

Foreword to the New Edition

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Under the impact of the modern Civil Rights, Black Power, and new social history movements of the 1960s and 1970s, a variety of scholars helped to revamp our understanding of African American history from the vantage point of black workers and the labor movement. This scholarship included not only historian Herbert Gutman's pioneering essay on the black coal miner Richard L. Davis of Ohio but important biographical and organizational studies by Theodore Rosengarten (1974), William H. Harris (1977), and Nell Irvin Painter (1979). At the same time, a Ph.D. dissertation by Richard Walter Thomas pioneered the treatment of Detroit's black community from the bottom up. These scholars gave careful attention to the "hidden" dimensions of interracial unionism (both within and outside the Communist Party); the careers of numerous grassroots black labor leaders; and the myriad ways in which black workers' lives unfolded within the larger contexts of community, culture, and politics, as well as work and labor relations. Without minimizing the magnitude of pain and feelings of despair that black workers experienced, this scholarship helped to clear the path for a more comprehensive portrait of the power and hope embedded in twentieth-century African American and U.S. labor and working-class history.¹

The publication of August Meier and Elliott Rudwick's *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* reinforced this trend toward a community-based study of black workers and a worker-based study of the black community. But Meier

and Rudwick's journey to black labor and working-class history was by no means straightforward. In 1963, the University of Michigan Press published August Meier's first book, *Negro Thought in America*. Meier illuminated the intersecting dynamics of what he called "an accommodating viewpoint" on the one hand and "the protest tendency in Negro thought" on the other (p. 206). He also acknowledged that his study focused mainly on "the expressed ideas of the articulate, who are ordinarily among the prominent people, and usually of the favored social and economic classes" (p. ix). A year later, Southern Illinois University Press released Elliott Rudwick's *Race Riot in East St. Louis, July 2, 1917*. Unlike Meier, Rudwick offered substantial insight into black migration and the militant African American quest for industrial jobs and full civil rights. According to Rudwick, "A large number of Northern Negroes aggressively and unconditionally claimed equal rights. For many whites it was their first encounter with Negro migrants who competed for jobs and seemed to be making unlimited demands on limited housing, transportation, and recreation facilities" (pp. 3-4). Nonetheless, Rudwick framed his study of East St. Louis as an investigation of interracial accommodation and conflict rather than one of African American labor and community development.

Over the next decade and a half, Meier and Rudwick came under the increasing influence of grassroots black urban social movements and gradually shifted the focus of their research from African American elites to a growing emphasis on black workers and the larger black community. As early as 1971, Meier and Rudwick joined historian John Bracey (then a Ph.D. candidate at Northwestern University) and produced the edited volume, *Black Workers and Organized Labor*, for the Wadsworth Publishing Company's "Explorations in the Black Experience" series. The essays in this collection spanned the period from the first major national labor federation in the United States following the Civil War to the militant black trade unionists' protests against the racial policies of the merged AFL-CIO during the 1950s. Still, Meier and Rudwick set out to write an organizational history of the NAACP, and they only gradually reached the conclusion that the activities of this race advancement organization offered an unusual opportunity to document the twentieth-century transformation of a black community and organized labor in a major industrial city.

Some fifteen years after their seminal studies on African American thought and patterns of interracial conflict and accommodation, Meier and Rudwick published *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*. This book not

only signaled the increasing influence of the new labor and social history movements on their work, it also underscored the rise of black urban America under the impact of industrial capitalism. By the 1970s, after beginning the century as the most rural of Americans, black people had become the most urbanized sector of the U.S. population.

Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW established a conceptual framework for the study of black urban workers during the pivotal years of the two world wars and the Great Depression. It provided a groundbreaking case study of the process by which one city's black community reoriented its primary interracial alliances from white elites to the predominantly white labor movement. Meier and Rudwick offered a detailed analysis of Detroit's black community, its social structure, and its leadership. Their research probed the experiences of black Detroit not only at work and in labor unions but in the neighborhood, housing, institutional, and political life of the city; at the same time, they gave close attention to the precise nature of the changing relationship between African American workers and elites, on the one hand, and white elites and workers (both rank and file and union leaders), on the other.

Until the onset of the Great Depression, Henry Ford occupied a uniquely positive place in the minds of African Americans. The auto industry (particularly Ford's River Rouge facility) represented one of the largest and most liberal employers of black labor in America. Indeed, for many black workers the Ford Motor Company seemed like an oasis in an otherwise hostile urban-industrial environment. But the Great Depression, the rise of the new CIO unions, and the emergence of an increasingly militant black community ended Ford's brand of racial paternalism and ushered in a new relationship between white capital and black labor. During the inter-world war years, the UAW leadership cemented its relationship with black Detroit through firm support for the African American fight against racial discrimination in the workforce, residential segregation, and the intensification of police brutality in the wake of the race riot of 1943.

While this study documented the reorientation of the black community's loyalties from the auto company to the UAW, it also highlighted the limits of such alliances for African American workers at the bottom rungs of the job ladder. By the end of World War II, even as the union supported black workers and the cause of civil rights, "a striking ambiguity" characterized the relationship between black Detroit and the UAW (p. 221). Rank-and-file white workers often hampered the implementation of the union's constitu-

tional provisions against racial discrimination and forced black workers to wage an ongoing fight against the color line in both the work force and the decision-making structures of the union. Black workers found it exceedingly difficult to rise into skilled categories of work and to gain representation on the UAW's International Executive Board and its salaried staff.

Black Workers and the Rise of the UAW contributed not only to the study of urban and labor history but to the realm of policy studies and the role of the state in shaping race and class relations. Meier and Rudwick documented the positive impact of federal bureaucracies in the transformation of the relationship between black and white workers. Although often reluctantly and grudgingly, the Federal Housing Authority and the wartime Manpower Commission, the War Labor Board, and the FEPC all helped to forge an alliance between black workers, the UAW, and the state. Federal agencies opened up jobs previously off limits to black workers; sided with African Americans in their struggle over public housing at the Sojourner Truth Housing Project in 1942; and curbed the incidence of racial violence by taking steps to put down the "hate strike" against black workers at the Packard Company in 1943. An ultimatum from the chairman of the War Labor Board empowered the UAW leadership to order white strikers back to work or "lose their jobs" (p. 170).

Closely intertwined with the original aim of this project, the changing relationship between the NAACP and the organized white labor movement also gained systematic treatment in this study. From the NAACP's inception in 1909 through the end of World War II, Meier and Rudwick convincingly argued that the organization was far less hostile to the labor movement before the rise of the new CIO unions than previous accounts would lead us to believe. According to prevailing interpretations at the time, the NAACP's Walter White played a pivotal role in the 1941 strike against the Ford Motor Company and helped to forge the alliance that emerged between the NAACP and the new industrial unions. On the contrary, Meier and Rudwick demonstrated that the national NAACP had endorsed the CIO as early as 1936 and helped to pave the way for a groundswell of support for industrial unionism among blacks in Detroit.

Following publication of *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, research on the history of African American work and community life flourished. Unlike the first wave of late-twentieth-century research on this subject, however, recent studies examine the southern cultural roots of African American labor migration and accent the role of black women and gender relations.

Although the lion's share of this scholarship focuses on the Great Migration of southern blacks into the urban South, North, and West, an emerging young generation of scholars are giving increasing attention to the changes ushered in by deindustrialization in the years after World War II. These historiographical and conceptual trends reveal the ongoing vitality of African American urban, labor, and working-class history as fields of scholarship—fields that are much richer because Meier and Rudwick produced *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*.

Note

1. See Joe W. Trotter, Earl Lewis, and Tera Hunter, eds., *The African American Urban Experience: Perspectives from the Colonial Period to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Trotter, "African-American Workers: New Directions in U.S. Labor Historiography," *Labor History* 35, no. 4 (fall 1994): 495–523. Also see August Meier, *A White Scholar and the Black Community, 1945–1965* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992); Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915–1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).