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Covering for the Bosses: Labor and the Southern Press

Joseph B. Atkins

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Throughout the twentieth century, southern newspaper editors seldom aimed to comfort the afflicted when they wrote about unionizing millhands and tobacco workers. Instead, the southern press routinely colluded with ruling political and business interests to disparage striking laborers, dismantle union gains, and generally distort news coverage with a pro-industry bias. That is the essence of Joseph B. Atkins' central thesis, and damning details amplify its veracity. In 1934, the little town of Honea Path, South Carolina, found itself in the national spotlight after a clash outside a cotton mill left seven striking workers dead. And yet, an editor who began working at the local newspaper in 1945 boasted that he never printed a word about the incident over the ensuing thirty-six years. A particularly vitriolic Mississippi editor once declared that union leader John L. Lewis was "far more dangerous than Scarface Al Capone" (20). Even progressive journalists hesitated to advocate on behalf of the labor movement, fearing association with unionists would lead to charges that the editors harbored communist sympathies. Tellingly, Atkins contends (the unmentioned labor writings of journalists Anne and Carl Braden notwithstanding) that the one publication that has most consistently examined and explained the views of southern working-class people is a hard-to-find quarterly called *Southern Exposure*, "a sort of Dixie version of Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement" (129).

The southern press is just one thread woven through Atkins' discursive examination of southern working-class activism and its repression. The book seemingly touches upon every significant event and trend in southern labor history from the late nineteenth century to the present day. It ranges from the race-baiting that thwarted the Populists in the 1890s and the wave of violent strikes that crippled southern industry in the late 1920s and early 1930s to the recent multiplying of Wal-Mart superstores and the arrival of overseas car manufacturers searching for cheap and plentiful non-unionized labor. Each chapter works as a stand-alone essay. Each examines a pivotal moment in southern labor history. Chapter topics include the CIO's failed drive to unionize the South, Martin Luther King Jr. and the 1968 strike of Memphis sanitation workers, the integrationist efforts of Mississippi unionist Claude Ramsay, the constant drumbeat for economic development that created the Sunbelt South, the impact of industrial plants and jobs moving to foreign markets, and the influx of Hispanic immigrants looking for work. The book's breadth, when coupled with its brevity, seems to best suit the reader who already possesses a basic understanding of southern labor history.

Atkins cautions early on that his book is neither scholarly history nor media criticism. Rather, the book consists of the reflections of a southerner who worked in the same North Carolina textile plant as his father, brother, and uncle before beginning a newspaper career that has continued for more than thirty years. Atkins writes from the perspective of "a trained observer and an eyewitness" (5). This reflective approach accentuates Atkins' empathy and understanding of his topic as he implicitly sketches the elusive possibility of a more equitable South. This approach, though, also prods Atkins to forgo a tight focus on the relationship between labor and the southern press in favor of a

broader, sometimes disjointed, discussion of the workings of the South's political economy and the protests of its working-class men and women. The topic of southern journalism too often recedes to the background.

Suitably forewarned, academic specialists should not expect the book to conform to the hallmarks of their professions. Historians will find that Atkins dutifully mentions the standard-bearers of southern history – C. Vann Woodward, W.J. Cash, and George B. Tindall, among others. However, he tends to pluck facts rather than interpretations from a selective reading of recent scholarship. Atkins avoids engaging the historiographical arguments that mold the books of labor historians, preferring to assume the journalistic stance of “one side says this, the other side says that.” Media scholars might look for a stronger analysis of newspaper content. Atkins cites comparatively few newspaper articles in his footnotes. Instead, he indicts the southern press through interviews, oral histories, and secondary sources. Content analysis might have informed the chapter concerning Wal-Mart. Here, Atkins recounts the dualistic nature of news coverage – part hagiography, part diatribe – accorded to Wal-Mart in books and national newspapers and magazines. It would have been more specific to the South to see how local newspapers treated the opening of new stores within their circulation areas and how that coverage changed over time. After all, Sam Walton, the company's founder, seemingly acknowledged the power of such press coverage in 1972 when he bought the local newspaper in Bentonville, Arkansas, home to Wal-Mart's corporate headquarters.

Atkins excels when he writes about the recent past, recounting the stories and viewpoints of the journalists and laborers he has interviewed. He captures the ambivalence of a former union organizer working as a deputy business editor for the

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, a major southern newspaper without a single reporter covering labor. The editor sees little interest among readers for news about unions, even though he links the diminishing of health care and retirement benefits to the decline of the labor movement. He tells Atkins, “I can’t think of a time in sixteen years here when someone said, ‘You need to cover more labor’” (101). In another chapter, Atkins illustrates how globalism has eroded the traditional power of the mainstream southern press. International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) Local 1422 bypassed the local media in Charleston, South Carolina, and secured international support for five indicted workers after violence erupted in January 2000 during a strike against the Danish Nordana Shipping Line. Ultimately, politically motivated felony charges were dismissed, the defendants pleaded no contest to misdemeanor rioting charges, and the shipping line resumed working with the union. Union supporters credited international attention, which was generated by union publications as well as left-leaning magazines and newspapers, for creating political pressure that tilted settlement of the dispute in their favor.

Atkins’ study of the southern press, though, excludes the black press. Black publishers had a complicated relationship with unions. They were leery of the unions’ racism but mindful of their potential power to raise wages for black workers. They often gave ample coverage to union activities but were vengeful when unionists attempted to organize newspapers. Three of the nation’s largest black newspapers – the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, *Atlanta Daily World*, and *Baltimore Afro-American* – were published in the South. Black newspapers covered steelworkers in Birmingham, longshoremen in New Orleans, and tobacco workers in North Carolina. Sensitive to the vagaries of Jim Crow, southern black publishers often lamented to their northern counterparts that the

South's more open racism forced them to censor themselves on all issues, including the labor movement. At times, though, some publishers barely concealed their unionist sentiment behind measured words. Atkins' omission mistakes "southern" for "white," ignoring the complicated relationship between unions and the black southern press.

Also, Atkins only fleetingly mentions the Newspaper Guild, a union that bargained for better pay and working conditions for newspaper workers. Atkins tantalizingly asserts that guild leaders from Memphis played a leading role in efforts to purge the CIO, which the guild was affiliated with, of "integrationists, communists, and other leftists" (72) during the late 1930s and into the 1940s, but he does not elaborate on this contention. Such a statement lends national significance to the southern press, a suggestion that merits further study. The brief reference to the guild also raises questions about how aggressively its leadership pursued unionization in the South and what tactics publishers used to fend off a challenge to their authority.

Atkins did not set out to write a definitive history of the relationship between the southern press and the labor movement. However, he provides worthy insights for the historian or journalist who wants to write that story.

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