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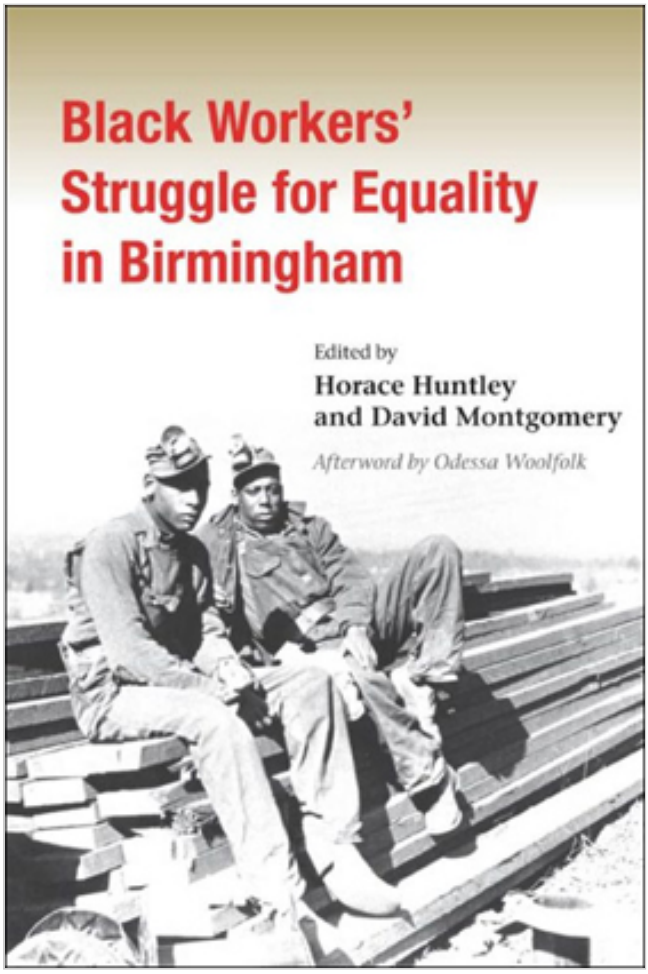
The struggle for equality, remembered

Black Workers' Struggle for Equality in Birmingham. Edited by Horace Huntley and David Montgomery, Champaign, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2007, 244 pp., $35.00/cloth.



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In *Black Workers' Struggle for Equality in Birmingham*, editors Horace Huntley and David Montgomery transform annotated interviews of participants in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement into a book that tells the story of the struggles and triumphs of those who stood up for justice and equality in Birmingham, Alabama. These men and women, Black and White, vividly recount their experiences in overcoming a number of different kinds of prejudice and discrimination, including sharecropping, migration, working in the mines and steel mills, police brutality, and hate crimes, among others. The result of their magnificent efforts a half century later is a better life and fairer society for their children and all children.

Most of the African Americans whose recollections appear in the interviews presented in the book came to Birmingham from the farmland of Alabama's Black Belt and Mississippi. (Other migrants came from farther afield.) They arrived with the hope of earning a better living than farmwork allowed and to escape abusive landlords. What they found was that the only jobs available to African American men were low-paying, dangerous positions involving heavy manual labor in the region's mines, mills, railroad yards, and construction sites. Work for Black women was confined to washing clothes, scrubbing floors, and caring for White households, likewise at insufficient pay. In contrast, Whites were hired for more than 90 percent of the newly created, better paying manufacturing jobs in, for example, South Carolina. Interviewee Reuben Davis commented on this dichotomy, observing that when Blacks like him came back from the Navy at the end of 1945, "it was common that practically everyone who wanted a job could get a job." But, he added, "The thing about it was, all the jobs available were lower end and the most difficult of working." He shared a statement that he once

heard Dr. Allen Ballard, a Birmingham physician, say at a church service: “Anytime a Black man made any move toward progress, they would brand him as a Communist.” Reuben went on to say, “In my opinion, the American government was not fearful of communism—they were thinking that communism would advance the cause of Black people.”

Birmingham was considered the citadel of heavy industry in the South. Steel mills and pipe foundries dominated the horizon, while hillsides in the vicinity were pocked with coal and iron mines. It was in the aforementioned mines and mills, and in their own neighborhoods, under the harsh oppression of segregation, that Black working people began their individual and collective struggle for equality. To accomplish their goals, they formed diverse labor unions and discreetly created “study groups and networks of known and trusted activists,” which linked those unions together. The decision to organize gave the Civil Rights Movement in industrial Birmingham a distinctive character and tenacity, and enabled African American workers, together with students, clergy, professionals, and White allies, to win historic victories over segregation between 1961 and 1963.

Brown v. Board of Education was a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case in which the Court overturned the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision allowing state-sponsored segregation insofar as it applied to public education. Handed down on May 17, 1954, the Warren Court's unanimous (9–0) decision stated that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” and unconstitutional. Racial hostility and discrimination in Birmingham accelerated following the Brown decision, and the city commission fomented, rather than contained, the violence that erupted against protesters. The head of public safety, T. Eugene “Bull” Connor, was an unrelenting racist. The police department in Birmingham was all White at the time, and many officers were active in the Ku Klux Klan. People who sought change were threatened, ridiculed, or belittled and even had their houses burned down or churches bombed. African Americans were beaten without reason, and Whites who fraternized with Blacks were also beaten. Many White families with school-age children simply left town to avoid putting their children in integrated schools.

One of the most touching stories was told by Rosa P. Washington. She recalled playing in a large cotton basket as her parents were working on a farm. The owner came by and threw candy in her basket; however, the horse he was riding kicked dirt into the basket, whereupon Rosa threw out the candy. Upset over the incident, Rosa went running to her father, who was in a nearby field. When her father inquired what had happened, the owner’s reply was that Rosa poured the candy out because the horse kicked dirt in her basket. So Rosa’s question to her father was, “When are you going to get a job where White folks work and not ride around kicking dirt on me?”

Concerns about the lack of advancement opportunities among African Americans and other groups still exist. Nonetheless, we have reason to be thankful for the unions, ministries, and movements that worked for equality and fairness for all in the workplace; in many cases, unions were the difference enabling Blacks to receive wages comparable to those of Whites for doing the same type of work. Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, head of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, in particular deserves praise for strategizing with the various neighborhood churches and for keeping people’s spirits high. Other groups and individuals worthy of praise are the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; the American Federation of Labor; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; the Birmingham Alliance against Racism and Political Repression; the United Mine Workers of America; the Steelworkers Organizing Committee of the Committee for Industrial Organization; and the Brotherhoods of Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality.

Some of the issues and challenges that existed decades ago are still recognized by the Department of Labor today. In a recent email, newly selected U.S. Secretary of Labor Thomas E. Perez states,

For 100 years, our department has been central to safeguarding and expanding the American dream for working families. As the first Secretary of the department's second century, I will focus every day on creating more opportunity for more people. That means more opportunity for workers to acquire the skills they need to succeed; more opportunity to earn a fair day's pay for a fair day's work; more opportunity for workers and employers to compete on a level playing field; more opportunity for our veterans to thrive in the civilian economy; more opportunity for people with disabilities to contribute productively to the workforce; more opportunity to retire with dignity and peace of mind; and more opportunity for people to work in a safe environment and with the full protection of our antidiscrimination laws.

Not only do the interviews presented in this book capture the importance of the many struggles of African Americans and provide new insights into the civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s, but they also recount decades of struggle before and after in the ever-present fight for equality. I echo Harvey Lee Henley, Jr.'s observations given in an interview: "We need to go back to what our fore parents did and see how they dealt with these situations. We got to get ourselves closer together because we are similar to the same problem now. I think we are going to reverse, or we are going to repeat what we went through."

It is appropriate to learn more about "the Struggle" as we pause to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington. Fifty years ago, Blacks, Whites, Jews, Gentiles, Protestants, and Catholics came together from around the world to march for jobs and justice. Dr. King knew of the Struggle in Birmingham and elsewhere when he spoke of "the Dream," and today books like *Black Workers' Struggle for Equality in Birmingham* ensure that we keep the Dream alive and march forward for equality and justice for all!

This book is a must-read for anyone searching for firsthand knowledge of how hard minorities had to fight for equality in a land of opportunity. It is also a must-read for those seeking to understand minorities' shared experience of never giving up. I highly recommend that you read the book and hear the voices that cried out to make this world a better place.