

Mary Stanton, *Red, Black, White: The Alabama Communist Party, 1930-1950* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2019). 248 pp. Paperback \$29.95, Hardcover \$99.95.

In *Red, Black, White: The Alabama Communist Party, 1930-1950*, Mary Stanton examines the activities and membership of District 17 of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). Students of the American Left will recognize many of the incidents and themes in this narrative history. District 17 began organizing in Birmingham, Alabama in 1929, particularly among industrial workers and the unemployed, later reaching out to sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Its activists' commitment to interracial unity and racial equality and criticism of capitalism made them frequent targets of law enforcement.

Stanton's thesis is that District 17 identified, critiqued, and sought to dismantle the "systemic racism" that enforced Alabama's rigid class and racial hierarchies. Much of *Red, Black, White* unfolds in the courtroom: Stanton chronicles the ordeal of the Scottsboro Boys, nine African American teenagers ranging from 13 to 19 who were accused of raping two white women on a train in 1931. The International Labor Defense (ILD), the legal arm of the CPUSA directed by the Harlem attorney William Patterson, led their defense. As Stanton tells us, the case of the Scottsboro Boys amounted to a "legal lynching" in which white jurors ruled against African American defendants in spite of, or perhaps because of, absurd, disingenuous, and flawed evidence. In many instances, a mere accusation was sufficient to convict. The horrific story of Willie Peterson, a tubercular African American First World War veteran convicted of murdering two white women and assaulting a third, underscores that legal lynching was not a failure of Jim Crow law, but integral to it.

Red, Black, White takes an episodic approach to history and uses collective character profiles. District 17 encompassed Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia, so while its boundaries did not change, its staff experienced constant turnover. Chapter 2 ("The *Southern Worker* and the Dynamo of Dixie") introduces James Allen, editor of the District 17 newspaper *Southern Worker*, who was born Solomon Auerbach in Philadelphia in 1906; successive chapters feature a roster of organizers who served various terms. "Tours of duty were often short and brutal," Stanton explains (9). Still, the agricultural workers and industrial labourers that District 17 attempted to organize did not have the means to move out of the region as easily as the CPUSA organizers, most of whom were white. To Stanton's credit, she depicts the violence that whites inflicted upon African Americans as gut-wrenching. To cite one example, in 1935 a white sheriff in Dallas County, Alabama shot one of the leaders of striking cotton pickers who died in jail afterwards; two days later, another strike leader was murdered and his wife savagely beaten. Blain Owen, a white District 17 organizer

and journalist on the scene for the *Federated Press*, was arrested and assaulted as well. Such instances of violence happened time and again. The final chapter provides snapshots of the afterlives of District 17 activists. “Like returning combat veterans many would have difficulty integrating what they’d experienced into the years to come,” Stanton concludes (164).

Good narrative history brings to life the tensions between the agency of its protagonists and the structures of everyday life. To that end, Stanton is adept at showing the conflict that District 17 stirred in challenging white supremacy and the precarity of tenant farmers and sharecroppers’ existence. Bureaucratic ignorance only added to their challenges; as Stanton explains, the New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) exacerbated the plight of farm labourers by implementing a crop reduction program to promote demand. In reality, this “incentivized landowners to evict croppers and tenants” (89). However, *Red, Black, White* does miss some opportunities. For example, Chapter 4 (“An All-Purpose Jesus”) discusses the centrality of faith and religion to the region, but it falls short in describing how it affected the interactions between the District 17 organizers—many of them from Jewish backgrounds—and the African American and white southerners they were trying to organize. Chapter 6, “The National Miners’ Union, Southeastern Kentucky,” explores this issue in greater detail, but the chapter itself is at odds with the rest of the monograph, which is set in District 17 turf. Given Stanton’s interest in labour struggles in Kentucky, moreover, it is surprising that she glosses over the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and its role in labour organizing in the region after its formation in 1935.

Radicals on the Left in the US South have long fascinated historians. *Red, Black, White* thus joins a remarkable tradition that includes Theodore Rosengarten (*All God’s Dangers*), Nell Irvin Painter (*The Narrative of Hosea Hudson*), Robin D.G. Kelley (*Hammer and Hoe*), Horace Huntley and David Montgomery (*Black Workers’ Struggle for Equality in Birmingham*), and Glenda Gilmore (*Defying Dixie*). *Red, Black, White* draws from this historiography and offers general readers a good, compact introduction to Southern radicalism. Another recent contribution to this field is Michael Goldfield’s *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s*. Among other things, he argues that the CPUSA was instrumental in unionizing Birmingham’s steel industry and helping organize nearly 25% of Alabama’s non-agricultural workforce into unions by the mid-1940s.

The present weighs heavily on *Red, Black, White*. One of the largest protest movements in world history erupted in the summer of 2020 in response to brutal police violence against African Americans in the midst of a global pandemic. On November 7, 2020, US President-elect Joe Biden resolved to “root out systemic racism in our justice system.” Mary Stanton has written an admirable tribute to the courageous farmers, workers, and organizers who set out to do that almost 90 years ago.

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