unity or “self-interest coalitions” against employers for this or that economic demand, whether articulated by union staffers or other shop-floor radicals, are bound to fail.<sup>44</sup> “There is no way to overcome the national and racial divisions within the working class except by directly confronting them,” Ignatiev writes. “The problem of white supremacy must be fought out openly within the working class.”<sup>45</sup>

Open fighting within the working class can take place in a variety of situations and through varied means. However, for Ignatiev, the theory and practice of union officialdom, increasingly bureaucratized since the heyday of the CIO, does not constitute a vehicle capable of promoting it. If, as Ignatiev writes in *Acceptable Men*, “the union doesn’t have much of a place in daily life,” it will not command much attention from the workers who spend many of their waking hours and working lives in the mill.<sup>46</sup> In fact, the sentiment was shared by the majority of workers he encountered at Gary Works and still is today among many unionized workers in the United States who cannot be bothered to participate in official union affairs. “My own approach was distinctive,” Ignatiev wrote, juxtaposing his orientation to the workplace against those of other far-left groups at the time. “I had no interest in the union.”<sup>47</sup> Such categorical sentiments and statements have sometimes represented a bridge too far for labour radicals seeking to adequately apprehend how unions can serve as a

42. For earlier examples, see Ignatiev, “Black Worker, White Worker” and “Backward Workers”; for the later parts of his career, see, for example, “Passing,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 15–23; “Modern Politics,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 352–362.

43. Ignatiev, “Black Worker, White Worker,” 101.

44. See Ignatiev, “Organizing Workers,” 71.

45. Ignatiev, “Black Worker, White Worker,” 102.

46. Ignatiev, *Acceptable Men*, 77.

47. Ignatiev, *Acceptable Men*, 23.

fundamental wedge against the capitalist class rule in the United States and elsewhere.

Union structures, in STO's perspective, did not inhibit worker self-organization per se. Although unions could not become a revolutionary pole in opposition to bourgeois society, the idea that they were a complete barrier was wrongheaded. Revolutionary energies could be sapped, and the credibility of revolutionaries on the shop floor forfeited,<sup>48</sup> in the pursuit of striving to transform the union to this end. But opportunities for revolutionary organization could be found elsewhere. Ignatiev and his comrades in the STO crafted a more sophisticated argument than is often recognized. They did not take jobs in industrial settings to advance into positions of influence within established union leaderships, nor did their entry into factory workplaces rely on recruitment schemes designed to increase the membership base of their own organization. In entering the fold of shop-floor organizing, they chose to focus on independent mass work, not to subvert the union but to increase class capacity, or, in more technical terms, associational power. The mode of "independent organization" was informed by their analysis of the period at hand.<sup>49</sup> Whether it occurred during "the lull" of the 1970s or a period of revolutionary realignment, shifted the whole nature of the question.<sup>50</sup>

Michael Goldfield's recent article "The Limits of White-Skin Privilege" in the Marxist journal *Spectre* provides essential insights into the STO's political role in the early 1970s and offers a much-needed illustration of Goldfield's own workplace organizing in the period as an STO member at International Harvester.<sup>51</sup> Goldfield and others left the organization in 1973 over

48. See Sojourner Truth Organization (STO), "The Steward's Position" (1973), in *Workplace Papers* (Chicago: STO, 1980), 30–33.

49. "Our stress on independent organization does not entail opposition to struggles in the union arena. When union struggles involve masses of workers, communists should be there. However, at times when the level of mass struggle is not high, and the revolutionary current among the workers is weak, communists must be particularly conscious of the danger of entrapment in schemes of union reform, which, in fact, isolate them from the workers. In such conditions, particular care must be used to distinguish the position of revolutionaries from that of reformists in practice, not just in rhetoric. Essential to this is the development of mass organizations able to deal with the problems of workers from a position of independent strength. Furthermore, such an external challenge to the union provides the best conditions for union reform." STO, "Theses on Workplace Organizing" (1974), accessed 15 January 2023, <http://www.sojournertruth.net/theses.html>. There are of course many conscious overlaps with the extra-union and extraparliamentary organizational forms that arose in Italy during the Hot Autumn and early 1970s; see the analyses and texts gathered in Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, eds., *The Golden Horde: Revolutionary Italy, 1960–1977*, trans. Richard Braude (London: Seagull Books, 2021).

50. Michael Staudenmaier discusses how the STO conceptualized "the lull" period in *Truth and Revolution*, Chap. 4 ("Reorganization in Difficult Times").

51. Michael Goldfield, "The Limits of White-Skin Privilege: Noel Ignatiev, the Sojourner Truth Organization, the Battle against White Supremacy, and the Path to Interracial Working-Class



disagreements regarding the degree of involvement in local union elections and strategy, as well as the prospects of union stewards facilitating the kind of independent organization that might make a dent in the power relations that structured work in the plant. In Goldfield's view, the STO's stance vis-à-vis unions was needlessly inflexible, ultimately papering over the different, concrete realities that affected distinct work sites. Profound differences in historical interpretation over the primacy granted to the revolutionary party and connections between trade unions and white supremacy in the United States, as elaborated principally by Ignatiev and Don Hamerquist, were also at stake.<sup>52</sup>

Goldfield's critique of Ignatiev hinges on the claim that the latter was "largely an observer, not an activist," at his workplaces and therefore could not play a meaningful role in class struggles that occurred there. But this formulation actually misconstrues the positions that Ignatiev adopted in relation to shop-floor organization and union politics. Ignatiev did regard syndical organization critically while eschewing leadership posts and surrounding fights, which is not an automatic recipe for a "passive" approach defined by abstention. The idea was not to praise spontaneity or the essential goodness of workers but to show the density of more or less organized social relationships at different work sites. Goldfield cites a section from *Facing Reality* to prove his point that everyday instances of workers' self-organization, though laudable, are of limited significance for expansive, class-wide solidarity. The relevant section describes how "for nearly ten years" workers in an unnamed department (presumably in heavy industry) made arrangements to collectively cover the workload of a disabled co-worker whose inability to perform his duties was a direct result of his job in the plant. According to the report, this process posed a direct challenge to supervisors there and came with the promise of "throw[ing] the whole plant into disorder if any steps are taken to dismiss [the co-worker]."<sup>53</sup> Goldfield argues that this example concerns simply the "class instincts that workers had spontaneously at the workplace" and to elevate its significance further partakes in precisely the kind of leaderless outlook that must be overcome in any effective mode of workplace organizing, where the priority is leveraging structural power, above all in key industries. Yet in the view of the James group, the direction for mass action implied in this instance, in "what is apparently a casual, and elementary anecdote," clearly leads to a deeper consideration of workers' capacity to orient production toward their own ends and upend relationships of subordination.

Ignatiev might caution us to more thoroughly investigate the quite elaborate modes of interaction that workers have carved out in various sectors,

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Solidarity," *Spectre*, 11 August 2022, <https://spectrejournal.com/the-limits-of-white-skin-privilege/>.

52. Staudenmaier, *Truth and Revolution*, 68–72.

53. C. L. R. James, Grace C. Lee, and Cornelius Castoriadis, *Facing Reality* (1958; Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1974), 107.



where the accretion of defiance and on-the-job solidarity developed over the course of years can easily be mistaken for the spontaneity of those on shorter time scales. These forms of activity, processes, and patterns already in motion – which, as the cited example shows, can often arrive at radical conclusions – need to be apprehended on their own terms, which does not preclude engaging with them, intervening in them, assisting them, and discovering their resonances with other situations of discontent. This optic widens, rather than narrows, the channels through which militancy can pass – and arguably makes the job of workplace activists, and the organizations to which they may belong, much harder. At the same time, Ignatiev's subsequent reflections on the period point toward real problems in his own approach.<sup>54</sup> But these travails do not so much register the fundamental wrong-headedness of the attention to these precarious assemblages of workers' autonomy as they attest to the difficulties of engaging with them and refracting their power onto a mass scale.

In the same way that capital recomposes social divisions in light of autonomous examples of Black struggle, individual firms can retaliate against any threat to their retainership of “the oleomargarine unions,” punishing efforts at union reform from aspiring rank-and-file leaders or caucuses by targeting the informal agreements and prerogatives established by workers to self-regulate their working conditions.<sup>55</sup> Ignatiev and the STO landed on the assessment that unions must be approached like other elements in the capitalist workplace – situationally, from the vantage point of tactics. Unions provide a common framework to reach workers, but they cannot be utilized tactically in the attack on white supremacy insofar as they only serve to delimit workers' activity inside a space designated by the sale of labour-power to capital.<sup>56</sup> Birthed in class struggle, unions – especially those in sectors of mass production – were mobilized as tools of insurgent combat. But once their bureaucratic elements had congealed in periods of waning militancy and disorganization, Ignatiev argued, they ultimately serve as a brake on struggle.<sup>57</sup> In one very real sense, then, “the working class struggles not against its defeats but against its

54. See Ignatiev's contribution to the 2012 symposium on Michael Staudenmaier's *Truth and Revolution*: “I had worked at US Steel Gary Works since 1971, during which time I had made friends among my fellow workers, taken part in direct actions of no consequence, organized together with others in our branch public meetings that were poorly attended, waged a campaign that went nowhere against the racial policies of the Company and the Union, and published several issues of a regional paper that elicited no response from the popular audience at which it was aimed.” “Symposium: Truth and Revolution,” *Insurgent Notes*, 15 October 2012, <http://insurgentnotes.com/2012/10/symposium-truth-and-revolution/>.

55. Ignatiev, “Learn the Lessons,” 65; Ignatiev, *Acceptable Men*, 108–109.

56. STO, “Theses on Workplace Organizing.”

57. The STO, in an effort to forestall further accusations, included this designation in bold type in the 1980 preface to the *Workplace Papers* (signed by Ignatiev): “STO is not dual unionist in principle and it is not anti-union.” Noel Ignatiev, “Preface to *Workplace Papers*” (1980), accessed 15 January 2023, <http://www.sojournertruth.net/preface.html>.

earlier victories,” as Ignatiev would continually assert, following early mentors like Martin Glaberman who insisted that the vitality of the working class could not be identified with its official institutions.<sup>58</sup> “I once complained to one of the incumbents about the ineffectuality of the union,” Ignatiev writes in *Acceptable Men*. “‘What’s your grievance?’ the official asked me. ‘This job sucks.’ ‘That’s not a grievance; that’s a gripe.’”<sup>59</sup>

Neither the narrow politics of the grievance nor the mass politics of the gripe were enough to mount a challenge to the response undertaken by employers at the end of the 1970s. Far from reflecting a “tyrannical monologue of capital,” however, the managerial counteroffensive was embedded within conflictual processes of deindustrialization and reallocation of international investments that the state as “collective capitalist” could mediate but not control. Each must be explained through reference to ongoing working-class resistance to modifications of the labour process in heavy industry.<sup>60</sup> The result could hardly be described as a victory. “The common ruin of the contending classes” invoked by Ignatiev designates a more complicated picture of the period, where those autonomous agreements among workers in the factory were eroded, often via the obliteration of the factory itself.<sup>61</sup> Both shop-floor militants like those in the SRO and the bureaucratic unionists they derided were left increasingly isolated, exhausted, and unable to catch their bearings.

This is not the end of the story, however; it may well be closer to the beginning. “Indeed, a necessary consequence of the development of a mass revolutionary working-class current will be the revitalization of the trade

58. Ignatiev, “Are US Workers Paid Above the Value of Their Labor?,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 142. In a striking introductory letter to Glaberman in 1971, written only six months after starting work at US Steel Gary Works, Ignatiev reports many of the main stories featured in *Acceptable Men*. See Martin and Jessie Glaberman Papers, box 39, folder 31, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit.

59. Ignatiev, *Acceptable Men*, 77–78.

60. Ferruccio Gambino, “Class Composition and U.S. Direct Investments Abroad,” in *Imperialismo e classe operaia multinazionale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975), English translation at <http://zerowork.org/Z3GambinoClassCompositionRevised.html>. Building on Gambino’s analysis of US capital mobility in the postwar period, in an unpublished 1984 text entitled “Present Depths” Ignatiev laid out the dilemma clearly: “Let me underscore this point: it was the inability of capital to subdue the American workers that created the present economic crisis and drive to restructure the economy. Official analysts point to the introduction of new production techniques, low wages in the Third World combined with the mastery of modern production there as the reason for the permanent structural unemployment and destruction of capacity that besets U.S. industry. Nothing I say denies the reality of these factors; but they could come into play only because of the refusal of American workers to accept work patterns and living conditions beneath what they deem an acceptable level. Consider for a moment: if American steel workers agreed to put out twice the work they now do for half the money they now receive, would there be a flight of capital from the U.S. steel industry to motel chains, food processing plants, real estate, and Brazil?”

61. Ignatiev, “Present Depths.”

unions,” Ignatiev wrote in 1980. Any process of union resurgence will be brought forward not by the efforts of union reformers per se but “both as a direct response to the radicalization of their constituency, and because of the heightened interests of capital in maintaining their legitimacy as a structure able to confine the working class within the capital relation.”<sup>62</sup> Contemporary struggles for unionization indicate some potential routes forward and point toward a broader revitalization of class power that does not stop with official labour unions and organizations.<sup>63</sup>

It is precisely in the present context of a cross-sector revival of the labour movement that these two texts – one a memoir of 1970s factory life, the other a thematic, career-spanning collection of many notable writings – offer certain lessons for today’s radicals grappling with the inadequacies of conventional wisdom and narratives of political defeat. Some of these lessons are quite practical and grounded in the quotidian details of working-class life. They involve confronting the seductions of leading workers on the job and the false appeal of letting racialized and gendered divisions of labour persist unchallenged, instead looking to those examples set forth by workers themselves – workers who, in resisting and refusing conditions on the shop floor, strike at the heart of the question of exploitation, articulating alternative models of leadership. By apprehending both apparent and unforeseen forms of workers’ control, which exist even in moments of accommodation, quiescence, and withdrawal, Ignatiev offers a model of inquiry where organization occurs against and despite a backdrop of political disorganization. So long as workers’ self-organization is taken as the precondition rather than the result of militant activity and the assertion of leadership, worker radicals today can freshly encounter Ignatiev’s set of propositions.

Ignatiev wrestled with his class background and his separation from other workers because of his university education.<sup>64</sup> Yet it is important to note how

62. Ignatiev, “Preface to *Workplace Papers*.”

63. It is lamentable that some of Ignatiev’s work dedicated to excavating older debates in the labour movement – like his critical 1975 piece on William Z. Foster, “A Golden Bridge: A New Look at William Z. Foster, the Great Steel Strike, and the ‘Boring-from-Within’ Controversy” – were not included in this voluminous collection. But this absence also points to the need for the full republication of STO’s *Workplace Papers* as a whole, the text of which is online at <http://www.sojournertruth.net/workplacepapers.html>.

64. “Most of them had grown up working on cars, boats, and tractors and doing plumbing and wiring around the house. As they were doing such things, I was learning to conjugate French verbs!” Ignatiev, *Acceptable Men*, 46. This history of industrializing among college-educated radicals or those from middle- to upper-class backgrounds in the US still deserves scholarly attention, especially because of the effective presence of “salts” in recent unionization campaigns. See Mie Inouye, “Labor’s Militant Minority,” *Boston Review*, 15 June 2022, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/labors-militant-minority/>. On the longer trajectory of this kind of “internal organizing” in the United States, see Salar Mohandesi, “Becoming One with the People: L’établi américain hier et aujourd’hui,” *Les Temps modernes*, no. 684–685 (July–October 2015): 120–146; Kieran Walsh Taylor, “Turn to the Working Class: The New Left,

he continued his research into the historical streams of abolitionism and the workers' movement while rooted at the point of production. He shares an affinity here with Theodore Allen, whose intensive study of the genealogies of racial oppression in the United States greatly influenced Ignatiev's own. They both practised a form of "guerrilla history," done outside of the academy and embedded in political projects.<sup>65</sup> The actors and strategic traces of abolitionism that Ignatiev recovers belong primarily to an unfinished revolutionary enterprise that possesses scholarly dimensions, like Ignatiev's editorial work in republishing a collection of Wendell Phillips' speeches and arguing for his place as a revolutionary figure, or his reconsiderations of Frederick Douglass' time as a Baltimore dockworker.<sup>66</sup> The aim was to place at front and centre the emancipatory initiatives of the movement from the 1830s through Reconstruction, the efforts that connected with and signal-boosted ongoing forms of rebellion against the slave system and colonial-capitalist expansion.<sup>67</sup>

Much of Ignatiev's writing, whether in the mode of history or commentary, is a matter of provocation. One finds turns of phrase and slogans that scramble existing ideological coordinates: "the black church has historically been more of a proletarian organization than the white labour movement"; "it is said that Lenin invited the IWW to join the Communist International; things might have worked out better had he enrolled the Communist International

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Black Liberation, and the U.S. Labor Movement (1967–1981)," PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007.

65. In "Since When Has Working Been a Crime," a document distributed at local factories, Ignatiev locates a basis of comparison for contemporary attacks on migrant workers in the *Fugitive Slave Act* of 1850. Significantly, a group that Ignatiev had close links to, Bring the Ruckus, would be on the front lines fighting heinous anti-immigrant policies in Maricopa County, Arizona, in the 2000s. See George Ciccariello-Maher, "By the Time I Get to Arizona," *Counterpunch*, 19 December 2008, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2008/12/19/by-the-time-i-get-to-arizona/>.

66. See Ignatiev, "Lesson of the Hour" and "The White Worker and the Labor Movement," in *Treason to Whiteness*.

67. One of Ignatiev's first sweeping historical pieces, "Which Side Are You On? U.S. History in Perspective," written as a pamphlet for SDS in the late 1960s, began, "The capitalism of the U.S., and indeed of the entire western 'civilized world,' arose out of the extermination of the Indians and the enslavement of Africans." The pamphlet's general layout and internationalist focus on the struggles of subjugated peoples would be revisited in the 1980 text "The United States: An Autonomist Political History," which is included in the *Treason to Whiteness* reader. For the former pamphlet, see Noel Ignatin [Ignatiev], "Which Side Are You On? U.S. History in Perspective," n.d., SDS, Chicago, <https://omeka.library.kent.edu/special-collections/items/show/3184>. Regarding recent arguments for the significance of the wide range and networks of political practices developed by enslaved people in the Atlantic world during the 19th century, see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London: Verso Books, 2000); Samantha Payne, "A General Insurrection in the Countries with Slaves: The US Civil War and the Origins of an Atlantic Revolution, 1861–1866," *Past & Present* 257, 1 (2022): 248–279.

in the *rw*w.<sup>68</sup> At times his remarks gesture toward a shift in the popular comprehension of a well-analyzed phenomenon, like his hypothesis that the youth counterculture of the 1960s in its norms, practices, and symbols “contained the elements of a mass break with the conformity that preserves the white race.”<sup>69</sup> Though these expressions are scattered throughout his texts, often buried, when chewed over and arranged together they open onto hitherto neglected dimensions of previous political or cultural sequences and can acquire renewed actuality.<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, Ignatiev’s reframing of the nexus between abolitionism and labour struggles, to be found in the streams of proletarian self-activity and sociabilities, can help us grasp the spillover from the events of the 2020 George Floyd Rebellion and the recent pandemic-induced developments in the world of work.<sup>71</sup> The precise connections and overlaps between, on the one hand, one of the largest bursts of mass protest in US history and the so-called Great Resignation, the late 2021 strike wave, and on the other hand, the sustained upsurges among employees that we see at both high-profile firms and low-

68. Ignatiev, “White Worker and the Labor Movement,” 219; see also his post, republished on the PM Press blog, “The *rw*w: Some Lessons for Occupy,” 2 September 2019, <https://blog.pmpress.org/2019/09/02/the-iww-some-lessons-for-occupy/>. On its face, the claim about Lenin bringing the Third International into the *rw*w at the moment of the former’s founding in 1919 invites skepticism. The *rw*w was experiencing devastating internal and external crises. It obviously did not possess the structural capacity or political reach of the constituent parties of the Comintern. Again, however, these “Noelisms” are best interpreted as shocks to our historical imaginary – how might the 1920s and ’30s have unfolded differently if what was primarily circulated politically and socially through communist-inflected internationalist organizing was not the Soviet productive system or monolithic party-form, as turned out to be the case (with all attendant nuances and clarifications of those phenomena), but rather the knowledge and experience concerning the industrial “guerrilla warfare” tactics and organizing strategies from the Wobblies’ “counter-organizations” in various sectors? See Mike Davis, “The Stopwatch and the Wooden Shoe: Scientific Management and the Industrial Workers of the World,” in Green, ed., *Workers’ Struggles, Past and Present*, 83–100.

69. Ignatiev, “Immigrants and Whites,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 210.

70. See Massimiliano Tomba, “The Past as Battlefield,” *European Journal of Political Theory* (advance online publication 2 May 2022), doi:10.1177/14748851221098190.

71. For overviews from the left, see Jarrod Shanahan, “Every Fire Needs a Little Bit of Help,” *Endnotes* (Summer 2022), <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/jarrod-shanahan-every-fire-needs-a-little-bit-of-help>; Unity & Struggle, *Big Brick Energy: A Multi-City Analysis of the George Floyd Uprising* (New York: Common Notions, 2022), <https://www.commonnotions.org/buy/big-brick-energy-a-multi-city-study-of-the-2020-george-floyd-uprising-1>; “Nous sommes témoins de l’une des plus grandes rébellions de l’histoire des États-Unis: Entretien avec Viewpoint Magazine,” *Acta*, 12 June 2020, <https://acta.zone/nous-sommes-temoins-de-lune-des-plus-grandes-rebellions-de-lhistoire-des-etats-unis-entretien-avec-viewpoint-magazine/>. Ignatiev offers some historical comparison on this point. In a text published in the first issue of *Race Traitor* (one year after the 1992 Los Angeles uprising), he wrote that in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, “if Dodge Main and Lordstown were the high points of the conflict at the point of production, they cannot be understood apart from Watts, Columbia, and Attica.” Ignatiev, “American Intifada,” in *Treason to Whiteness*, 198–199.

wage sectors more broadly are still to be mapped through sociological and ethnographic research.<sup>72</sup> But there are links to be drawn in how recent union drives have targeted racialized divisions of labour in warehouses and created shop-floor networks that contest white supremacy in infinitely more effective ways than the recommendations and recriminations of highly paid consultants or specialists.<sup>73</sup> If the mechanisms of whiteness function to defend social positions in different conjunctures, as gears in a broader social compact and apparatus of political neutralization, then abolitionism is necessarily about the instruments required to break the arrangements that make it up: “its aim is not racial harmony but class war.”<sup>74</sup>

Recent cases of labour unrest show the potential relevance of Ignatiev’s outlook on the dynamics of struggles and the way they spark from “forces already present on the scene.”<sup>75</sup> On a recent Labor Notes panel on organizing drives at Amazon across the United States, Angelika Maldonado of the Amazon Labor Union stated that beyond particular union organizing models, what was most important for gaining support from fellow workers was “building our own culture within the JFK8 warehouse.”<sup>76</sup> Within a logistics firm whose labour process has been defined by a managerial playbook aiming to simultaneously concentrate and atomize the workforce, union supporters had to find creative outlets to manoeuvre around a crushing pace of work, company intimidation, and the separations imposed by the layout of the warehouse and existing social segmentation. The break room, the bus stop outside the facility, and spaces where supervisors could be directly confronted became openings for critical intervention and relationship building. Of course, Ignatiev might have misgivings about the decision to go the route of a National Labor Relations Board election, but organizers consistently strove to organically integrate the union drive with the forms of activity already in motion. And,

72. On the October 2021 strike wave, see Gabriel Winant, “Strike Wave,” *Sidecar* (blog), *New Left Review*, 25 November 2021, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/strike-wave>. On trigger events and momentum organizing among workers at companies like Starbucks and Amazon, see Chris Brooks, “How Amazon and Starbucks Workers Are Upending the Organizing Rules,” *In These Times*, 31 May 2022, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/amazon-starbucks-workers-organizing-unions-momentum-movement-moment>.

73. See Eric Blanc and Brima Sylla, “How Amazon’s Immigrant Workers Organized to Win a Union on Staten Island,” *Jacobin Magazine*, 4 April 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/04/amazon-warehouse-alu-staten-island-immigrant-workers>.

74. Ignatiev, “The Point is Not to Interpret Whiteness but to Abolish It,” *Treason to Whiteness*, 235.

75. See Ignatiev’s first reply letter to Staughton Lynd on the Boston desegregation busing crisis in *Radical America*, later published as Staughton Lynd, Noel Ignatin [Ignatiev], and Ken Lawrence, *Fighting Racism: An Exchange* (1975), <http://www.sojournertruth.net/fightingracism.html>.

76. See the panel “Amazon Workers in Motion,” Labor Notes 2022 conference, Chicago, 18 June 2022, YouTube, 1:50:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3h-DAMFESHU&t=787s>.



despite Ignatiev's earlier assertions that a "cost-of-living allowance" might not fundamentally transform the realities of workers' lives, we have recently seen tens of thousands of graduate student workers in the University of California system take militant strike action to win a COLA to lift them out of rent burden, in the midst of a prolonged housing crisis: first at UC Santa Cruz in the 2019–20 wildcat strike, and most recently UC-wide in the UAW 2865 strike of 2022.<sup>77</sup> Against a university juggernaut that is the state's largest employer with a massive real estate portfolio, grad workers have developed collective practices of writing, agitation, and decision-making firmly planted in rank-and-file activity at a distance from official union leadership. Their focus has been on figuring out how to most effectively sustain the kernel of antagonism between the withholding of teaching and research labour and the administrative timelines of academia – exerting a certain degree of worker control over a range of issues such as autonomy from professional supervisors to the size of courses.<sup>78</sup>

The predominance of multiracial manufacturing plants has given way to recast geographies of labour and massive transformations in the accumulation of capital, state regulation, and organization of work. The ongoing whiplash effects of deindustrialization and the decomposition of working-class institutions in the United States have fed into bleak cycles of right-wing reaction, hardening the "inchoate associational gel" of the racialized politics of white supremacy in a volatile sociopolitical landscape.<sup>79</sup> Ignatiev's advice to would-be revolutionary prophets in the present might be to band together to seek out new cultures of struggle at social sites as they appear in unanticipated fashion, to connect with and comprehend them, and to help steel them for the next move.

77. Ignatiev's remarks are in "Backward Workers," 181.

78. See COLA Agitation Committee, "Recording the Complexity of Struggle," *Viewpoint Magazine*, May 2020, <https://viewpointmag.com/2020/05/27/recording-the-complexity-of-struggle-an-interview-with-the-cola-agitation-committee/>; Zach Hicks and Rebecca Gross, "No COLA, No Contract: On the Ground at the UC Strike," *Brooklyn Rail*, 15 December 2022, <https://brooklynrail.org/2023/12/field-notes/No-COLA>.

79. Gabriel Winant, "We Live in a Society," *n+1*, 12 December 2020, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/we-live-in-a-society/>. See also Winant, *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2021).