Distorting the Historical Record

One Detailed Example from the Albert Shanker Institute’s Report

Perhaps the most glaring error in these textbooks is the treatment of the role that unions and labor activists played as key participants in the civil rights movement. For example, while coverage is thin on the relationship between organized labor and the civil rights movement in the 1940s, it is virtually nonexistent from the 1950s on.

In general, the textbook coverage of the civil rights movement is quite good, but the omission of organized labor’s contribution to that movement is deeply problematic and seriously distorts the historical record. To be sure, unions have their own troubled history of racial discrimination, with many unions banning the inclusion of African American members through the 19th and early 20th centuries. Nonetheless, African American workers understood quite well that they needed to organize to protect their rights. Accordingly, in New York City in 1850, black workers formed the American League of Colored Laborers, the first organization of black workers.

Beginning in the 1930s, however, most large unions began to recruit African American workers into nonsegregated unions. In addition, organized labor provided crucial support to the civil rights movement from the 1940s through the 1960s, most of which the textbooks ignore.

The textbooks do mention A. Philip Randolph (the founding president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, who led the union’s 12-year fight for recognition by the Pullman Company and won the union entry into the AFL) as both a union leader and a civil rights leader. The books concentrate on Randolph’s 1941 plan for a march on Washington to protest racial discrimination in the military industries and to propose the desegregation of the American armed forces, which led to the Fair Employment Act, an early success for civil rights advocates. When the textbooks move into the 1950s, however, they ignore other strong links between leaders of organized labor and the civil rights movement.

The textbooks do not cover the extent to which many civil rights activists were also labor activists and leaders, and how closely intertwined the struggle for African American workers’ labor rights was with the struggle for civil rights. Consider union leaders such as Clarence Coe, who played a key role in building the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Memphis in the 1930s, worked at Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, and organized the United Rubber Workers during and after World War II.

Likewise, none of the textbooks mentions E. D. Nixon, a leader in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and an associate of A. Philip Randolph. Nixon was also a leader of the NAACP in Alabama and the initial organizer of the Montgomery bus boycott and the Montgomery Improvement Association, which managed the boycott. There is no mention in the textbooks of the role of union support for the boycott.

Finally, none of these texts introduces students to Bayard Rustin, a master strategist and hero of both the labor and civil rights movements, and the chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and into the ’80s, Rustin was instrumental in linking organized labor and the civil rights movement.

Moreover, the textbooks simply fail to reflect the extent and depth of organized labor’s support for the civil rights movement, and how closely the two movements—labor and civil rights—were intertwined. This close relationship between labor and civil rights is often called “civil rights unionism.”

Just a few examples of omitted content on labor and civil rights can demonstrate the extent to which textbooks ignore labor’s contributions to the modern civil rights struggle. Consider the contributions of just a few of the many unions that supported civil rights that are not covered in history textbooks. For example, the United Auto Workers (UAW) sent money to support the Montgomery bus boycott led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., endorsed a national conference. King worked out the March on Washington. Two months before the March, some 150,000 supporters of civil rights marched in Detroit, led by UAW President Walter Reuther and King. UAW members bused in large numbers of marchers.

Early in its history, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters would not allow Southern locals to follow the practice of segregation, and threatened to pull charters in cases where this rule was
stores in New York City. Such unions as the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union contributed upward of 800 picketers per day.14

There are many more examples of union participation in the area of civil rights. For instance, the American Federation of Teachers and its locals supported the civil rights movement in many ways, including by filing an amicus brief in support of Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, by actively supporting the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and by giving King more than $40,000 worth of station wagons to be used in the voter registration drive in Selma, Alabama. In 1963, AFL-CIO President George Meany paid $150,000 in bail to release King and 2,000 protesters being held in a Birmingham jail.

Other omissions reveal selective bias quite clearly. One glaring example: King was murdered in Memphis in 1968 while he was aiding a unionization effort of black Memphis sanitation workers under the auspices of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference made the Memphis struggle a focal point of its Southern cities organization effort. King believed that unionization was a key part of the struggle for civil rights. Yet, while the textbooks mention the reason why King was in Memphis, none mentions the specific union involved in the strike—clearly a central actor—by name. Worse, not one mentions King’s strong belief that labor rights and civil rights were inextricably linked.

In 1961, King spoke to the AFL-CIO on the shared values of the organized labor and civil rights movements. This speech should be included in all U.S. history textbooks. In the speech, King declared:15

Negroes in the United States read the history of labor and it finds them their own experience. We are confronted by powerful forces telling us to rely on the goodwill and understanding of those who profit by exploiting us. They deplore our discontent, they resent our will to organize, so that we may guarantee that humanity will prevail and equality will be exacted. They are shocked that action organizations, sit-ins, civil disobedience and protests are becoming our everyday tools, just as strikes, demonstrations and union organization became ours to insure that bargaining power genuinely existed on both sides of the table.

We want to rely upon the goodwill of those who oppose us. Indeed, we have brought forward the method of nonviolence to give an example of unilateral goodwill in an effort to evoke it in those who have not yet felt it in their hearts. But we know that if we are not simultaneously organizing our strength we will have no means to move forward. If we do not advance, the crushing burden of centuries of neglect and economic deprivation will destroy our will, our spirits and our hope. In this way, labor’s historic tradition of moving forward to create vital people as consumers and citizens has become our own tradition, and for the same reasons.

Finally, there is no mention in the textbooks of labor’s role in supporting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.16 In short, the picture painted by U.S. history textbooks simply airbrushes labor out of this vital historical period and, in the process, paints an incomplete picture of both the labor and civil rights movements.

Endnotes

1. As Wade Henderson, president and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, put it in congressional testimony: “Although many unions attempted to defy workplace racial hierarchies, others acquiesced and focused primarily on organizing white workers, while either neglecting African Americans or relegating them to the worst job classifications. Notably, the United Auto Workers (UAW) stood bravely athwart some of its own members in demanding equal treatment of African-American workers within Detroit’s auto plants.” See Wade Henderson, “A Strong Labor Movement Is Critical to the Continuing Advancement of Civil Rights in Our Nation” (testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, March 10, 2009).
2. For example, the American Railway Union, which was at the center of the 1894 Pullman strike, did not admit black railway workers. See Louis Menand, The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001). See also James Gilbert Cassedy, “African Americans and the American Labor Movement,” Prologue 29, no. 2 (Summer 1997).

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22. For an accessible explanation of this, see Francisco Ayala, Darwin’s Legacy (Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press, 2007), 59–61.


24. For details, see Berkman and Plutzer, Evolution, Creationism, and the Battle.


27. Nicholas J. Matzke and Paul R. Gross, “Analyzing Critical Federalism Versus State Constraints: Balancing Evolution and Creationism in the National Guard, not to attack strikers or to evict them from their homes, provided the main support that made the rise of the CIO possible, at a time when supporting a union was as much the system as the product of the mass movements. Yes, the decision resulted from the incredibly hard-working and ardent battle led by Charles Houston, Thurgood Marshall and others in the NAACP. But it also resulted from mass movements and a vast shift in status among poor and working-class African-Americans, millions of whom moved out of rural areas and into cities and mass-production industries in the 1930s and ‘40s. They created an expanding membership base for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the NAACP, and in the process, tipped the balance of power from the New Deal.”


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5. During the strike, corporate and police brutality against the strikers led Michigan Governor Frank Murphy to send in the National Guard, not to attack strikers or to evict them from the GM plant they had occupied (ways in which the National Guard was often used against strikers), but rather to protect them, both from the police, who used tear gas against the strike, and the private strikebreakers. 4.5. Moreau, Schoolbook Nation, 245.


11. For more on the Teamsters’ support of civil rights, see “Teamsters and Civil Rights,” International Brotherhood of Teamsters, www.teamsters.org/content/teamsters-civil-rights/history-month.

12. To cite just one example: in the Deep South city of Memphis, African-Americans, who had been organizing unions since the Civil War, lost their organizing efforts that made the rise of the CIO possible, at a time when supporting a union could cost one’s life. The purge of the interracial local from the CIO during the cold war undermined civil rights unions, yet a number of black industrial unions continued to challenge white supremacy in the 1950s and ‘60s. Union wages also made it more possible to send children to college, and some of those students led sit-ins and demonstrations against Jim Crow.

13. For more detailed account of the UAW’s history in supporting civil rights, see “UAW History,” United Auto Workers, www.uaw.org/page/uaw-history.

