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Review: Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality

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Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality

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and scholars interested in methodology and pedagogy will appreciate the emphasis it places on oral, local, regional, and national history and the role each has played in creating an African American identity in the United States.

Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality, by Eric Arnesen. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001. 332 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95 cloth.

Reviewer Andrew E. Kersten is associate professor of history and social change and development at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. The author of *Race, Jobs, and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941–46* (2000), his research interests include the history of labor and fair employment.

Eric Arnesen deserves a lot of credit for writing this exceptional book, which examines the overlooked but significant history of black railroad workers. From the late nineteenth century through much of the twentieth century, in any given year, the major railroads employed tens of thousands of African Americans. The jobs they held were mostly hot, hard, and dangerous. But for many African Americans, railroad employment translated into economic security, a moderate level of prosperity, and a brighter future. Yet despite the benefits, black railroad workers were subjected to virulent racism and employment discrimination. Arnesen analyzes the plight of black railroaders and argues that their struggle for justice—although incomplete—achieved dramatic breakthroughs that influenced not only their working conditions but the civil rights and labor movements as well.

Black railroad workers were an essential labor force, particularly in the South after the Civil War. Managers hired African Americans to build roadbeds, lay track, and perform many other service jobs. Working conditions were poor. For example, black porters on passenger trains were made to sleep in the baggage car or on dining car tables. Furthermore, nearly all high-paying skilled jobs were for whites only. The four big railroad unions (the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Order of Railway Conductors of America, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen) were lily white and worked tirelessly to aid their members to the detriment of black workers. Arnesen carefully points out that railroad managers as well as federal government officials willfully participated in creating unfair employment practices. In fact, railroad employers played off white racism and hired black brakemen, firemen, and switchmen to forestall union agitation. Thus, for African Americans, the work environment was hostile, threatening, and violent.

In response, black railroaders engaged in a civil rights movement for equality and justice.

Arnesen explains that World War I provided an unusual opportunity to advance the cause of black railroad workers. In 1917 the federal government created the U.S. Railway Administration (USRA) under the direction of William G. McAdoo. To discourage African Americans from leaving the railroad industry for better war jobs, McAdoo increased wages and established the principle of equal pay for equal work. African Americans welcomed the federal intervention and immediately sent additional workplace complaints to the USRA's grievance machinery. The promise of federal assistance was soon dashed, however. White union workers used the USRA to write new employment rules that forced blacks from their jobs. Protests fell on deaf ears in Washington, D.C.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency brought new opportunities for those fighting employment bias in the railroad industry. Although early New Deal legislation as well as federal agencies such as the National Labor Relations Board failed to help most black railroaders, later developments such as the establishment of the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) aided African American railroad workers. In fact, the FEPC was the brainchild of a black railroader, A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. In some ways, as Arnesen explains, Randolph was typical of African American railroad activists who, like Ishmael Flory, Rienzi Lemus, Willard Townsend, and Milton Webster, fused both labor and civil rights issues. During World War II, black railroad workers and their unions used the FEPC to advance the cause of job justice in what Arnesen labels "a moment of hope" (182). Yet again, although some advances were made, federal action did not go far enough.

Since the mid-1940s, black railroaders have used the courts to seek redress. In two famous U.S. Supreme Court cases, *Steele v. Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company* and *Tunstall v. Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen* (both decided in 1944), the justices sided with African American workers, ruling that railroad unions must represent all workers fairly regardless of race and end the practice of devising separate rules to advance job opportunities for whites only. Court challenges to unfair employment practices of railroad employees and unions have continued into the 1990s, often with the assistance of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Ultimately, this legal process has helped save jobs and establish more equality in the industry. Unfortunately, these gains were made at a time when railroads be-

gan to decline and disappear. Historically, in such situations, African American workers have always been hit the hardest.

Eric Arnesen has admirably recreated the bittersweet history of black railroaders. The book is extremely well written, nuanced, and insightful. Anyone interested in civil rights and the labor movement will find it invaluable. Furthermore, one would hope that the book would inspire other studies of regional or individual railroads and the issue of race.

A Milwaukee Woman's Life on the Left: The Autobiography of Meta Berger, edited by Kimberly Swanson. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 2001. xxvi, 189 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$15.95 paper.

Reviewer Sally M. Miller is professor emerita of history at the University of the Pacific. She is the author of *Victor Berger and the Promise of Constructive Socialism* (1973), "The Milwaukee Movement to 1920" in *Socialism in the Heartland* (1986), and many other books and essays on socialism and on women reformers.

This sketchy autobiography is a welcome addition to political history and woman's history. Meta Schlichting Berger (1873–1944), a daughter of German immigrants, grew to young womanhood as a middle-class housewife and mother in the Midwest. Born in Milwaukee and educated as a teacher, her marriage to an ambitious minor party politician transformed her life and her sense of identity. Although nonpolitical and unconfident, she began attending her husband's socialist and trade unionist conventions as a supportive wife. To her own surprise, she became caught up in the socialist movement, and then embarked on public activities of her own.

In 1897 Meta Schlichting married Victor Berger, who quickly built the local socialist party into a major presence in Wisconsin politics. Thirteen years older than his wife, he initially dominated her, shaped her beliefs and cultural tastes, and patronized her self-actualization efforts. In 1909 Meta Berger, freed by a devoted housekeeper from childcare of their two daughters and from homemaking tasks that bored her—a perk of the middle class—was elected to the Milwaukee School Board, where she served for 30 years. Simultaneously, she immersed herself in her husband's campaigns for municipal and congressional offices and in handling the financial exigencies of his daily newspaper, the *Milwaukee Leader*. Living in Washington at times during his congressional terms as a lone socialist representative (1911–13, 1923–29), Meta Berger tried to find causes to pursue, spurning the social circles of Washington wives. During World War I, Victor Berger was prosecuted by the federal government for his antiwar views. He

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