

The Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality. By *Eric Arnesen*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001. 332 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 0-674-00319-5.

Reviewed by Francille Rusan Wilson

The history of black railroad workers is paradoxical. It is full of heartbreaking tragedies and bitter ironies interwoven throughout a century of determined struggle by African American craft and service workers for their livelihoods and, all too often, their lives. The railroad industry was one of America's most segregated and occupationally stratified workplaces, yet despite its dangers and indignities, railroad work offered a better life for black workers and their families than agriculture or menial labor. The Pullman Company was, for many years, the largest private employer of black workers, and generations of students earned the money, as porters and dining-car waiters, that they needed to pay their college tuition. Yet black railroad firemen, who shoveled coal into the engines, risked beatings and assassination when they refused to abandon the skilled jobs that were increasingly reserved for whites in the early twentieth century. Until the Second World War, the four most powerful railroad brotherhoods successfully pressured both the federal government and railroad companies to maintain employment practices that excluded black men and women from the most desirable jobs and to pay them far less than their white counterparts for performing the same duties. Although black railroad workers began to win important legal battles in the 1940s, during the earliest days of the modern civil right movement the enforcement and implementation of these laws did not keep up with the postwar technological changes that transformed and dramatically altered the industry. Thus it is fair to summarize the last 125 years by observing that black railroad workers lost many of their battles to achieve equity in the workplace, but won the war, only to lose out to the forces of deindustrialization and a changing transportation sector that depended far less upon trains.

Eric Arnesen offers a graceful and complex account of the efforts of black rail unions to oppose the domination of the all-white brotherhoods, to combat the connivance of employers to use them as a strikebreaking and low-wage labor reserve, and to prod the government to enforce labor relations laws. He has exhaustively documented his study with black press accounts, letters, interviews, and literary sources, as well as governmental, business, and union documents. This critical aspect of American labor and business history has been neglected by contemporary scholars, except for a few studies of A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Pullman Car Porters. Arnesen's study is particularly valuable because he has chosen to look carefully at black

regional and local craft unions while also giving the national leadership and the rank and file their due. He vividly recounts the multiple goals and differing circumstances of firemen, porters, cooks, waiters, baggage carriers (red caps), rail-yard laborers, and engineers. *Brotherhoods of Color* reflects a merging of the traditional institutional descriptive narrative with some of the concerns of the new American labor historiography—race, gender, and agency. His decision to use personal histories of union activists nicely balances the decades of seemingly fruitless struggle by black railroaders. Charts and graphs illustrating black workers' regional and sectoral influence over time, however, would have helped the reader keep track of the larger picture.

American labor historiography has changed dramatically in the last three decades, shifting its purview from descriptive trade union studies to muscular analyses that consider race, gender, class, and community. Sparked on the one hand by Herbert Gutman's powerfully suggestive essay on black organizers in the United Mine Workers Union and, on the other, by the black studies movement, African American labor history has moved from the periphery to the center of the discipline. Robin Kelley writing on Alabama workers and the communists and on black working-class consciousness, Joe William Trotter on black coal miners and on the great migration, and Tera Hunter on southern black women workers all exemplify this new energy. Kelley, Trotter, Hunter, and now Arnesen have vividly filled in what had seemed a virtual moonscape in terms of postwar black labor studies. In fact, disciplinary interest in black labor studies may be measured by the critical backlash it has generated from the ranks of left, right, and Afro-centered partisans compared with the splendid isolation that was accorded to it during its first eighty years.

Brotherhoods of Color is a balanced and significant expansion of labor historiography, yet it does not necessarily move the field forward theoretically. Arnesen does not fully analyze his cogent observations on differences between black and white unionists. Black workers consistently have embraced the political, economic, and social needs of their entire community, unlike their white counterparts, whose primary focus has been on economic and racial superiority in the workplace. Business historians may find that Arnesen's full documentation of the railroad companies' interactions with black and white workers rarely seems to fit rational economic models and may wish for a fuller discussion of what this sordid and splendid saga tells us about the effect of racial and occupational segregation on American business history in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Because Arnesen has elsewhere written several provocative essays on race and labor history, his fine history of black railroad workers would have also been further enriched, albeit lengthened beyond its 332 pages, by a comparison of the experiences of

black workers in other industries. *Brotherhoods of Color* nevertheless remains a nuanced, multifaceted chronicle of a pivotal segment of American industrial history.

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