

Book Review: Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality by Bruce Nelson

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Nelson, Bruce. *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. xlv + 388 pages. Paperback, \$45.00.

In his authoritative introduction to *Divided We Stand*, historian Bruce Nelson explains that his book was a response to two parallel currents in American labor history. The first, led by Herbert Hill and Nell Irvin Painter, among others, insisted that the so-called New Labor History had (literally) whitewashed the study of American workers by ignoring the importance white racism and the agency of Black workers in the formation of the American working class. The second, led by David Roediger, proposed whiteness as a key component of American racial and working-class formation. It is difficult to imagine today, in an era when race is a vital level of analysis for labor historians and terms such as “white privilege” have entered common parlance, how rancorous were the debates over these issues. Painter and (especially) Hill famously took to task leading lights of American labor history, including Herbert Gutman, David Montgomery, and Nelson Lichtenstein. Whiteness, meanwhile, was widely derided as a concept too insubstantial to gain traction in social history.

Nelson’s innovation was to examine the growth of whiteness and the marginalization of Black workers not as discrete phenomena, but inextricably interconnected. Most critically, Nelson argues that the agency of workers, both white and Black, has long been overlooked in our study of race and labor. White workers were not duped into antiblack racism by the divide-and-conquer tactics of employers; nor were Black workers bribed into skepticism of unions by corporate paternalism. Rather, white workers took an active, if halting and uneven, role in defining themselves as white and in marginalizing their Black colleagues, while Black workers combatted such oppression with every weapon at their disposal.

Divided We Stand is split into two halves, with the first examining dockworkers and the second examining steelworkers. In each, Nelson offers a powerful analysis of the processes by

which working-class immigrants—Irish in dockworking, southern and eastern Europeans in steel—became white. Critically, Nelson’s analysis of whiteness is centered on the concrete material advantages it conferred. On the docks, for example, kinship networks afforded the Irish enormous advantages at the “shape-ups” that determined the day’s work, while off the job, their “untrammelled access to public space” and network of “neighborhoods, political networks, and criminal gangs...offered them psychic capital and avenues of mobility that barely existed for blacks” (44). In steelworking, native-born workers and “old immigrants” from England, Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia consolidated their control over the mills by defining skilled work, and even skill itself, “as an occupational qualification and badge of status,” as white; as southern and eastern Europeans became white, they too were welcomed into the aristocracy of skill, while Black workers remained permanently marginalized (150).

Nelson’s analysis of Black workers is similarly nuanced and provocative. Much of this argument is embedded in a reconsideration of the role of trade unions in racial segmentation. In particular, Nelson upends traditional historical arguments that the arrival of the Committee for Industrial Organization/Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) heralded a revolution in race relations among workers. In New Orleans, for instance, Black longshoremen voted overwhelmingly to stick with the conservative, racially segregated, AFL-affiliated International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) rather than join the radical, racially inclusive, CIO-backed International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), because they viewed the former as a reliable if staid body and the latter as a group of slick-talking outsiders. Even more powerful, if only because of the scope of the industry and thus the argument, is Nelson’s discussion of the CIO’s work in steel. Nelson adeptly summarizes the paradox of the CIO’s insurgency: the Steelworkers Organizing Committee (SWOC), and later the United Steelworkers (USW) were

highly centralized, even dictatorial, organizations, but were animated by the energy and agitation of rank-and-file workers. This placed Black workers in the worst possible position: on the one hand, entrenched white leadership prevented Black workers from expanding the union's social agenda, which remained timid so as not to alienate racist rank-and-file whites. Black workers—especially those in the heart of the “massive resistance”-era South—came to realize that unions would offer them only nominal protection from discrimination, and the fight for racial justice moved from the shopfloor to the lunch counter, the bus, and the street. Nelson's poignant closing chapter on the decline of Youngstown, Ohio, fittingly concludes that “formal agreements by themselves could not bring about lasting change,” and that the behavior of workers on the shopfloor, above all else, that has determined the potential (or not) for interracial unity (186). This emphasis on agency is the greatest strength of *Divided We Stand*. By centering the agency of white workers in the construction of their own identity, and of Black workers in resisting their marginalization, Nelson revises longstanding historical assumptions. Though employers were structurally significant, of course—Nelson calls them the “prime movers” of industrial capitalism—it was largely workers' own prejudices and behaviors that racially divided the shopfloor.

If there is a critique to be made here, it is that Nelson's focus occasionally limits his analysis. By Nelson's own argument, trade unions were primarily white organizations whose efforts at pursuing Black equality were often halting and desultory. Yet Nelson's choice to focus on unions as a lens for examining the working class means that his analysis of white workers is at times sharper than his analysis of Black workers, whose struggles for equality took place largely outside unions (as Nelson himself acknowledges). Yet these are minor quibbles, particularly in light of the unique historical moment in which *Divided We Stand* was produced. By offering a

keen, cohesive, concrete analysis of whiteness and its discontents in the American working class, Nelson creates a much-needed addition to the field of American labor history. Twenty years later, *Divided We Stand* remains a provocative and essential work.

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