

The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South. By William P. Jones. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005. xv +235 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, figures, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$45.00; paper, \$20.00. ISBN: cloth, 0-252-02979-8; paper, 0-252-07229-4.

Reviewed by Eric Arnesen

Historical scholarship on race and labor in general, and on African American workers in particular, has expanded in quantity and sophistication over the past decade. Not long ago, the field was marked by contentious debates about the extent of racial inequality in the labor movement and how historians should evaluate it. Informed largely by their participants' political sensibilities and revealing more about the participants themselves than the past they purported to study, those debates now have something of a dated feel about them. In an exemplary new account, William Jones wisely ignores those debates. Instead, he offers us a richly researched and illuminating social and political history of the African American men employed in the southern lumber industry. The result is an impressive case study that not only reconstructs these men's lives and the communities they built but also places them squarely in the center of southern economic and political history.

Jones convincingly challenges the influential and enduring portrait of these men first drawn by the white sociologist Howard Odem. Odem's three novels about "Black Ulysses," published between 1928 and 1931, established "the alienated working-class black man as a central figure" (p. 3) in fiction and nonfiction writing. In its multiple variations, Black Ulysses lacked firm familial or community ties; essentially "tribeless" (p. 5) and without morals, he was often depicted as young, footloose, impulsive, powerless, and criminally oriented, standing outside the forward march of southern industrialization and modernity. Social scientists, folklorists, and social workers amplified this picture, adding their own paternalistic take on what they saw as "degraded forms of leisure" stemming from the "disintegration of black rural traditions" (p. 66). Nothing in this picture withstands Jones's careful scrutiny, which effectively overturns what he calls the "myth of Black Ulysses" (p. 12).

Over the course of the twentieth century, more black men worked in the southern lumber sector than in any other, constituting the majority of its labor force. Engaging in what they called “public work,” southern black men geographically moved about in search of seasonal wage labor to support their families remaining on the land. Over time, increasing numbers found lumber employment a permanent alternative to agriculture. Not only were they not “without anchor,” but, Jones argues, black lumber workers also viewed their industrial employment “as a means to strengthen their roles as husbands and fathers” (p. 44). Indeed, Jones firmly establishes that far from being the itinerants of the myth, black lumber workers remained committed to their families, either sending home money or bringing wives and children with them to make new homes in lumber camps and sawmill towns. Rather than undermining black families, wage work in the lumber industry sustained them. The barrelhouse milieu that earlier had fostered considerable “black cultural creativity” (p. 62) eventually gave way by the 1930s to a more established environment of churches, organized sports teams, schools, and homes.

Government policies as well, particularly during the New Deal, decisively shaped the arena in which black lumber workers made a living and struggled to improve their families’ lives. Under the National Recovery Act (NRA) of the early New Deal years, the lumber industry’s wage policies received close attention. The establishment of regional wage differentials (northern wages being higher than southern wages) and debates over wage standards politicized southern workers, especially blacks, who turned to New Deal administrators and politicians to address longstanding grievances. Although the Supreme Court overturned the NRA in 1935, the act “whet [black] workers’ appetite” (p. 124) for greater government intervention.

The New Deal years also heightened blacks’ interest in trade unionism. The new Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) made industrial (as opposed to craft) organizing a priority and made interracial (as opposed to exclusionary) unionism imperative. Some industrial-union advocates maintained that “black workers lacked the social and political freedom necessary to join and support industrial unions” (p. 132), leading them to miss organizing opportunities, particularly in the South. That attitude changed during World War II, Jones demonstrates, when racial inequality “seems to have made African Americans more supportive of unionization” (p. 168) than whites. The

result was the growth of the interracial International Woodworkers' Association (IWA). Jones skillfully analyzes both the debates among national black leaders about the prospects for unionization and the on-the-ground experiences of black and white workers enrolled in the CIO's IWA and the American Federation of Labor's Sawmill and Timber Workers Union in the South.

Jones is appropriately and resolutely unromantic about his subjects. Appreciating the substantial difference that trade unionism made in the lives of lumber workers and the significance of the imperfect interracial project they engaged in, he nonetheless delineates unionism's limits. In some places, black trade unionists pushed the boundaries of the possible, expanding their organizations' scope to go beyond economic issues in order to "address their social and political grievances as well" (p. 172). The IWA, however, stressed a race-neutral approach that focused members' energies on economic matters and avoided taking on issues of racial inequality. Jones refreshingly avoids the polemics that favorably contrast the civil-rights unionism of the left (Communist)-led unions with that of more conservative unions. During its headway in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he shows, the IWA, even with its more limited views about race and labor, sponsored successful interracial strikes, grew significantly in size, and won numerous contracts.

It was not to last, for an employer counteroffensive put the union permanently on the defensive by the early 1950s. Before the industry declined and eliminated countless jobs, though, trade unionism enabled black lumber workers to advance their economic position significantly. Deindustrialization "devastated young men's hopes for supporting their families through southern industrial work" (p. 185), Jones concludes, and subsequent economic development in high-tech, aerospace, and electronics offered few concrete gains to local black workers. Jones's coverage of the rise of the CIO, its interracial organizing campaigns, the limited civil-rights unionism, and the ultimate decline of organized labor is too concise to allow for an in-depth exploration of unionism's triumphs and travails or labor activists' broader civil-rights activities. But the aims of *The Tribe of Black Ulysses* are more ambitious than a stricter and more detailed focus on trade unionism would allow. Jones's meticulous recreation of the world of southern black lumber workers successfully lays to rest the myths of Black Ulysses, leaving us with a far richer portrait.

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