

Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh. *By John Hinshaw*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002. xvii + 348 pp. Index, notes, tables. Cloth, \$75.00; paper, \$25.95. ISBN: cloth 0-791-45225-5; paper 0-791-45226-3.

Reviewed by Thomas J. Misa

I wish John Hinshaw had really grappled with the “project of Marxism” that he hints at in his preface. After all, if Manchester, England, was the paradigmatic site of capitalist industry and working-class struggles in the nineteenth century, as Friedrich Engels maintained, surely Pittsburgh might be the paradigm of corporate industry and labor struggles for the twentieth century. Hinshaw has the right raw materials. In the late nineteenth century, there was the unbridled power of the great industrialists and their political lackeys, who crushed strikes, repressed unions, and literally disarmed the working class by disbanding the National Guard units in their neighborhoods. At the turn of the century, the rise of corporate capitalism altered the personal power of the Carnegies, Fricks, and Mellons. In the mid-twentieth century, the dynamics of the American working class shifted with the New Deal’s labor laws, the increased employment of black workers, the explicit politicization of steel during the cold war, and the astonishing possibility for steelworkers to achieve contentment as middle-class consumers. Such an account would analyze, with a full awareness of workers’ concerns, the turning point of the 1959 strike (its “man versus machine” theme challenged management’s prerogatives to run the works), and the running debates on administered prices, antitrust, and civil rights. Finally, of course, the great collapse of the 1980s. To sort out the vexing concepts of class, race, capital, and the state, such an account would draw on, examine, modify, and extend the works of David Montgomery, John Ingham, Katherine Stone, Dennis Dickerson, Henry McKiven, John Bodnar, David Noble, Phil Scranton, Judith Stein, David Harvey, and many others. The result would interpret one of the central historical dramas of the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, instead of confronting this rich but problematical literature, Hinshaw opts instead to “focus on the story” (p. xi) and largely disregards the analytical problems that his complex empirical material casts up. (His disagreements with Ingham, Stein, and others are itemized in the extensive footnotes [see pp. 263, 266, 331] but nowhere examined, while quotes from Marx provide rhetorical flourishes [pp. 160, 232].) One must credit Hinshaw for examining an unprecedented breadth of archival materials in the Pittsburgh region, as well as many labor publications, the archives of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), and extensive oral

histories. Of the major industry sources, only the Andrew Carnegie papers at the Library of Congress appear untapped.

The “story” that Hinshaw tells does have its drama and pathos. Vivid examples of raw capitalist power over iron and steel workers fill Chapter One, which recounts the industrialization of Pittsburgh from the 1850s to the 1920s, while Chapter Two examines the Steel Workers Organizing Committee during the New Deal and Chapter Three makes clear the dramatic curtailment of civil liberties and civil rights during the cold war. During that repressive time, many unions, including the USWA, bent over backward to expel their communist members, who were inevitably the most fervent supporters of national civil rights legislation, increased black participation in the union, and enhanced black employment in the mills. Chapter Four takes a dim view of big steel’s attempts at modernization in the 1960s, while Chapter Five situates the onset of the “lean years” as early as 1978. The corporate-dominated Pittsburgh Renaissance takes a drubbing.

The principal analytical problem is, of course, the intersecting tensions between class loyalties and racial divisions (and gender differences). These difficult problems have long bedeviled labor historians, and have recently engaged some business historians. Here is where Hinshaw’s empirical material about race and class is most persuasive, but also where his analysis often comes up short. He makes clear that black workers fought not only the oppression of capitalist managers but also the determined racial prejudice of white workers on the shop floor and in the union itself. The workplace seniority system, for many years, actually entrenched racial segregation by making a worker’s promotion feasible only within certain job lines. Black workers advanced within the blast-furnace department’s ill-paid job lines, for example, but did not cross over to the better-paid maintenance department that remained a white enclave. The USWA remained without black staff members for years, and understandably enough few black workers participated in the union’s business. Black workers appear to have made significant advancements by practicing a strategy of aggressive individualism, often in the face of blatant racial prejudice on the work floor. White workers might prefer to *do* a job assigned a black worker rather than *teach* him how to do it.

Hinshaw sometimes recognizes that class and race (and, from the 1950s onward, the allurements of middle-class consumerism) really were in severe competition for workers’ loyalties, but he does not consider that a strict class analysis is in serious need of expansion or revision. Against the backdrop of pervasive racism, it seems strained to pin the blame for racial discrimination on white managers (p. 138). While at least one black unionist claimed the union

“was just as prejudiced as the company was,” another black unionist allowed, realistically enough, that “without the union, things would’ve been worse” (p. 146).

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