

Book highlights struggle world forgot as ‘Black Workers Remember’ visits labor veterans

Editor’s Note: Michael Honey will be speaking at 4 p.m. Tuesday, April 4 at the Faculty Club, on the anniversary of Martin Luther King’s assassination.

The struggle for civil rights in the 1960s had some of its strongest roots in labor organizing among blacks in the 1930s, according to a new book by a UW faculty member.

The book chronicles the struggle for dignity and “personhood” through the union movement among black workers in Memphis. But the book’s author argues that the struggle in Memphis is indicative of what happened across America.

Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism and the Freedom Struggle, is written by Michael Honey, associate professor of liberal studies at the University of Washington, Tacoma. Honey teaches American and African-American history and labor studies at UWT. His book is largely a first-person account of those individuals who led the struggles, beginning nearly 70 years ago, that led to unionization and eventual attainment of the full rights of citizenship in Memphis.

“The unions are key to the struggle,” says Honey, “because most of the other organizations of which we think now barely existed in the Deep South. The NAACP was a secret society, as was the American Civil Liberties Union. Aside from the black church, unions were the chief way of becoming organized.”

Honey’s search for the earliest survivors of this struggle took him across the country over the past 15 years. Many of the key figures had already died. Overall, he talked to more than 60 people who participated in the struggle for workers’ rights.

When unionization’s great surge took place in the 1930s, black workers made up the bulk of the Memphis workforce and did about 80 percent of the unskilled industrial work. Their first battle was to attain the right to organize unions. Next, they fought for equal rights within the unions. But because of segregation and racism in unions, very few blacks became union officers. Nevertheless, Honey found that blacks were almost invariably the strongest supporters of unions.

Black workers in the early days generally adhered to a “racial etiquette,” Honey says - showing deference in the presence of whites, and generally keeping a low profile. But those who became active in unionizing efforts found their own way of resisting the Jim Crow system. “There’s a continuity between the generations,” Honey says. “They all faced racism on the job, and they all had to find ways of maintaining their integrity and dignity. Even if people didn’t have the right to vote freely or equal access to public accommodations, they did find ways in the workplace of holding their dignity.”

The right to vote in a union, in a secret ballot, was federally protected - a right blacks didn’t have in society in general. Honey calls this “citizenship right” a powerful affirmation to continue the struggle for a widening circle of rights.

The black union activists had to fight on two fronts - with management and the white workers. Exercising citizenship rights in the workplace was considered threatening behavior to many whites. Especially after World War II, blacks struggled to get better jobs and to get rid of Jim Crow, which put them in conflict with white unionists. Many of the stories in the book are about the first black workers who managed to secure what had been known as “white” jobs; they were intimidated and threatened in the workplace and harassed at home.

Black workers who became active did so despite the lack of protection from federal or local authorities. It

took generations for much of the progress to occur in the union halls and on the factory floors.

“And the sad end to the story is that, by the 1970s, they had pretty much desegregated in the unionized factories, and then employers started closing them all down,” Honey says. “In the 80s, it was worse. It’s kind of a bitter victory. The workers talk about what this means for younger, working-class blacks. The income generated by the unionized jobs is suddenly gone, and the neighborhood goes into a collapse. The industrial core of the community has been hollowed out. The factory closings have thrown the whole community into despair. People felt that everything they fought for was decimated.”

Honey points out that the people in the book are clearly exceptional. “Most black workers chose to just survive, but these people chose to fight.” The unifying thread among those who made this choice was that at least one influential adult - a family member or close friend - taught them not to be fearful. “Someone taught them there was another way to respond to racism,” he says. “Although there was good reason for fear, these workers fought back against both racism and economic exploitation and considered the union era their proudest moment.” ¶

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University Week

The faculty and staff publication of the University of Washington

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March 30, 2000