



Ken's Labor Book Reviews From The Archives

Building Bridges
with mimi rosenberg & ken nash

**Your Community
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Labor Report**

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"Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers." By Michael K. Honey. University of Illinois Press, 1993. 364pp. \$49.95, \$17.95 paper.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. died during the Memphis sanitation strike of 1968 fighting to recreate an alliance of Memphis labor and civil rights which had briefly flourished a generation earlier.

Michael Honey's history of union growth and decline in Memphis from the '30s to the early '50s is a biography of this long-forgotten movement for labor and black civil rights in one Southern city.

Memphis Boss Edward H. Crump's political machine, which ruled during this entire period, early made its peace with skilled craft unions in the AFL that represented white males. But the Memphis power structure reacted violently to the organizing of black unskilled workers.

It was only during World War II, when federal war contracts and the War Labor Board neutralized local oppression, that black workers successfully flocked to CIO unions. Even the white rubber workers realized that they could not go it alone and joined their black coworkers in a new CIO local. Communists and radicals were prominent in these battles, leading the workers in interracial organizing.

Memphis came out of the war with an energized labor movement, with black and white workers working together for the first time, but whites hesitated to support black demands to end discrimination in the shops and fight the South's segregation system.

Fifty years ago, in May 1946, the CIO inaugurated Operation Dixie to organize the South. Again, blacks and women flocked to the call. But the CIO squandered this window of opportunity in an underfinanced campaign. They also centralized decision making in a small group and implemented a conservative strategy of purging communists and integrationists from positions of power while ignoring job discrimination and civil rights issues. Renewed state repression, the Taft-Hartley Act and the Cold War's Red Scare turned the CIO inward, to raiding CIO radical locals instead of organizing.

And so progress was reversed until the 1968 Memphis strike by AFSCME sanitation workers again united blacks with labor.

This book has much to teach us as the new AFL-CIO leaders get set for the May 1 launching of Union Summer, the first major organizing drive since Operation Dixie.

--Ken Nash, Rifkin Solidarity Library

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