

**ONE OR TWO MORE THINGS ABOUT
THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF LABOR**

by
Nell Irvin Painter

Since the appearance in 1967 of his groundbreaking study of organized labor and radical Republicanism, *Beyond Equality*, David Montgomery has been at the center of the new labor history, which he and a few others (notably the late Herbert Gutman and David Brody) forged in the 1960s and '70s. Although Montgomery is associated with investigations of "workers' control," that is, studies that focus on workers' activities in the workplace, he has always kept the political component of labor history well in mind, as, for instance in *Beyond Equality*. Analysis in several dimensions characterizes all his work.

The Fall of the House of Labor has many strengths, among them a thematic organization that makes sense chronologically, a mastery of the evolution of financial and managerial practices as well as production techniques, and a clear explanation of the relationship between capitalism and the state. Keeping his eye on the working lives of Americans from diverse backgrounds, Montgomery delineates the larger power relations that so profoundly influenced what workers experienced. *The Fall of the House of Labor* is the mature work of a thoughtful scholar whose mastery of overarching themes and the details of real life leaves little room for criticism. But one can always ask for more. One topic needs

Nell Irvin Painter is Professor of History at Princeton University, and currently a Fellow at the Center for Advance Study in the Behavioral Sciences.

to play a larger role than it does in this book: racism and what it means for an analysis of the working class in the United States.

The Fall of the House of Labor addresses matters that seldom appeared in Montgomery's earlier work. In the past he attended mainly to working people's ability to establish relative autonomy within a system of class oppression, as a corrective of earlier misconceptions of workers' utter powerlessness. Concentrating on northern workers, Montgomery had little to say up to now about the interplay of race and class, which often preoccupies labor historians who write about the South. On the rare occasions when Montgomery looked southward, he focused on splendid (but rare) moments of interracial solidarity, such as the New Orleans general strike of 1892. Although his earlier work lacked a sustained examination of racism among workers, this book is far more attentive to such motifs.

Early on, Montgomery explains that race is an issue of crucial importance, so much so that a definitive analysis must wait "until the many contradictory links between the working class and the social order as a whole have been examined" (25-26). Later on, in an insightful section entitled "'Our Kind of People,'" he says that the South shows the "decisive importance of the ideology and practice in the experience of laborers," by which he means laborers subject to racism (81, 83). These statements do not quite go together, and happily for readers, Montgomery does not quite carry out his initial threat to postpone discussion of matters of race and class. In several places he deals with workers who suffered from racism (Italian and Chinese as well as Afro-American) with a great deal of confidence. However his conception of what racism means for the entire working class and the society as a whole strikes me as incomplete.

Montgomery writes as though racism needs to be understood only in order to interpret properly the experience of its victims. He recognizes that non-white workers belong in labor history, and to make sense of *their* lives, racism needs to be comprehended. Obviously racism operated on its victims, by, for example, limiting their numbers in skilled trades and denying them the benefits of skilled workers' status. Montgomery understands this sort of cost and is ready to take it fully into account.

My point, however, is that the analysis needs to be extended

to virtually all segments of the working class in the United States. Racism, which has affected the whole of American society, the whole of the American working class (including workers who were not its victims), cannot be left for later.

White supremacy made it extremely difficult for workers who thought of themselves as white to combine with those they thought of as non-white. In the short term, lack of solidarity undermined numberless strike actions, making “Negro” and “scab” virtually synonymous terms early in the 20th century. As a consequence, white workers lost many a strike. Afro-Americans gained a foothold in industrial jobs in Chicago, East St. Louis, and Pittsburgh by crossing the picket lines of unions they were not entitled to join, but bigoted fellow workers did not permit them to strengthen workers’ power overall.

Strikebreaking across racial lines sometimes entailed interracial violence, which permeates the history of workers in the United States. I do not mean to say that Montgomery sweeps intra-working class violence under the rug, for he does not. But he is far more comfortable describing individual instances of violence—as when white Knights of Labor lynched Chinese workers in Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885, or Irish-American workers attacked Afro-American workers in Chicago in 1919—than in seeing such confrontations as an enduring characteristic of working class life in this country. In a painfully balanced and poignantly obscure summation, Montgomery says that in Chicago in 1919, employers “played antagonistic white and black workers off against each other” and that the conditions that black workers encountered in the North “lent themselves more readily at that moment to movements for black pride and community self-help than to trade unionism” (384). This obscures the fact that white workers had murdered enough black workers to convince the latter that racial self-reliance represented a more realistic strategy for survival than combination with their late attackers. Montgomery is easily able to point out that “class conflict was an inherent part of industrial life” (44), without being able to add that one-sided racial conflict was also. Racial antagonism among workers occurred throughout the nation—the Draft Riots of New York City took place as early as 1863—but racism has been most deeply entrenched in working-class life in the South.

White southern workers have been (and remain) difficult to organize, out of religious convictions, individualism, and racism, while at the same time, lack of organization has been directly connected to low wages. The racially divided southern labor force seldom forged the unions that had raised wages in the North, so that the South was (and still is) fundamentally a low-wage economy with far-reaching consequences. Montgomery mentions the Central Competitive Field (CCF) agreement that the United Mine Workers of America signed in 1898 with coal mine operators between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. By 1904, however, wages in the CCF had begun to decline. The cause: competition from low-wage, non-unionized southern coal fields. This example could be multiplied thousands of times over, from the 1880s up to now.

The relationship between union organization and wage is direct and easily grasped, but the politics of white supremacy, particularly during the period about which Montgomery writes, also had far-reaching economic ramifications. At bottom lay the inability of masses of southern workers to vote. Disfranchisement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries cannot be blamed solely on elites, even though they were its main champions, for disfranchisers enjoyed the (short-sighted) support of whites who farmed and worked for wages. In the name of white supremacy, whites of low and moderate incomes endorsed the measures that undercut their own political influence along with that of working people who were black.

Between 1892 and 1902, for instance, poll taxes, literacy tests, and other strategies drastically reduced voter turnout in southern states (69% in Mississippi, 56% in Virginia, 34% in North Carolina, and 80% in Georgia), leaving politics largely in the hands of members of the middle and upper classes. Southern legislators proceeded to pass legislation that immobilized and encumbered workers, particularly those who were in agriculture. Laws proposed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by northern politicians with working-class constituencies (e.g., to abolish poll taxes, institute the eight-hour day for public employees, provide factory inspectors, and raise school-leaving ages) did not succeed in the South until at least a generation later. Because large numbers of labor's potential voters lacked a voice, southern legislatures more

nearly embodied capitalist ideals, and their representatives in Congress often obstructed federal legislation favorable to workers.

The southern situation was extreme, both in terms of the vigor of white supremacy and the extent to which laws circumscribed workers' autonomy. But wherever white workers drew lines against workers they considered non-white, labor handed political strength to employers, who did not hesitate to use the state. In sum, racism in American labor history concerns all workers, not just its immediate victims. A fact of American life, white supremacy must be taken into account, even though it alters fundamental conclusions in unpleasant ways.