

## Notes and Documents

### RACIAL CONFLICT AND RACIAL SOLIDARITY IN THE ALABAMA COAL STRIKE OF 1894: New Evidence for the Gutman-Hill Debate

by  
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Labor historians have perennially found themselves at odds over the issue of race. Recently an old dispute has flared anew: have white workers identified their self-interest as a *race*, and used their organizations to defend the privileges associated with a white skin, or have they seen themselves as a class, with readily staked common ground with black workers? Have black workers made real gains through participation in interracial or biracial unionism, or by joining unions have they subordinated themselves to organizations ultimately hostile to their interests and aspirations as African-Americans?

As historians hasten to point out when studying race relations within the working class, this consciousness is situational, not immutable.<sup>1</sup> Much good work has recently been devoted to detailing the predominance of one form of consciousness or another in various unions, locales, time periods, or industrial conflicts.<sup>2</sup> Yet the central point of contention has remained, and so does one of its acid tests: the attempts by

<sup>1</sup>Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans* (New York, 1991), intro.

<sup>2</sup>Rick Halpern, "Interracial Unionism in the Southwest: Fort Worth's Packinghouse Workers," in Robert Zieger, ed., *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South* (Knoxville, 1991); Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights* (Urbana, 1993); Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History*, 75 (1988), 786-811; Bruce Nelson, "Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile during World War II," *Journal of American History*, 80 (1993), 952-88; Robert J. Norrell, "Caste in Steel: Jim Crow Careers in Birmingham, Alabama," *Journal of American History*, 73 (1986), 669-701; Judith Stein, "Southern Workers in National Unions: Birmingham Steelworkers, 1936-1951", in Zieger; Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Coal, Class and Color: Blacks in South West Virginia, 1915-1932* (Urbana, 1990).

black and white coal miners to organize the southern bituminous coal field during the 1890s.

This remains a crucial episode in the history of interracial organizing for several reasons. First, coal mining was one of the first major industries to be organized on industrial rather than craft lines, an approach which necessitated more open racial policies than that of most AFL unions. Second, under the auspices of the United Mine Workers (UMW) the coal miners union was *ostensibly* committed to organizing both black and white workers on an equal basis, even in the Deep South. This commitment was made by a powerful *national* union, which might not have to bend to local "custom." And not least, the UMW was the subject of the late Herbert Gutman's pioneering study that suggested blacks and whites could achieve labor solidarity in the most unpromising of eras. Consequently, however, the UMW has also been a target of blistering counterattacks by Herbert Hill, whose work suggests the contrary: even when self-interest clearly dictated racial cooperation, white workers always gravitated toward caste, not class, regardless of the articulated policy of the national union.<sup>3</sup>

Hill's attack on the "Gutman revision" two decades after its appearance has received attention of late as labor historians again turn their attention to the questions Gutman initially raised, with growing attention to the experience of southern workers. But with regard to the mineworkers the debate rages on virtually unchanged after 25 years, and most scholars come to it with their predilections intact, which they use to sift through the same evidence—especially the letters to the *United Mine Workers Journal (UMWJ)* by black organizer Richard Davis, the focus of Gutman's original essay. Ever more sophisticated theories of race and class, or the impugning of an opponent's evidence as selective, distorted, or just plain wrong, dominate the discourse, but no real new ground is broken. What is sorely needed in sorting out the truth about race relations among southern coal miners is not renewed polemics, but attention to new evidence.

Ample examples of both racial antagonism and racial solidarity appear in the pages of the *UMWJ* between 1891 and 1910. Indeed, selectively drawing evidence from the *Journal* a convincing case can be made for either assertion: the UMW made extraordinary efforts to overcome

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<sup>3</sup>Herbert Hill, "Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers of America," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 2 (1988), 132–200; Rick Halpern, "Organized Labor, Black Workers, and the Twentieth Century South: The Emerging Revision," in Halpern and Stokes, eds., *Race and Class in the American South Since 1890* (NY, 1994). Gutman's original essay appeared as "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America," in Julius Jacobsen, ed., *The Negro and the American Labor Movement* (Garden City, 1968).

the barriers to racial cooperation, even in the South; the UMW never was able to transcend the stake white workers maintained in racial discrimination. Relying on the same sources as Gutman, Hill makes a persuasive case that Gutman used selective evidence to illustrate the interracial promise of the UMW, which Hill characterizes as a myth. He also notes Gutman's focus on the period 1890-1900, when the UMW was relatively small, and reached out to black workers in the South out of necessity, when "survival required the admission of black miners."<sup>4</sup> After 1900, as the union rapidly grew to encompass over 200,000 members, the commitment to racial solidarity declined in inverse proportion. While this appears to be true, it begs the question: how do we explain the racial openness of the earlier period? What circumstances occasioned breaks with white supremacy during the rabidly racist 1890s? Was it merely white opportunism, as Hill suggests; and if so, how does this explain the actions and consciousness of *black* mineworkers who were drawn to unionism, and often staked their lives on it? Gutman's own work — considerably more aware of the ambivalence with which both black and white miners approached the question of racial cooperation than Hill allows — suggests that as much can be learned by studying the exception as the rule. In fact, Hill's own chronology undermines his ceaseless contention that white workers *inevitably* cast their lot with caste instead of class.

Yet, as long as the *UMWJ* remains the court of last resort, each side will marshal the existing evidence, or read the same evidence differently, to prove their point. But why not look at other evidence, evidence which provides, in Gutman's words "detailed knowledge of the local world inhabited by white and negro miners"? This seems an especially pressing task given that Hill's attack is aimed not just at the ghost of Gutman, but at the entire project of the New Labor History with which historians associate his legacy, dismissed by Hill as "romantic Marxism."<sup>5</sup> But of course the New Labor History concerns itself not with union leadership and organizational history, so readily available in the *UMWJ* and considered at great length by Hill, but with the social relations of workers in specific *local* settings.<sup>6</sup>

In what follows I re-examine the Alabama coal strike of 1894, and

<sup>4</sup>Hill, "Myth-Making as Labor History," 187.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>6</sup>Several of Hill's critics note the necessity of pursuing such local studies, grounded in specific events. See the rejoinders published in *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 2 (1989): 361-403; for an example, see Stephen Brier, "Interracial Organizing in the West Virginia Coal Industry: The Participation of Black Mine Workers in the Knights of Labor and the United Mine Workers, 1880-1894," in Gary M. Fink and Merl E. Reed, eds., *Essays in Southern Labor History* (Westport, 1977).

deliberately eschew use of the *UMWJ*. Indeed, it is important to note that while information from Alabama filtered up to the *UMWJ* during the 1890s, the miners' union there—the United Mine Workers of *Alabama*—did not even officially affiliate with the national UMW until later in the decade.<sup>7</sup> Thus questions of national union policy, at least during the strike of 1894, were relatively unimportant in Alabama, even though the strike there coincided with a national walkout. What mattered was how black and white mineworkers interacted in a local situation fraught with racial and political tension and the ever present reality of violence.

To uncover this interaction, I rely on the daily Pinkerton detective agency reports sent to Governor Thomas G. Jones of Alabama during the four months of the strike, over 200 pages of which are preserved in the Governor's papers at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, in Montgomery. In late 1893 and early 1894 Governor Jones had hired Pinkertons to investigate cases of vigilantism in rural Alabama. As detective T. N. Vallins wrapped up this case on April 20, 1894 he was sent by the Governor to Birmingham to "learn the condition of affairs relative to the striking coal miners." The strike was barely a week old. Noting that "the companies intended replacing the striking miners with negroes," Vallins' assignment was to warn the Governor of "a riot or destruction of property" this might cause.<sup>8</sup>

Over the next four months four different Pinkerton "operatives" spent time in the saloons and on the street corners of Birmingham and surrounding mining communities, acting as the Governor's eyes and ears. The operatives reported daily to the Pinkerton's Chicago office, where William Pinkerton and his staff collated and typed the reports, and sent them back to the Governor in Montgomery (ironically, the delay caused by this cumbersome procedure greatly reduced the effectiveness of the intelligence the operatives provided). Rarely used by historians, these reports disclose a wealth of information on the attitudes of black and white miners, the response of both to the presence of black strikebreakers, and the prevalence of racial violence in the Birmingham District during the strike.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class and Community Conflict* (Lexington, 1987), 44; *UMWJ*, June 7, 1894, 2.

<sup>8</sup>William A. Pinkerton to Thomas G. Jones, April 27, 1894, 2, Governor Thomas G. Jones Papers, Administrative Files, Box 25, Alabama Dept. of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL. All Pinkerton to Jones correspondence is drawn from Box 25.

<sup>9</sup>Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 41–44, offers a good description of the 1894 strike which relies partly on the Pinkerton reports. Robert David Ward and William Warren Rogers, *Labor Revolt in Alabama* (University, Ala., 1965), provide an excellent narrative of the strike, aided by the Pinkerton files, but do not address the question of race relations. All citations below refer to William Pinkerton's dated report to Governor Jones, rather than to the date of the operative's report to Pinkerton.

Ultimately, these reports indicate both the potential fault lines of racial cooperation and the possibilities for solidarity. The Pinkertons provided evidence of racist sentiments and even violence during the 1894 strike. But they also revealed, inadvertently at times, numerous examples of the willingness of black workers to overlook the racism of their white union counterparts, and to stick with the union. Finally, these reports suggest that more often than not, violent hostilities in the Alabama coal field involved black and white union miners together attacking imported strikebreakers, regardless of race.

Naturally, labor spy reports must be used with caution.<sup>10</sup> But as evidence, the Pinkerton files offer several advantages over the *UMWJ*, which Hill, Gutman, and his defenders, all rely on almost exclusively. Rather than providing a sudden snapshot of a local dispute, as letters and reports sent to the *UMWJ* by organizers who spent a day or two in a locale often did, the spies sustained their reports throughout a labor conflict that lasted over 100 days. Moreover, the *UMWJ* material is naturally tendentious, since it was written often in the service of a partisan cause within the union, particularly when concerned with racial disputes. In contrast, the Pinkerton material appears *relatively* objective. Since there were four spies present in Alabama, their reports provide four different perspectives, and can corroborate one another. Certainly the Pinkertons were partisan—they were in Alabama, after all, to help defeat the strike. But it is important to emphasize that they did not work for the coal companies. Instead, they reported to Governor Jones, and their mission was to provide him with intelligence about impending violence, or investigate violent incidents that had already occurred.

Since much of the actual and potential violence of the strike had racial overtones, the Pinkertons frequently commented on the state of racial antagonisms in the mining communities they visited. And their job *required* objectivity; they had to dispel false rumors<sup>11</sup> and to unravel the truth when violence did occur, as well as to warn the state of potential violent outbreaks. Finally, while the Pinkertons surely were not neutral observers, unintended sympathy for the plight of the men they smoked, drank, and chatted with daily did on occasion slip through.

The coal strike of 1894 was a crucial moment in the history of mining and mineworkers in Alabama, and had profound implications for the

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<sup>10</sup>For an exemplary use of spy reports, and a discussion of their strengths and weaknesses as a source, see Gary M. Fink, "Efficiency and Control: Labor Espionage in Textiles," in Robert Zieger, ed., *Organized Labor in the Twentieth Century South* (Knoxville, 1991).

<sup>11</sup>See Pinkerton to Jones, June 12, 1894, 5, for an example of disproving a rumor.

problems and possibilities black workers would find in southern unions. By the 1890s, Birmingham and its surrounding counties had by far the most fully developed coal and iron complex in the Deep South, which had developed at an astonishing rate during the 1880s. In 1870, only 13,200 tons of coal were removed from Alabama's immense 5000 square mile field, and this was for local consumption only; coke production did not begin in the state until 1880. But in an astonishingly brief period of time Alabama built an integrated coal and iron complex of coke-fueled furnaces. By 1890 Alabama produced 4,090,409 tons of bituminous coal, fifth in the nation; 1,072,942 tons of coke; and 718,383 tons of pig iron.<sup>12</sup>

This rapid development resulted in an unusually diverse labor force for a southern community. Birmingham's mines and furnaces drew on black labor fleeing the oppressive conditions of rural Alabama, as well as a high proportion of immigrant whites.<sup>13</sup> Alabama's mine labor force in 1890 consisted of 2778 native-born whites, 1492 immigrants, 3687 blacks, and 1295 convicts (almost all of them black).<sup>14</sup> The great coal and iron boom of the 1880s was followed by new challenges to the industry in the 1890s: increased competition; a deep depression and a sharp drop in the price of coal and iron; the pressing necessity to convert iron production to steel; and labor conflict on a massive scale, particularly as miners' organizations made inroads in the Alabama field and corporations attempted to cope with the drop in prices.<sup>15</sup>

In the Spring of 1894, faced with a 25% wage reduction insisted upon by Alabama's coal operators, the recently formed United Mine Workers of Alabama, which represented at least 8000 of the state's mineworkers, called a strike to begin on April 14.<sup>16</sup> By May, only 735

<sup>12</sup>William B. Phillips, *Iron-Making in Alabama*, 2nd ed. (Montgomery: State Printer, 1898), 366; U.S. Geological Survey, *Mineral Resources, 1889-1890*, 172; U.S. Census Office, *Report on the Mineral Industries of the United States at the Eleventh Census, 1890*, Vol. 7, 355; USGS, *Mineral Resources, 1890*, 149; Phillips, *Iron-Making, 1896*, 25; Mable Mills, *The Coke Industry in Alabama* (University, AL: Bureau of Business Research, University of Alabama, 1947), 2; Tennessee Division of Mines, *Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor, Statistics and Mines* (Nashville: State Printer, 1985), 234. The Woodward Iron Co. reported that between 1886 and 1890 alone 27 blast furnaces were built in Alabama; Woodward Iron Co., *Alabama Blast Furnaces* (Woodward, 1940), 19.

<sup>13</sup>U.S. Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *Relations Between Labor and Capital*, vol. 4, pp. 286-290; Paul B. Worthman, "Black Workers and Labor Unions in Birmingham, Alabama," *Labor History*, 10 (1969), 375-407.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 378; Alabama, *Third Biennial Report of the Inspectors of Convicts, 1888-1890*, 97.

<sup>15</sup>Robert J. Norrell, *James Bowron: The Autobiography of a New South Industrialist* (Chapel Hill, 1991), intro.; Ward and Rogers, *Labor Revolt in Alabama*; Victor S. Clark, *History of Manufactures*, vol. 2 (New York, 1949), 302-03; Alfred M. Shook to Arthur S. Colyar, Sept. 30, 1892; G. B. McCormack to Nat Baxter, April 1, 1892; Alfred M. Shook to Benjamin Talbot, c. 1894, A. M. Shook Papers, Birmingham Public Library.

<sup>16</sup>Ward and Rogers, *Labor Revolt in Alabama*, 59-63; Report of the Proceedings of a Conference between Members of the Executive Board of Mine Workers of Alabama and Governor Thomas G. Jones, July 19, 1894, Jones Papers, Box 25.

free miners remained at work in Alabama's mines, although the convict mines continued to produce coal, much to the union's chagrin.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that black convicts continued to produce coal, even if against their will, helped sharpen the racial tension in the District. Moreover, Henry DeBardeleben and the region's other coal barons quite consciously used the threat of permanently replacing white miners with black ones in order to exacerbate racial conflict and divide the union along its fragile racial fault line. In a public letter published in the *Birmingham Age-Herald* of April 20, DeBardeleben proclaimed that he would offer black strikebreakers work in his mines: "This is a rare chance for all first-class colored miners to have a permanent home. . . . this can be a colored man's colony. . . . Colored miners come along," he invited.<sup>18</sup>

And indeed, the coal companies did open several mines with black labor exclusively (though whites crossed the line as well)<sup>19</sup>, virtually inviting racial violence. A local black labor agent, Chat Holman, was known to be "gathering up all the negroes he could get and putting them to work for the Company in the mines in place of the strikers."<sup>20</sup> One white miner informed a Pinkerton agent that he believed "many of the white men would never be allowed to go to work here again."<sup>21</sup> A week later operative JHF reported much saloon talk of this variety: "if the company keeps putting these negroes in all of the mines . . . the boys would get left (meaning the miners)."<sup>22</sup> In early May, detective Vallins reported that two black miners who continued to work were beaten by strikers. "It is probable [the white strikers] will resort to anything to intimidate the negroes if they cannot persuade them by argument," Vallins warned ominously.<sup>23</sup> Six weeks into the strike, when 30 black workers entered a newly opened mine, he reported to the Governor that this "will hurt the strikers who are angry and making threats to kill the negroes" and that "the white men realize they are about to lose the strike on account of negroes going to work," creating an especially dangerous situation.<sup>24</sup>

Read superficially, this sort of evidence reveals what labor historians stubbornly regard as a rather typical pattern of race relations during

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<sup>17</sup>*The Tradesman*, 30 (May 15, 1894), 61-62; 30 (May 1, 1894), 50; Alabama, *House Journal*, 1896-1897, 639; Alex Lichtenstein, "Through the Rugged Gates of the Penitentiary: Convicts and Southern Coal," in Halpern and Stokes, eds., *Race and Class in the American South*.

<sup>18</sup>*Birmingham Age-Herald*, April 20, 1894.

<sup>19</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, June 30, 1894, 8.

<sup>20</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 23, 1894, 1-2.

<sup>21</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 18, 1894, 7.

<sup>22</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 25, 1894, 2.

<sup>23</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 16, 1894, 3; Pinkerton to Jones, May 23, 1894, 4.

<sup>24</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, June 4, 1894, 2.

a serious labor conflict: white strikers, black strikebreakers, racial violence. But the Pinkerton reports also expose the complexity of working class race relations in great detail. On the one hand there is no shortage of threatened violence against black strikebreakers — “blacklegs” — some of it tinged with racial antagonism; and there is even more grumbling by white strikers that they would “never trust a negro nor ever work with them again.”<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, as we shall see, black strikers stood fast with their white counterparts and did not return to work; virtually all the strikebreakers came from outside the coal mining communities. By the end of the strike, white miners did not even “credit the report of negroes coming there to take their places because they have heard it ever since the strike commenced.”<sup>26</sup> Quite surprisingly, even while the labor conflict often seemed to be posed in terms of race, black and white miners socialized together in integrated saloons in Birmingham, and held interracial mass meetings without incident. Moreover, when resentment against black strikebreakers boiled over into violence or threatened violence, black and white strikers participated in that violence *together*.

Thus, when some black workers at the Johns mine returned to work after only one week out, Vallins had to report that while “white miners claim that the company have been partial to the negroes in the way of work” he also noted that the scabs angered *both* black and white workers who remained on strike.<sup>27</sup> Commenting several weeks later that most scabs were black, a Pinkerton operative then indicated that “the negro strikers are very bitter against them and threaten them at every opportunity and have done some acts of violence to intimidate them.”<sup>28</sup> T. N. Vallins admitted that “the operators are able to get a few negroes to go to work each day but many of them are not miners and as a result they do not get out much coal.”<sup>29</sup> In June, the Pinkertons became especially concerned about the potential for violence when the Tennessee Coal and Iron Co. brought black strikebreakers to the Birmingham District from Tennessee; a necessity because, as detective Vallins put it, “the strikers have perfect control over the local striking negroes and there has been no break in their ranks at all, and there are very few miners among the new men. . . . The men now going to work are negroes who are picked up at different places.”<sup>30</sup> Later in the Summer, the union claimed that many of these black workers were essentially being held

<sup>25</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 29, 1894, 2.

<sup>26</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, July 27, 1894, 8.

<sup>27</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, April 27, 1894, 3-4.

<sup>28</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 18, 1894, 2.

<sup>29</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 26, 1894, 1.

<sup>30</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, June 12, 1894, 2.

in peonage, lured from the plantation belt to the Birmingham District by false promises of high wages, and then charged for transportation, room, and board.<sup>31</sup>

The battle lines drawn in the Birmingham District appear to fluctuate. At one moment (or in one miner's mind) the struggle pitted strikers and "blacklegs" regardless of color; at another, these antagonists took on racial hues, as white miners and black scabs. In a single statement the miners' executive committee could protest against "the employment of negro 'scab' labor to the exclusion of white and the better class of colored labor" and yet appeal to the merchants and citizens of Birmingham: "can you stand to see your white brother driven from the state?"<sup>32</sup> But what about the moments when striking miners took definitive action (often contrary to the union leadership's wishes), and defended their livelihood with illegal and even deadly violence? In May, Vallins informed the Governor that "a few negroes are going to work each day and this still further irritates the strikers who say that the only way to stop them and thereby save the strike is to blow up the mines and kill some of the negroes which will stop them from working."<sup>33</sup> But saloon talk was one thing; when violence did erupt, its racial aspect was less than clear.

For example, Chat Holman, the black labor agent, had a shotgun fired into his house in an effort to scare him. The Pinkerton agent sent to investigate this incident discovered that three attackers were seen running back into "the negro settlement."<sup>34</sup> This is not evidence that Holman had black enemies, but when Holman was arrested a few days later for carrying a concealed weapon a mob of several hundred white *and* black strikers gathered; the Pinkerton on the scene remarked that "if Holman had not been protected he would have been seriously dealt with by the strikers."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, when Walter Glover, a black coke oven worker who took a job in the mines during the strike, was murdered on May 19th, the Pinkertons claimed that "the effect of this murder on the strike situation will be to intimidate the negroes who were about to go to work." But of the three strikers who committed the murder, one was a black miner named John Driver, Glover's neighbor.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Conference between Gov. Jones and the UMWA, July 19, 1894, 37; Pinkerton to Jones, Aug. 15, 1894, 3.

<sup>32</sup>Birmingham *Age-Herald*, June 6, 1894.

<sup>33</sup>T. N. Vallins to Jones, May 3, May 18, May 23, 1894, Jones Papers, Box 24; Pinkerton to Jones, May 26, 1894, 1.

<sup>34</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 23, 1894, 2.

<sup>35</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 24, 1894, 2.

<sup>36</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 23, 1894, 5; T. N. Vallins to Jones, May 20, 1894.

Ironically, the most serious violent incident of the strike occurred while the Pinkertons were back in Chicago, in mid-July, when there was a "massacre" or "riot" at the Pratt mines. Dozens of striking miners ambushed some black strikebreakers as they left the mine on July 16, killing two in a deadly fusillade. But this was not merely a case of white violence against black workers. Of the over 100 arrests made in response to the massacre, one half of the accused were black strikers. And after much fruitless spying — none of the miners, white or black, would reveal much about the massacre<sup>37</sup> — one Pinkerton agent finally discovered that one of the leaders of the mob was a black man named Dan Marshall, a blacksmith by trade.<sup>38</sup> Despite one black informant's claim to a Pinkerton that strike violence was "at the instigation of the white men and that none of the negroes advocated such steps, but some of them had participated with the white men," this was not the only reported example of black leadership.<sup>39</sup> Operative E. W. was told to investigate "a negro named Jones who has been to Tennessee and is trying to form a band of negroes there to come and help drive the negro miners out of the Blossburg mines."<sup>40</sup>

Clearly black workers in Alabama in 1894 were not passive pawns in a class struggle among whites, simply caught between coal operators using them as strikebreakers and a racist white union interested in barring them from the mines. But in addition to dispelling this myth, the Pinkerton reports also allow a glimpse of African-American consciousness, though one often distorted by racist preconceptions. At times, the Pinkertons could only grasp black participation in the strike as motivated by fear and intimidation. "Most of the negroes at Pratt City are with the strikers and are afraid to say anything or go back to work, and do about as the white men tell them to do," one reported with dismay.<sup>41</sup> Detective Vallins further reported to the Governor that "the strikers are aware that they have the negroes thoroughly frightened" and "have perfect control over the local striking negroes."<sup>42</sup> But other reports suggest that black willingness to remain out on a strike was a conscious decision, dictated not by fear or white "control" but by conviction and collective solidarity, and their own recognition that, as a Pinkerton put it, "the result of the strike depends on them."<sup>43</sup> A month into the strike, operative JHF reported that "many of the negroes are

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<sup>37</sup>See, e.g., Pinkerton to Jones, July 25, 1894, 5.

<sup>38</sup>See the *Birmingham Age-Herald*, July 17–July 21, for arrests; Pinkerton to Jones, Aug. 4, 1894, 1.

<sup>39</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, June 30, 1894, 5.

<sup>40</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, Aug. 2, 1894, 3.

<sup>41</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, June 7, 1894.

<sup>42</sup>T. N. Vallins to Jones, May 26, 1894, Jones Papers, Box 25; Pinkerton to Jones, June 12, 1894, 2.

<sup>43</sup>T. N. Vallins to Jones, May 21, 1894, Jones Papers, Box 25.

talking about going back to work and a meeting will be held to vote on this question."<sup>44</sup> A week later Vallins admitted that "the negro strikers are divided as to going to work"; at the very least, black strikers were "depending on the white strikers to settle the fight and they will not go to work until it is settled."<sup>45</sup> By mid-June, after meeting with some black strikers at Wilson's saloon (where white miners also drank), JHF reported that "I heard one of these negro strikers say he could not or would not work digging coal in the mines for 35c per ton," and he admitted that "there are a great many negro strikers living at Pratt City and the most of them stand by the white strikers and will not go to work for 35c per ton for mining coal"—the union's basic position. Blacks, however, had their own analysis of the complex racial divisions that threatened to weaken the strike, which they indiscreetly confided to one of the Pinkertons. "My opinion," reported operative JHF, "is the strikers at Pratt City are too mixed up, Scotch, Irish, Welch [sic] German and Americans, and they will not trust one another. This is what the negro miners told me at Wilson's saloon."<sup>46</sup>

Black miners also fully participated with whites in the social and political life of the strike. In the first week of the strike, a Pinkerton agent travelled with 700 or 800 Birmingham miners, "the larger portion of them . . . negroes," to a mass rally of over 3000 miners which not only addressed strike issues but endorsed Reuben Kolb, the Populist gubernatorial candidate, who had pledged to end convict labor in the mines. "Nearly one-half the crowd present were negroes," reported the *Age-Herald*.<sup>47</sup> On May 26th, 2000 miners marched from nearby Pratt City to Birmingham and attended a mass meeting there to discuss the strike situation; one-half of the crowd was black, according to the Pinkerton man in attendance. The *Age-Herald* noted, however, that "the negro miners came very near being without a representative on the committee on resolutions" at this meeting, but at the last moment a black man rose and nominated a fellow black miner, who was then elected to the committee.<sup>48</sup> A few weeks later, a Pinkerton reported that black and white wives and children of the miners demonstrated together against the "blacklegs" being brought to the mines.<sup>49</sup> Less public demonstrations of solidarity are also alluded to in the Pinkerton reports. Wilson's saloon, in particular, seemed to be a place where black and

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<sup>44</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 23, 1894, 1.

<sup>45</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 26, 1894, 2; Pinkerton to Jones, June 12, 1894, 7.

<sup>46</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, June 13, 1894, 1, 3.

<sup>47</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, April 28, 1894, 3; Birmingham *Age-Herald*, April 24, 1894.

<sup>48</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, May 26, 1894, 4-5; Birmingham *Age-Herald*, May 29, 1894.

<sup>49</sup>Pinkerton to Jones, June 12, 1894, 6.

white miners came together informally to discuss strike matters. On occasion small integrated union meetings of 15 or 16 strikers would be held at Wilson's, where "a large crowd of negroes who are standing by the white strikers" could usually be found.<sup>50</sup>

Birmingham's Democratic Party press, the *Age-Herald*, persistently warned the miners that "strikes of a very long duration are not possible in the South. . . . any serious and protracted struggle by white mine labor in the South will inevitably lead to its permanent displacement by negroes from the plantations."<sup>51</sup> The paper also ran a letter from E. E. Carlisle, a black Democrat, who urged black miners to show loyalty to the coal companies and the Democratic party.<sup>52</sup> A resolution by a handful of black miners in favor of the Democrat for Governor gives the tenor of the kind of loyalty preached by Carlisle: "if there is any legislation enacted to benefit us as citizens of Alabama, it must be enacted by our better element of white people."<sup>53</sup>

Another black miner, writing in the Birmingham *Labor Advocate*, presented quite a different view of race and class relations in the coal mines, however; he wrote

I a colored mine worker went over to Pratt a few days ago . . . all the blacklegs working there were not "niggers", from the color of their skin at least. So-called white men of the lowest grade of humanity are working under guard more humble and time-serving than the lowest-bred African slave before the war, and yet these black-leg white pimps have audacity to call us "niggers". . . . We will stand by honest labor in its struggle for the right and if need be die by it.<sup>54</sup>

It would be foolish to pretend, in the face of all the contrary evidence, that the UMW was somehow practically the first modern organization devoted to civil rights. But it would be equally obtuse to ignore the very real examples of racial solidarity among mineworkers, against considerable odds. The Pinkerton reports suggest that when the common interests of black and white coal miners in Alabama were challenged as a *class*, they banded together to defend those interests, and together confronted their employers and the strikebreakers whom they understood as their class enemies, regardless of their race. This solidarity even achieved biracial political expression in support for the

<sup>50</sup>See, e.g., Pinkerton to Jones, June 13, 1894, 1; June 18, 1894, 3, 5; July 26, 1894, 1.

<sup>51</sup>Birmingham *Age-Herald*, June 12, 1894.

<sup>52</sup>Birmingham *Age-Herald*, July 21, 1894.

<sup>53</sup>Birmingham *Age-Herald*, June 28, 1894.

<sup>54</sup>Birmingham *Labor Advocate*, June 9, 1894.

Populist candidate for Governor, who also represented a rural Alabama constituency hardly known for its racial egalitarianism.<sup>55</sup> If this is "the reduction of race consciousness to class consciousness in labor history"<sup>56</sup>, as Hill would have it, it is a reduction engaged in by historical actors themselves, not by historians.

Ultimately, these documents of the Alabama coal strike of 1894 reveal little about the racial policies of the *national* UMWA. But in a way that the *UMWJ* cannot, the Pinkerton reports illustrate how black and white coal miners responded to one another on a daily basis during a major conflict fraught with racial tension. Moreover, the events following the strike in the Alabama field suggest that black and white workers were able to overcome whatever differences the conflict (and the coal operators) may have exacerbated. Certainly the strike ended in virtual defeat *in part* because black convicts and black strikebreakers continued to turn out enough coal to keep the companies alive. And the largest coal companies fanned the fire by importing black strikebreakers, openly proclaiming a preference for an all black labor force, and even offering to *pay* white miners to leave Birmingham.<sup>57</sup> But the miners did not capitulate because their own ranks were broken on the anvil of race. Till the end, black and white strikers alike refused to return to work for 35 cents per ton, and the local UMW was even able to write an antidiscrimination clause into a contract two years later.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the national UMW's era of greatest strength in Alabama came in the decade after this failed strike, and rested on successful interracial organizing. This success came to an end with the strike of 1908, a strike broken by a successful appeal to racism not against black *strikebreakers* but against black miners in general.<sup>59</sup>

The preservation of such a fragile racial detente during the 1894 strike and its aftermath was all the more remarkable because it came in an era in which racial division increasingly marked daily life in the Deep South. The saloons, meetinghalls, and street corners where black and white workers came together to discuss their plight in the summer of 1894 soon were to become segregated social space. Indeed, it does not seem farfetched to suggest that Jim Crow in Alabama was at least

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<sup>55</sup>See, e.g., Pinkerton to Jones, Aug. 14, 1894.

<sup>56</sup>Hill, "Myth-Making as Labor History," 132.

<sup>57</sup>For this latter scheme, also designed to drain votes from Reuben Kolb, see Pinkerton to Jones, June 30, 1894, 8.

<sup>58</sup>*UMWJ*, June 11, 1896.

<sup>59</sup>Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 47-48; Richard A. Straw, "The Collapse of Biracial Unionism: The Alabama Coal Strike of 1908," in William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell, eds., *Blacks in Appalachia* (Lexington, 1985).

partially motivated by the fear of a militant interracial working class.<sup>60</sup> If black and white workers in Birmingham closed the 19th century by seeking common cause, in the 20th this became ever more difficult under the laws and ordinances of what became the “most segregated city in America.”

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<sup>60</sup>This adds a new layer of evidence to C. Vann Woodward's contention that segregation was something *new* in the 1890s, and was a political response to populism, C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, 1974). See John Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy* (Cambridge, 1982) for the suggestion that segregation was also a response to rapid industrialization and modernization.

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