Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretive History of Textile Unionism in the United States. *By Clete Daniel.* Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press. x + 327. Index, notes, photographs. Cloth, $39.95. ISBN 0-801-43853-5.

Reviewed by Randall L. Patton

Clete Daniel details the travails of American textile unions in his latest book, *Culture of Misfortune*. Daniel is primarily concerned with the failure of the American Federation of Labor's United Textile Workers (UTW) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations' Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) to organize workers in the textile trades. His narrative emphasizes the internal political struggles, the mistakes and missteps of union leaders, and the flawed strategies and miscalculations that seemed to plague these organizations. He does an excellent job of guiding readers through the labyrinth of internal union intrigue. In the process, he observes that while the "culture of misfortune" seemed to envelope textile unions, their failures were more attributable to factors beyond the control of unions or workers, such as global competition. While America's textile unions have often seemed to be exceptional in their spectacular failures, Daniel argues that the reality is more complex. Textile unions simply faced harsh economic realities of interregional and international competition earlier than most American industries, difficulties that steel and automobile workers were not forced to confront until the 1970s and 1980s.

The image of the South hovers over Daniel's story. The American textile industry became ever more heavily concentrated in Dixie during the twentieth century, with unhappy consequences for northern textile workers. The UTW and TWUA had some success in the northern branches of textile manufacturing. Yet organizing the South proved to be a task beyond the capabilities of American union leadership, which was all the more frustrating because the discontent of southern workers appeared obvious and deep. The UTW presided over the disastrous general strike of 1934 (well documented recently by major works devoted to the event, such as Janet Irons's *Testing the New Deal: The General Strike of 1934 in the American South,* 2000). Soon after, the new CIO took the leadership in promoting textile unionism. Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACWA) spearheaded the creation of the Textile Workers Organizing Committee (TWOC) under CIO auspices in 1937. Hillman and the TWOC's southern leaders attempted to market a relatively conservative brand of unionism, hoping that employers would find it less threatening, but, like many others, he misjudged the depth of antiunion sentiment among southern mill owners.

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In the face of adamantine employer opposition and inadequate financial resources, the TWOC nevertheless made some gains in 1937. The "Roosevelt recession" of 1937–38, however, "ultimately brought unionism's lurching advance in the textile industry to a standstill" (p. 95). The TWOC suffered another crippling blow in 1938 with the sudden death of the Lower South director, Steve Nance, who had achieved a level of respectability rare for a labor leader in the South. Daniel noted that whatever Nance's actual accomplishments may have been (and they appear slim in retrospect), "an enduring myth of what surely would have been accomplished had he lived quickly took shape"; thus, "Steve Nance continued to serve the cause . . . by providing a palatable explanation of the TWOC's failure to accomplish its mission in the South" (p. 98). Daniel's account of the impact of Nance's death encapsulates both the author's narrative style and the theme captured by the book's title. However bleak the outcome of a textile-organizing campaign, an explanation that involved the hand of fate always seemed to be available.

During World War II, many unionists chafed under the no-strike pledge, but fledgling unions like the TWUA had little choice but to accept it. Under the energetic leadership of George Baldanzi, the War Labor Board helped the TWUA create a sense of stability and permanence that was further bolstered by conditions of full employment. The Board also helped the TWUA win a handful of spectacular victories. As the war ended, however, TWUA leaders understood that they could not count on the same degree of cooperation from Washington, noting, "[W]e are on our own again" (*Textile Labor* editorial, quoted on page 153).

The TWUA tried to expand on these wartime gains with its highly touted "Operation Dixie." While the CIO drive produced a seemingly healthy weekly tally of National Labor Relations Board election victories, the pace-setting large firms in the region remained beyond the TWUA's grasp. The failure of Operation Dixie was, Daniel observes, a "disquieting omen" for the future of organized labor in the United States (p. 183). In spite of the failure of this campaign, TWUA vice president Baldanzi continued to advocate a risk-taking, vigorous southern strategy for the union. TWUA president Emil Rieve preferred a cautious policy of protecting hard-won gains in the northern branches of the textile industry. Yet, Baldanzi argued, the entire industry was becoming a southern one, and unless southern workers were organized, TWUA locals would vanish, along with northern plants. As part of a developing feud between the TWUA's top leaders, Rieve maneuvered the union into a disastrous strike aimed at closing the North–South wage differential in 1951. Rieve followed the failed strike with a drive to purge Baldanzi and his supporters from the union.

Rieve's blunders appeared as the most recent examples of the "culture of misfortune" that enveloped textile unionism. Daniel observes, however, that "by the mid-1950s, the forces that

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figured most decisively in the union's decline were not reversible even by the ablest leader." The liquidation of the last vestiges of the northern textile industry, the shrinking of the domestic industry in the face of global competition, and the "impenetrable barriers to unionism erected by" the South's leading mills—these were "the chief causes of TWUA's deterioration"(pp. 245–6). The union's long, costly, and well-publicized battle with the J. P. Stevens chain in the 1970s and 1980s is the centerpiece of Daniel's final chapter. The company used heavy-handed and blatantly illegal tactics to frustrate workers and union leaders, apparently willing to accept the fines and legal fees that accompanied such a brazen strategy. The TWUA's successor, the ACTWU, eventually declared victory after a hard-fought settlement in 1980. While some workers benefited from the settlement, this costly victory, like many before it, did not set any new pattern for the textile industry or its workers. It was a victory nonetheless, Daniel argues, unlike many illusory union wins of the preceding century.

Daniel has written a highly detailed and well-researched institutional history of the TWUA and related unions. He combines research in TWUA records with a broad reading of the secondary literature (though a bibliography would have been a useful addition). Daniel seems to reject the notion that unfortunate circumstances and self-inflicted wounds ultimately made the TWUA's organizing task impossible; he notes often that, in spite of specific circumstances, broader political and economic forces were shaping the fate of textile workers and unions. Yet Daniel does such a good job of explicating the seriocomic misadventures of the UTW and TWUA leadership that the reader comes away believing that perhaps textile unions were victims of a "culture of misfortune." Daniel's institutional history is a valuable addition to a growing literature on textile workers and unions in the twentieth century. His assessment is somewhat bleaker than that of Timothy Minchin *(What Do We Need a Union For? The TWUA in the South, 1945–1955,* 1998). Minchin argued that although union organization failed, the union's efforts did force southern mill management to adopt more rational personnel policies and improve wages and working conditions in order to stave off unionization. Daniel agrees that conditions improved somewhat, but he emphasizes the harsh tactics often used by southern management and points out the union's failure to bring participatory democracy to the shop floor. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, victories over first J. P. Stevens and later Pillowtex offered little hope for a revolution in labor–management relations, Daniel argued, but they at least indicated that the "spirit of textile unionism was as strong and resilient as ever" (p. 279). This important book will be required reading for anyone grappling with the issue of union organization and the textile industry.

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