Two. Four Decades of Change: Black Workers in Southern Textiles, 1941-1981

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Black workers in the Southern textile industry have experienced rapidly changing patterns of employment during the last forty years. Before 1940 fewer than one Southern textile worker in ten was black and 80 percent of black workers toiled as “mill laborers” in non-production jobs. By 1978 one of every five workers was black, and black workers held one-fourth of all operative positions. At present, black workers represent the largest group of recently recruited workers within the industry, and in many Southern mills they are a majority of the work force. The political importance of black workers’ entry into and mobility within the textile industry can be measured in terms of their role in ongoing organizing efforts within the textile industry. The solidarity of black textile workers in local Southern communities and their role in grassroots organizing for social, political, and economic freedom in the decades after World War II laid the groundwork for the contemporary political action of this group of workers who hold hard-won positions within the region’s industrial workforce.

The patterns of black employment in the South began to change during World War II as a labor shortage due to high levels of wartime employment and wage competition from war industries increased the opportunities for black workers in the mills. In the postwar period, after an initial decrease in jobs for black workers in the early 1950s, the traditional structure of produc-

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tion in Southern textile manufacturing gave way to competition within a more diversified industrial base, resulting in an increasing need for black workers. These changes, combined with the impetus of federal civil rights legislation and pressure from locally organized blacks, have resulted in an industrywide occupational breakdown in which black workers hold a large proportion of the positions within a broad range of job classifications.

The employment shift which has occurred in the Southern textile industry in the last four decades followed a period of sixty years in which black workers in the South faced restricted opportunities in a regional manufacturing system which rigidly segregated workers on the basis of race and sex. The argument will be made here that despite the overt exclusion of black workers from textile manufacturing between 1880 and 1965, black men and women have always played a critical role in the growth and development of the industry in the South.

First, behind the statistics which indicate small percentages of black employees in the South's most important industry were thousands of workers for whom the title "mill laborer" masked work which ranged from the least skilled to the most skilled of any performed in the mills. Secondly, black workers comprised a reserve labor pool which management could and did tap whenever necessary. Although black workers were only occasionally used as strikebreakers, their mere presence in proximity to Southern mill communities functioned as a potential threat to white job security and served to keep the demands of white operatives to a minimum. Mill-owners continually considered hiring greater numbers of black workers and did so whenever a shortage of white labor appeared imminent. For example, during both World War I and World War II the percentage of black workers in the mills increased slightly. But not until the 1960s did the long-waited severe shortage of white employees finally transpire and result in the hiring of black workers in significant numbers. After 1965, black men and women were actively recruited for production jobs for the first time.

THE HISTORY OF BLACK PARTICIPATION IN SOUTHERN TEXTILES

The long history of black participation in the Southern textile industry began before the Civil War when slave labor was responsible for spinning and weaving in the home production of cloth. Slave women on Southern plantations often returned from a day of hard field work to "spin, weave, and sew well into the night." In the Southeast the transition from home to factory production was made by bondswomen and men who were either owned by industrial entrepreneurs or hired out by their owners to work in the small antebellum mills which dotted the streams and rivers of the Piedmont. Prior to 1860, no one questioned the ability of black workers in handling industrial work. To the contrary, industrialists praised the virtues of black labor over white, and slave labor over free.2
After freedom, Southern workers faced a reorganization of the region's occupational structure and a redefinition of the occupational status of the black worker. In plantation areas the transition from slavery to share-tenancy resulted in black workers attaining virtually the same economic rank as non-land-owning whites. Changes in the occupational alignment of black and white workers in cities and small industrial towns, however, resulted in the loss of skilled and semiskilled positions for blacks. In urban mill communities and industrial villages this meant that black workers who had been textile operatives before 1865 began to be replaced by white workers. The number of mills in the South increased two-and-one-half-fold between 1880 and 1900, and as new mills were built, jobs as spinners and weavers went to white workers, predominantly women and children who left small farms to work in textiles. Thus, the operative workforce which had been largely black before the Civil War became predominantly white before the turn of the century.  

By 1900 the number of black workers in textiles had declined to less than 2 percent of the total labor force. Industrialists had bargained with white Southerners and granted them limited amnesty from direct competition with black workers for positions as operatives. Moreover, racial lines were drawn within the mills which reflected new twentieth-century patterns of racial segregation throughout the South. As part of the extreme racism of these years an ideology developed regarding blacks and industrial work which simultaneously mirrored and then reinforced the occupational segregation of black workers in textiles. As Herbert Lahn wrote in 1944: "There appeared to be no limit to the supposed justifications of the exclusion of the Negro from the work of operatives—Negroes were said to be temperamentally, morally, physically, etc., etc., unfit to be anything but laborers. All these reasons were, of course, beside the point..."  

The reorganized labor system in Southern industry was intact by 1915; in textiles, the region's most rapidly expanding industry, the new occupational codes which virtually excluded black workers from operative positions were given legal expression in South Carolina. In that state a law passed by the State General Assembly in 1915 and not rescinded until 1960 established conditions which necessitated separate weave and spinning rooms for black and white employees. In this way black workers were banned from the primary work areas of the mills. The ruling read in part:

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina, That it shall be unlawful for any person, firm or corporation engaged in the business of cotton textile manufacturing in this State to allow or permit operatives, help and labor of different races to labor and work together within the same room. . . .

The act had a second clause, however, which excluded its application to
firemen as subordinates in boiler rooms, truckmen, or to floor scrubbers and those persons employed in keeping in proper condition lavatories and toilets, and carpenters, mechanics and others engaged in the repair or erection of buildings.  

There is evidence that mill-owners violated this law whenever convenient or necessary, although the second clause of the ruling left considerable leeway for hiring black employees in a variety of positions. Textile entrepreneurs across the South clearly wanted the flexibility to hire whomever they pleased, but as concessions to white Southerners they gave white employees priority, hired black workers as needed, segregated the workforces within the mill, and liberally interpreted the title "mill laborer."

MILL LABORERS AND INDUSTRIAL OBSERVERS

It was as "mill laborers" that black workers in Southern textiles performed tasks which ranged from cleaning floors to installing electrical wiring to repairing looms to constructing mill buildings and mill housing. In the years after black workers were segregated out of operative positions thousands of black employees continued to perform essential functions within Southern mills. The work of black men and women included the most arduous tasks of lifting and loading bales of raw cotton and rolls of finished goods, as well as assignments in the opening and carding rooms, the sections of the mill with the highest concentrations of cotton dust. In addition to doing the most disagreeable jobs, black workers made the lowest wages paid in the textile industry, a result of both the fact that blacks were restricted to the lower-paying textile jobs and wage discrimination on the basis of race. Sex provided a third discriminatory factor for white men made more than white women, and black men earned more than black women. Race was the predominant wage determinant, however, for black men were paid less than white women. For example, in Georgia, in 1938, black men made 65 percent of the wages paid to white men; black women earned only 56 percent of the wages paid to white women; and black men were paid 78 percent of the wages paid to white women.  

Clearly black workers received lower wages than their white counterparts, within identical job classifications, but it is of greater long-range significance that the 80 percent of black workers categorized as "mill laborers" actually held a wide range of jobs within the mills. As early as 1900 an Atlanta cotton manufacturer testified before the United States Industrial Commission that he never attempted to work black and white labor together "except when the white help goes out to get a can of snuff the colored sweepers run the loom." A 1922 study of 2,750 women in ten textile firms (840 of the women were black) reported that black women were found in all of the twelve occupations in which white women were employed, although
the black women also worked at cleaning and feeding, two jobs not performed by the white women. A sample of 115 black employees who worked in textiles in LaGrange, Georgia, for 25 consecutive years (between 1925 and 1969) listed 38 job classifications, and included master plumbers, skilled carpenters, card strippers, card tenders, picker tenders, mechanics, machine fixers, landscapers, a woman who stenciled flower designs, and, in 1969, a man who retired as a loom fixer. A survey of seventy textile mills in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina in 1951 reported that black workers were employed as painters, plumbers, carpenters, and electricians, as well as truck drivers, sweepers, and janitors. Finally, in the late 1960s Richard Rowan reported in his study of black workers in Southern textiles that "close scrutiny of the jobs in the laborer category would probably result in some of them being reclassified as semiskilled... the nomenclature remains basically the same that it has been since the early 1900's."

The positions which black workers held in textile mills were more varied and required greater skill than Southern industrial lore has recorded. Moreover, mechanics, teamsters, painters, carpenters, and sweepers had considerable mobility within the mill. Unlike white operatives who could not leave their spindles or looms, black workers had the freedom to move from one section of the mill to another. As roving workers black employees observed industrial work and learned about the overall operation of the mill. When blacks worked as mechanics and loom cleaners they became familiar with industrial machinery, and as carpenters, electricians, and painters they were among the few workers in textiles who labored as craftsmen within an industrial setting. Thus, black workers employed in textiles prior to 1965 became "industrial observers," knowledgeable about the organization of the industry and the hierarchy of the workforce, and accustomed to the pace and environmental conditions of industrial work. Hired in significant numbers in many mills, these workers formed a substantial cohort of minority textile employees, forerunners of the thousands of black workers who moved into operative positions after 1965.

The work histories of two Georgia textile workers illustrate the role of the "industrial observer" in more concrete terms. Both Julian West and Minnie Brown grew up in Westpoint, Georgia, where their fathers worked in the mill. When West turned 18 in 1932 he entered the mill as a full-time worker. Brown got a mill job in 1942, when she was 28 years old, after having worked for over a decade as a domestic worker. Both West and Brown retired after 1975, and their worklives spanned four decades of change for black workers in the industry. Their own careful descriptions of their work delineate the parameters of their industrial experience and demonstrate the subtle distinctions which have to be made when correlating job descriptions with job classifications.

Julian West's family moved to Westpoint in 1920 when he was six years old, after his father got a job as a sweeper in the mill. When teenagers, Julian
and his two brothers went down to the mill with their father to help out in the cloth room for a few hours a day, and by the time West was 18 he had a full-time job cleaning and "chucking cloth." West left the mill in 1943, went to Michigan for several months, and when he returned asked for a job in the carding department. Hired immediately, West stayed in the carding department until he retired in 1978, and it was in the card room that West became an "industrial observer." Familiar with the mill since he was a child, knowledgeable about the cloth room where he had worked with his father and two brothers, West entered the card room as a sweeper in 1943. Promoted to lap racker in 1948, West became a card tender in 1965. But West knew how to tend cards long before he got promoted to a card tender's position. As he explained:

Well, you see, when I was a lap racker I'd put up a bolt of cotton on this card machine. Well maybe now the end of that card has stopped. I mean the cotton has broke out and the card has stopped or either kept running and run over. Well, I would go over there. Now the card tender, he'd possibly be way down the line somewhere, and he got a card up here that's overrunning. Well, I would stop and pick that cotton up and put it back in there and start it back to running, although that wasn't my job. But I'd do it see, and that's the way it'd run.

For seasoned "industrial observers" like Julian West, transition to a production job did not involve additional training. By allowing West to "learn cards" and help the white card tender, management had ensured his training, and when the time came that West was needed as a card tender he was well prepared:

They wouldn't bother you, you see it was allright if the racker would help the card tender keep his job up. I had to be around the machine anyway because I had to service the machine. What I mean by that is that I had to keep enough cotton up here for the card tender to run. I couldn't let the cotton go out of the machine. And at the same time, when I got through supplying the machine, putting enough cotton on the machine then see I had to sweep around it and keep the floor clean and all that kind of thing. So every chance I got to get up an end, as we call it, and start that machine back running, well then it was a help to that card tender, and finally, a long time before they gave me a job running them. I'd learned how to do it. One day the boss came out there and he asked me, "Julian, you reckon you could run a set of those cards?" I told him "yes, sir." And the next morning he gave me a job on them.

Unlike Julian West who changed positions three or four times during his worklife in the mill, Minnie Brown worked for 34 years in the same job. Hired in 1942 as a "cleaner," she retired in 1976 in the same position. As a child Brown "had been used to going to the mill carrying my daddy's dinner," and years later when one of the few jobs available to black women
The Struggle for Control

opened up she was eager to earn the money paid in the mill, wages much higher than those she could make as a domestic worker. Brown's job as a cleaner took her "all through the mill from one end to the other." But Brown did not just clean. Through her "white friends" in the weave shed and spinning room she learned how to weave, decided against spinning ("I'd seen how it was done all right, but I didn't fool with it"), and settled on work filling batteries:

I'd be caught up with my job, you know, and I'd go down there and they'd let me fill batteries. Just every night I'd go on back down there to the weave shed. I'd get down there and they'd say "start up there." And I'd throw that spool in and whip it around there and like that. And I began to like it. They had so many to do. I didn't charge nothing 'cause I was just learning. They'd say "when you get ready just come on down here," and I'd say "all right."

The testimony of workers like West and Brown confirms the existence of an informal work structure within the mills which differed from the formal job and wage classifications used by management. While classified in "non-production" jobs both West and Brown performed tasks which directly affected production. Moreover, within "segregated" mills West and Brown worked side by side with the white workers who trained them. White employees expressed appreciation for the help they received and, according to West, would reciprocate with cash payment or favors. Thus, everyone benefited in some way from the operation of this informal system. White production workers received much-needed assistance, black workers got industrial training and some extra pay, and management gained from increased production without additional wage costs. In the long-run the industry benefited most from the existence of a well-trained reserve workforce of black men and women eager to move permanently into higher-paying jobs as production workers.

FARM TO FACTORY MIGRATION AMONG BLACK TEXTILE WORKERS

The historical and political significance of this group of "industrial observers" is two-fold. First, the experience of black textile employees hired in non-operative positions in the decades between 1900 and 1940 was that of Southern urban/industrial workers, not isolated subsistence farmers or sharecroppers. Like their white counterparts, these first-generation black textile workers came from agricultural backgrounds to take jobs within the mills. But the movement of black workers into industrial work in textiles was a three-step process involving three generations of employees. The initial stage involved migration from farms to Southern urban/industrial communities and non-production jobs in the mills. The second step, taken by another generation, involved the children of black textile workers who had been
employed as sweepers and cleaners obtaining jobs at the level of picker
tender and lap racker. The final step, by the third generation, included the
large-scale movement of black Southerners into operative positions begin-
ing in the mid-1960s.

Secondly, within the context of local Southern communities these indi-
viduals formed a small but important group of workers whose ability to earn
regular cash wages augmented their standing within the black community
and their power within the white community. For example, among the 115
long-term black workers in the LaGrange, Georgia, mills at least 40 percent
owned their homes and many had credit at local furniture and clothing
stores. It was the norm for the children of these workers to finish high school
and many sons and daughters of this black community graduated from
college. Active in church work, a majority of the LaGrange sample served as
officers, deacons, or lay preachers within local black congregations.

The experience of black textile workers in LaGrange was not unique. In
Westpoint, Georgia, in the “relatively progressive community” in which
Julian West grew up and then raised his own children, the prevailing
philosophy of life was based on the adage “if you work hard you can make
it.” Black families coming into town from nearby farms sought to buy a plot
of land, build a house, and send their children to school. Parents worked
extra hard to keep their children out of the mills. Mattie Ivey, whose
grandfather was a slave and whose father worked on the railroad, worked
the 6 P.M. to 2 A.M. shift as a cleaner in an Alabama mill, and held two
additional domestic cleaning jobs to send her four children through college.
She and her husband, a mill elevator operator, “survived and succeeded
through hard labor.” They labored in the mill for over thirty years, “did not
drink, smoke or party,” and used what little money they had so their sons
and daughters could “follow what they learned.” The children of Southern
black mill communities were taught to work hard and maintain their alle-
giance to church and school.

Firmly grounded in well-established black communities, the back-
grounds of many Southern black workers who entered the mills in the 1960s
and 1970s were substantially different from those of white operatives who
migrated from farm to factory between 1900 and 1940. Numerous black
workers who became textile operatives after 1965 did not come from the
agricultural sector. Rather, their families were already a part of a Southern
urban/industrial workforce, and they were second- or third-generation city
dwellers and often second-generation mill workers. But unlike Southern
white textile workers, black workers had experienced little mobility within
the mill, and had made their homes in segregated communities shut off from
equal access to full political, economic, or social participation even in the
larger community of textile workers. The combination of these two factors,
familiarity with industrial work and industrial skills on the one hand, and the
denial of equal participation on the other, made Southern black textile workers more predisposed to both collective action and union organizing than the white workers who had preceded them into the mills.

For example, when Jim Thomas’s grandson became a textile operative in the mid-1960s, his knowledge of industrial work was based in part on his grandfather’s experience in the card, picker, and opener rooms of the Unity Spinning Plant in LaGrange from 1929 to 1954. Young Thomas’s familiarity with factory-town living came from his father’s position in the Elm City Weave Room in the 1950s and his own childhood spent in LaGrange. For Julian West, who grew up in the black community in Westpoint, Georgia, and whose father had retired from the mill, a job in textiles meant continuing his father’s fight for civil rights within the workplace. Inside the mill working for equality meant fighting for the union, and West’s allegiance was second nature. In the plant West worked for the union, and at home he fought to send his children to college, and not into the mill.10

Both Jim Thomas’s grandson and Julian West worked in tandem with previous generations of black textile workers. The sons of men who believed that “if you were going to survive in this society you had to be able to hold a job” struggled to provide their children with the opportunities for work which they had been denied. Taught by their fathers to “go ahead but be careful” black workers in the period between 1940 and 1980 used their positions within the community and the plant to fight for the right to fill jobs they could already perform, to have access to better jobs and to earn wages equal to those of white employees.

RURAL INDUSTRIALIZATION

Another version of the multi-step migration pattern by black workers who have become textile operatives occurred in eastern North Carolina and in low country South Carolina where mills were built and still operate in small rural communities. In these areas the children of black sharecroppers have quit farming and come into the mills in a way which initially appears to duplicate the farm-to-factory migration of white workers in the years between 1900 and 1940. But the lives of black workers migrating to the mills in the 1960s and 1970s have been influenced as much or more by their experience off the land as by the fact that their parents were sharecroppers. For example, when James Boone, a black North Carolinian in his early twenties, took a job as a doffer in 1971, he came into the mill after already having worked for several months in textiles, and as a store clerk in Washington, D.C. Boone had grown up in the country outside Roanoke Rapids, but he had come into town to attend high school, and unlike the white tenant children who had migrated to textile communities in the 1920s, he was familiar with the local J. P. Stevens plants. His father had worked for many years in a paper mill and was a proud member of the International Woodworkers Union of America. When the textile workers union came to
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Boone’s plant in 1974, he was “raring’ to go,” saying that “blacks and some whites, too, are gonna make some changes here.”

In more rural areas, many workers still live with family members who farm, and they have depended on the land when work was irregular in the mills, and vice versa. One advantage of this dual farm/factory worklife by families had been that as black workers organized in the mills they had resources and options rarely available to earlier generations of white workers who lived in company-owned housing. For example, in a study of mill workers in a rural North Carolina community, Dale Newman reported that two black workers involved in collective action to improve working conditions in the plant expressed “sensitivity to the possibility their actions might result in losing their jobs but as they were both landowners, they and their wives were willing to take the chance.”

CHANGING PATTERNS OF EMPLOYMENT

The number of black workers in the textile industry has changed dramatically within the last forty years. Between 1940 and 1978, the participation of black textile employees multiplied six-fold (from 24,764 in 1940 to 152,458 in 1978). The greatest increase in black employment occurred between 1966 and 1968 when in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia the proportion of black workers rose from 10 to 15 percent. In South Carolina and Georgia, the Southern textile producing states with the highest black populations, the percentage of black workers within the industry traditionally has been higher than the regional average. For example, in South Carolina in 1920, black workers comprised 10 percent of the state’s textile workers, at a time when the industry average was 2.6 percent. The representation of black workers has been consistently highest in Georgia, where between 1966 and 1968, the percentage of black employees increased from 14 to 18 percent with black men comprising 22.5 percent of all male textile employees in the state in 1968. The gains made in black employment in the textile industry in the 1960s continued and were consolidated in the 1970s. By 1978 black workers in Georgia held 28 percent of all available jobs within the industry, and 58 percent of all black employees worked as operatives. Looking at Georgia and the Carolinas combined, in 1978 black workers held 26 percent of all positions, and 31 percent of all operative jobs.

The pivotal point at which textile employment in the South opened to black workers occurred in the mid-1960s, a period which black workers refer to as “the change,” and which Richard Rowan described as “a virtual revolution in employment in the southern textile plants.” But the groundwork for this transformation was laid in the 1940s and 1950s. In the forties with the growth of wartime industries and the subsequent diversification of local manufacturing within the South, textile firms began losing employees. As one Macon, Georgia, manufacturer lamented:
About World War II on, things started getting kind of rough. A lot of other industries came to this area and your skilled people, such as loom fixers, were the first ones they would hire away from you. They would move in here with the same wage scales they had up East, which was way above what we were paying down here.

The hiring of black workers increased during the 1940s. In the LaGrange sample of 115 long-term employees, 55 workers or 48 percent began work between 1940 and 1944. Nevertheless, few black Southerners entered the mill as operatives, even during World War II. During that period, however, workers classified as "laborers" were moved into "picker tender," "opener tender," and "lap racker" positions. Some workers retained these positions after the war, but many others were demoted after 1945.

In addition to the diversification of Southern manufacturing, the post-World War II period brought significant changes within the black communities of Southern towns and cities. Black veterans returning from the military saw their hometowns and local industries in a different light after periods of travel throughout the United States and overseas. As John Foster, a black man employed in textiles from 1949 to the present, described:

"It wasn't a whole lot better after we came back from the military, but we had been exposed to things a little different and not so much of trying to change the system as to get the opportunity to participate a little bit more from the standpoint of things like voting, and registering to vote. They gave veterans the opportunity to do those things. A lot of us were determined to fight the system to see if we could do it.

Fighting the system in the late 1940s focused on battling for equal political participation. Gaining the right to vote was the first step, as John Foster explained:

"We felt that as long as we didn't try to participate in the political side of this society there was not a whole lot we could do. The guys who came back from World War II, we started opening up these little voter leagues you hear them talking about. We felt that if we could get involved in voter registration then we could get others involved. The only thing you had to do was to get enough black people together to make a politician realize that they could make a difference."

Gradually, with constant pressure from black veterans and others, rigid segregation within Southern political, economic, and social systems began to give way. Within the textile industry changes also came slowly, at first. By 1954, John Foster, still actively working to register his people to vote, played baseball for the mill on an integrated team. After 1958, turnover among white male textile workers increased rapidly as they found higher-paying jobs in other industries. At the same time, Southern white women, the workers on whom the textile industry had grown dependent for many jobs,
were also leaving the mills, specifically for jobs in the clerical sector. Meanwhile, local black leaders in Southern textile communities were waiting. Floyd Harris, a black man now in a management position within the industry recalled:

I was active in the social revolution that went on from the fifties, through the sixties and early seventies, so I was aware of what the black leaders were talking about. We wrote the laws and they passed the Civil Rights bill, and I knew that if the federal government made it a law it'd have to be followed. Our management here is smart, and they knew it too. Besides, that was the only way they could survive.

By 1964, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, both black workers and management moved cautiously. Black workers already employed in textiles, many of whom were World War II veterans, wanted to “integrate things ourselves so there wouldn't be trouble.” As Floyd Harris remembered:

Management would screen workers real carefully at central employment. You had to know somebody to get on. They would put a black here and a black there and this sort of thing.

Thus, when “the change” occurred it was both carefully planned and swiftly implemented, as Floyd Harris described:

We didn't have such a difficult time in as much as the President of the Company when the bill was passed had employment meetings, group meetings and everyone was told in no uncertain terms that discrimination would not be practiced in this plant. Anybody caught doing this of course would be separated. Segregation was eliminated and everybody had the right to the job they were capable of doing. Management, top management, made it clear that there wasn't going to be any trouble so the transition wasn't bad because it came from the top.

The relative ease with which Southern employers, generally a group intransigent in the face of federal mandates, responded to the regulations of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance reflected the industry's need for new workers and a growing reliance on black labor. Although a few supervisors had to be replaced, by 1969, the transition was over and management in most Southern textile communities feverishly sought to hire black workers, literally to keep the mills running. In 1970, with very low unemployment throughout the Southeast, Floyd Harris was promoted to a position recruiting black workers for the industry. Harris had a difficult time getting people to apply for the available jobs, and finally he set up recruiting stations in country stores within a fifty-mile radius to try to attract local black men and women to work in the mills.
LIVING IN TWO WORLDS

Southern textile communities have undergone innumerable changes, both obvious and subtle since the transition years of the 1960s. Exploration of the evolving relationships between black and white Southern workers within the mills and within the larger community reveals that integration within the workplace began the process of integration in textile-dominated towns and cities with long traditions of racial segregation. And most agree that once the mills integrated, the effects spilled over into the larger community. As Julian West remembered:

The better it got down there at the mill, the better it got out here in the black community. Just about everybody, other than merchants, worked down there in those cotton mills. Where it started, where it began to get better was on the job.

Integration in the mills forced many white employees to recognize and come to terms with the abilities of black workers. John Foster argued that:

Any close contact between individuals in any specific area made it possible for people to do a better job of evaluating abilities. The people in the mills had an opportunity to compare white skills against black skills and they found out that blacks did have skills, did have intelligence.

Foster, and others, agreed that one of the main things that black workers had to overcome was "the idea that Negroes were not intelligent enough to work with modern technology." Foster felt that:

In each of the areas where Negroes had a chance to come together and work side by side with whites they were able to more and more disprove some of those theories. Eventually it just got to the point where they accepted the fact that there were blacks who could do this work, and blacks who could not, just like in any other ethnic group.

But although integration within the mills made white workers more aware of the skills and abilities of black workers, few employees totally forgot the past. For example, Floyd Harris, a mill porter until 1965, delivered the mail to a plant where the receptionist, a white woman who sat in the front office, always called him "boy." Harris, then a man in his mid-thirties, repeatedly tried to get the woman to address him by his first name. In 1970, Harris, newly elected as one of the two black members of the local City Council, became assistant personnel manager in the mill where this receptionist still worked. No words were exchanged as the two adjusted to a new hierarchy which placed Harris in a supervisory role, but as Harris recalled, "I hadn't forgotten, and I'm certain she hadn't either."

Nevertheless, once black workers could not be denied jobs in the production areas of the mills, Julian West emphasized that "the atmosphere changed. They changed and I changed. We got closer together in every way." The opening of production jobs to black workers in Southern mills
affected the ways in which black and white employees interacted in the workplace, and the higher wages earned by black workers new to operative positions brought material improvements to homes and businesses within the black community. Integration of the schools in most Southern towns and cities followed closely behind integration of the workplace. But a man like Floyd Harris will tell you that despite integration in the workplace and the schools, the mill community he lives in “remains segregated, like it was.” John Foster agrees that “segregation is still a part of this society,” and adds that:

You still have the same basic feeling being a minority, and you know that in everything you do, you will succeed or fail through how you respond to the majority."  

Tangible differences between the totally segregated society of the past and the partially integrated communities of the South today include the fact that black children no longer have to leave the region to become successful, that a decent education in an integrated public school is attainable for both black and white, and that black workers are not denied industrial jobs on the basis of their race. John Foster agrees that:

There is a marked difference now, and people who couldn’t get away from here fast enough are coming back comfortably.

Foster grew up in Alabama in the 1930s, served in a segregated unit in World War II, headed the mill-run recreation program for black workers while fighting for civil rights on the grassroots level in the 1950s and 1960s, and today he is an employment manager for a major Southern textile company. Reflecting on the changes he has experienced he concluded:

I consider myself now as living in two worlds, the one I remember and the one that I’m involved in now. Now the younger black doesn’t have the hesitancies that I have in a lot of situations because of the changes in the local area and in the southern region since he’s been growing up. I find myself cautioning him about my experiences and about his relationship to the white majority.  

Black workers like Foster and Harris, who are among the few blacks who have been promoted to white-collar jobs in textiles, see themselves as blacks first and textile managers second. Their allegiance is to their people, and in their capacity as employee counselors and grievance arbitrators, they argue that they can play the role of the union in their company’s unorganized plants. But these men are uncertain of what will happen next. They are concerned that black workers have not moved into management jobs as rapidly as they did into operative positions, and they noted that the affirmative action program, “the tool that has helped us get into these areas,” is under fire both on the federal and local levels. It is arguable that the impetus for continued black equality in hiring, wages, promotion, and seniority
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cannot come from within the textile industry itself, but must be promoted by unionized workers on a regional and national basis.21

TEXTILE UNIONS

Beginning in the days of the CIO, textile workers in the South came to symbolize both the hope of equality and the promise of justice under the law. In the 1950s and 1960s a black man like Julian West found himself fighting for the union in battles that were waged once or twice a year. In his plant in southwest Georgia, votes for and against the union consistently divided along racial lines:

I was for it. If we could have got it in there everybody felt like they would have bettered themselves. Where we didn't have a union and didn't succeed in getting it, well then we just had to put up with what we did have. White voted it down. It meant equal rights. The white voted it down to keep me down. If the white had voted the way the black voted then the union would have gotten in, would have taken over control. Then that would have made me get just as much as they get. They just didn't want it, it was a matter of keeping it segregated.22

West viewed the refusal of white workers to vote for a union as a political act executed to maintain the status quo both within the plant and within the community.

Since the 1960s, just as the textile industry has relied on black labor to run the mills, so have the unions organizing in Southern textiles depended on black Southerners to organize, to win elections, and to fight decertifications. The effects of black participation on efforts to organize in textiles are evident in recent union elections across the South. For example, the favorable vote at the Roanoke Rapids Stevens' plants in 1974 was ascribed to a 70 percent black vote. Neither the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) or the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) record the race of their members in the South, but unofficial tallies indicate a black majority. It has been argued that the unionization of textiles depends on black workers looking for the "promise of the civil rights movement." In fact, the most active black leaders in the textile unions grew up in Southern urban/industrial areas, learned their organizing skills in the civil-rights movement, lived outside the region in New York, Chicago, or Detroit, and then returned south. These activists, together with local union leaders from both urban and rural backgrounds, have formed a strong new core of Southern textile unionists.23

This new cohort of Southern textile leaders faces many of the same problems which always have plagued those trying to unionize Southern workers. Most importantly, the long-held anti-union stance of Southern industrialists remains unshaken. Today local Southern Chambers of Commerce try to entice Northern industry south with promises of low taxes, inexpensive energy sources, and cheap, non-union labor which duplicate
almost word for word those issued in the 1920s. The companies which come south, and those long entrenched in the region, literally invest in the belief and hope that workers of the South will remain unorganized. Among the most successful in fighting unions are the large textile chains, J. P. Stevens, Burlington Industries, and Cone Mills; in the last decade these companies have expanded their operations, and with the elimination of the 1968 ban on mergers within the textile industry, more mergers and industry consolidation can be expected. For workers this means that union drives will become more difficult as an increasing percentage of employees work for major firms which can easily close plants or shift production schedules to fight organizing efforts within a local community.24

Although many similarities exist between the difficulties faced by union organizers in the Southern textile industry today and those which frustrated union drives among primarily white workers in the period before World War II, there are also many differences. Most significantly, the paternalistic vise within which Southern mill-owners kept their workers has been loosened. The mill villages have been sold, or torn down, and the majority of workers live miles away from the mill in which they work. Few, if any, young black workers have experienced life in a company town, and their willingness to respond collectively to their work situation underscores the different heritage they have brought into the mill. At present many black workers in Southern textiles come from backgrounds, both urban and rural, in which racially cohesive institutions—churches, agricultural and educational improvement associations—have provided the means for collective action to solve common problems faced by black communities. The values and attitudes shaped by generations of working together have been brought to the mill.25

After black workers entered the mills in the larger numbers in the mid-1960s, their initial response to unionization was so overwhelmingly positive that the unions tended to take that firm commitment for granted. As one organizer explained, "Back in the late 1960's, whenever you went into one plant the first thing you looked to was how many blacks are there working in here. And if there were forty blacks you could count on forty votes."26 But after a decade, the relationship between black workers and management has begun to change. Managers have worked hard to break the racial solidarity of black employees by promoting black leaders and hiring some workers to spy against others.

Thus far Southern black workers have continued to respond collectively, but decades spent within the mill with individual production demands, pressure on individuals from foremen and supervisors, and the rigidity of time schedules which curtail communication between workers have made it difficult to sustain the cooperative values with which most black employees entered the industry. For example, in a Macon, Georgia, organizing drive in 1979–1980 black workers voted solidly for the union and remained united.
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until management withheld wage increases for two years. Finally, some of the black workers broke rank and participated in a successful decertification election. A year later one of the black women leaders of the union campaign emphasized the necessity of continued efforts "to make our people understand" the ramifications of the tactics used by management. 27

In many Southern mills the workers most responsive to seeking cooperative solutions to work situations have been black women. Long excluded from production jobs, black women now hold over 50 percent of the operative positions in many Southern plants. Many black women have entered textiles after having worked in domestic service; unlike their fathers and brothers they have come into the mill without previous industrial experience, and usually without having worked outside the region. For them the transition from home work to factory work is most analogous to the farm-to-factory transition experienced by workers who entered the mills between 1900 and 1940. As a Roanoke Rapids woman who went to work for Stevens in 1971 recounted, "To tell you the truth, when I first went in there, I thought I had stepped into hell. I thought I knew what hard work was, but until I went in there, I didn't." 28

Black women who began to work in Southern textile mills after 1965 often came from Southern rural/industrial areas, where families both retain their ties to the land and work in the mill. This rural pattern of industrialization, so common in the South, involves a complicated set of interactions between those family members who farm and those who work in the mill. In these families black women are the steady textile employees, those who go to work in the mill at eighteen and stay (with maternity leaves) throughout their childbearing years and even longer. Their fathers, brothers, or husbands are often seasonal textile workers who farm, do pulpwood work, and labor in the mill in the winter when bad weather prohibits outdoor work. Women can get regular work in the mills more easily than men. There are still more jobs designated as "female jobs" than there are "male jobs," and a continually expressed demand for the "nimble fingers" of women workers. 29

But although many Southern black women came to textiles from non-industrial backgrounds, they have brought with them to the mills a firm commitment to improving their lives by working together, the way their mothers worked within the church. The two women who became leaders of the organizing drive in Macon, Georgia, "prayed for those yeses to come" as the NLRB official counted the ballots at the Bibb Company's Bellvue Plant in the spring of 1980. For one woman, an inspector in the mill for three years before the election, working for the union was "working for God by working for humanity." 30 This continued dedication on the part of individual workers willing to work together for the common good is critical for the eventual success of textile unions in the South.
CONCLUSION

In the last four decades Southern black textile workers, once considered marginal, invisible mill laborers, have become the region's most prominent group of industrial employees. But even in 1940, black workers in fact formed a significant part of the workforce in most Southern mills, held a variety of essential positions, and also observed and performed production jobs whenever possible. In the post-World War II period, black textile workers became a well-trained reserve workforce ready to replace those white workers leaving the mills for jobs in a newly diversified Southern economy. Knowledgeable, long-term workers, and important local leaders within well-established black mill communities, many black textile workers fought for unionization within the mills and civil-rights legislation within the larger community.

But while black workers have brought about substantial changes within the textile industry, they have also inherited many of the traditional problems characteristic of this labor-intensive, low-wage industry with predominantly unskilled or semiskilled jobs. Textile workers today, as in the first decades of the twentieth century, are among the nation's lowest-paid industrial workers. In the fall of 1980 the average wage for cotton textile workers within the region was $5.21 per hour, compared to a national average manufacturing wage of over $8.00 per hour. Black operatives, as generations of white operatives before them, are exposed to the crippling effects of byssinosis from exposure to cotton dust. Moreover, in the early 1970s, many Southern mills faced with labor shortages and government pressure to reduce cotton dust levels within the mills, began to invest in new equipment, automated machinery which simultaneously increased production and reduced the size of the workforce. As a result, the number of U.S. textile workers, at over one million through the 1950s, and slightly below a million in the 1960s, declined to 779,620 workers in 1966, and 754,296 workers in 1978. The industry has never regained the employment levels which existed before the recession of 1974–1975. In the Southeast (with three-fourths of the workers) 95,000 jobs have been permanently lost, 19,000 between 1979 and 1980. Figures on the 1981–1982 recession are beginning to appear and indicate that the effects may be worse than 1974. At present unionized workers in textiles across the Southeast are being pressed for concessions on a model patterned after General Motors and Ford, but in plants where operatives make one-fourth of the wage of automobile workers. Textile employees from North Carolina to Alabama are on short-time, and in South Carolina twelve mills closed in the last six months of 1981, and 18,000 out of the state's 133,000 textile workers are out of work. As the most recently hired workers black employees are bearing the burden of much of the current downturn in textiles. The rapid movement
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of black workers into the industry in the 1960s and 1970s transformed the industry and altered the interaction between management and labor; but now the problems of plant closings and unemployment, anti-union wage battles, and decertifications have replaced industrial segregation as the problems faced by black textile workers in the South. The solutions will be hard-won. Today, as black workers lead efforts to organize the Southern textile industry, their long and complex experience as Southern industrial workers enriches and informs that work, just as their participation in the civil-rights movement of the 1960s serves as a model for achieving the right to bargain collectively in the 1980s. The struggle to earn wages that equal the national average industrial wage, to participate in industry decisions about automation and health and safety, and, finally, to gain union representation will demand all the strength and courage of the men and women now running the looms of the South.

NOTES

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5. Ibid., p. 82.
Four Decades of Change


8. The information and quotations which follow are from interviews with Julian West and Minnie Brown in Westpoint, Ga., on April 20, 1982. The name of each individual interviewed has been changed to protect their privacy. All interviews conducted by the author.


10. Data about the Thomas family from *Callaway Beacon*, vol. 6, no. 35 (Sept. 6, 1954); West interview.


13. Rowan, "The Negro in the Textile Industry," pp. 54, 98–99, 141; EEOC, *Minorities and Women in Private Industry* (1978), 1: 19. In Georgia 43 percent of white textile workers held operative positions; a higher percentage of white workers performed craft jobs (16% vs. 9%) and office work (10% vs. 2%).


15. Interview with John Foster, Shawmut, Ala., April 20–21, 1982.

16. Interview with Floyd Harris, Westpoint, Ga., April 20, 1982.

17. West and Foster interviews.

18. Harris interview.

19. Interviews with West, Harris, and Foster.

20. Foster interview.

21. Interviews with Foster and Harris.

22. West interview.


29. Interviews with Harris, Brown, and Ivey.

30. Newby, "Long Campaign," 1B.

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