

Contesting the New South Order: The 1914–1915 Strike at Atlanta’s Fulton Mills. *By Clifford M. Kuhn*. University of North Carolina Press, 2001. 320 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-807-82644-8; paper 0-807-84973-1.

Reviewed by Bess Beatty

Clifford Kuhn describes the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills collection, discovered in 1985 and now available at Georgia Tech, as “truly extraordinary.” For unknown reasons, Oscar Elsas, president of Fulton Mills, saved a wealth of documents, even those described as “potentially damning” of his reputation (p. x). Kuhn makes much of this material accessible with this richly detailed monograph covering the strike at the Fulton Mills during 1914 and 1915. In the introduction, he writes that his book will “perhaps reshape some of the generalizations about southern textile workers” in recent synthetic works (p. 5). I do not think he has reshaped generalizations formed over the last two decades to any great degree, nor do I think he needed to do so. Kuhn does not have to find a place for such a richly detailed and smartly analytical work by challenging others. It stands on its own as one of the most thorough chronicles of a lengthy strike in American history.

Throughout the book, specific events at the Fulton Mills are placed in the larger context of Atlanta history, southern history, labor history, and the Progressive Era. Kuhn successfully establishes that his work “joins a growing historical literature that explores the nature and degree of change in the New South” (p. 6). He also successfully establishes that the strike “reveals in high relief many of the complexities and contingencies of the New South” (p. 7).

Although the book is largely devoted to the story of this strike, Kuhn’s early chapters establish the place of this event in the larger contest for the New South by exploring several other topics: an 1897 strike to prevent the hiring of African American workers, the Leo Frank case, and even the annual tour of the Metropolitan Opera to Atlanta. He cleverly compares the opera’s significance in Atlanta with that of the annual old-time fiddlers’ conventions in order to clarify his point that there was “tension between traditional ways and modern time, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (p. 6). Kuhn’s work also facilitates rethinking specific events, particularly the 1913 lynching of Leo Frank that resonated throughout this strike against a Jewish-owned mill a year later. Involvement of the Men and Religion Forward Movement, a Christian evangelical group of businessmen, prompted the Jewish mill owners to claim that the anti-Semitism unleashed during the Frank trial fed the strike. Kuhn rejects the charge that the mill

owners were targeted because they were Jewish and capably explores how class and religious conflict were intertwined.

Although Kuhn does not offer major new interpretations concerning racial or gender relations in the New South, he is constantly aware of their significance. He has been admirably careful to avoid the tendency displayed in some recent accounts of southern textile workers of recognizing that many textile workers were female but writing as if they were all male. A woman with the wonderful name of O. Delight Smith is one of the most intriguing people in Kuhn's account. Information about her is scattered throughout the book; a lengthy sketch like the one he drew of the Elsas family would have been an interesting addition.

Kuhn writes a balanced account. Although he clearly sympathizes with the workers, he does not tell their story uncritically. He reveals, for example, how photographs, a critical component of the union's propaganda effort, were sometimes doctored for effect; a photo of a tent colony housing evicted workers, for example, was a composite of two pictures designed to make the colony look twice the size it really was.

Kuhn argues that the use of nationally circulated photographs is exemplary of how the Fulton Mills strike was a "modern strike . . . most notably concerning the involvement of the federal government and the contest for public opinion" (p. 220). He describes it as significant on the very personal level as well. Kuhn opens the book with a rejection of W. J. Cash's description of the strike as "mere foam before passing gusts" (p. 5). He concludes by claiming the strike as a chance for the usually powerless "to challenge usual relationships of power" and that as a result the strike "meant a great deal" (p. 231).

The great strength of this book, the "truly extraordinary" collection it is based on, is ironically a kind of weakness as well. Kuhn is able to move in so many directions and suggest so many areas of inquiry that he fails to pursue them all fully. This is not to criticize *Contesting the New South Order*, but to suggest that Kuhn continue his work and that others follow his lead.

*Bess Beatty is associate professor of history at Oregon State University. She is the author of Alamance: The Holt Family Industrialization in a North Carolina County, 1837–1900 (2000) and is currently working on a study of American women touring Europe from 1814 to 1914.*