

# The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910-1948: A Story of Labor, Race, and Class Struggle

The textile industry played a pivotal role in the development of South Carolina's economy and society in the early 20th century. By 1920, the state had become the leading producer of cotton textiles in the United States. The industry's growth created a large working class, primarily composed of white women and African American men. These millhands faced a range of challenges, including low wages, long hours, and dangerous working conditions. They also faced discrimination and segregation in both the workplace and the community.



## A Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910-1948 by Bryant Simon

★★★★☆ 4.3 out of 5

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Despite these challenges, millhands in South Carolina were politically active. They organized unions, participated in strikes, and supported progressive political candidates. Their activism was shaped by a combination of factors, including their experiences in the workplace, their

racial and gender identities, and the changing political landscape of the South.

## **Labor Organizing and the Great Depression**

The Great Depression had a devastating impact on the textile industry in South Carolina. Mills closed and unemployment soared. In response, millhands organized unions to fight for better wages and working conditions. The most successful union was the United Textile Workers of America (UTWA), which organized over 100,000 workers in the South by the mid-1930s.

The UTWA led several major strikes in South Carolina, including the 1934 textile strike in Honea Path. The strike lasted for six weeks and involved over 4,000 workers. It ended with a victory for the union, which won a wage increase and improved working conditions.

The Great Depression also led to the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as president. Roosevelt's New Deal policies, such as the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and the Social Security Act, provided some relief to millhands. The NIRA established a minimum wage and a maximum work week, while the Social Security Act provided old-age pensions and unemployment insurance.

## **Race and Class in the Textile Industry**

Race played a significant role in the textile industry in South Carolina. White millhands were often paid more than African American millhands, and they were more likely to be promoted to supervisory positions. African American millhands were also more likely to be fired during layoffs.

The UTWA was committed to racial equality, but it struggled to overcome the racism of its white members. In 1937, the UTWA expelled its all-African American local in Gastonia, North Carolina. This decision led to the formation of the National Textile Workers Union (NTWU), which was the first black-led union in the textile industry.

Class also played a role in the textile industry. Millhands were often divided by their race, gender, and skill level. Skilled workers, such as weavers and spinners, were more likely to be unionized and to have higher incomes than unskilled workers, such as doffers and sweepers.

## **World War II and the Postwar Era**

World War II brought a boom to the textile industry in South Carolina. Mills increased production to meet the demand for uniforms and other war supplies. Millhands worked long hours and received overtime pay.

The war also led to a change in the racial composition of the textile workforce. As white men were drafted into the military, African American men were hired to replace them. This led to an increase in the number of African American union members.

After the war, the textile industry in South Carolina entered a period of decline. Mills closed and unemployment rose. Millhands faced a new set of challenges, including the loss of jobs, the decline of unions, and the rise of automation.

The politics of South Carolina millhands from 1910 to 1948 were shaped by a complex interplay of labor, race, and class. Millhands were active in the labor movement, fighting for better wages and working conditions. They

also faced discrimination and segregation, both in the workplace and the community. Despite these challenges, millhands made significant progress in improving their lives and working conditions. Their story is a reminder of the power of collective action and the importance of fighting for justice.

## Bibliography

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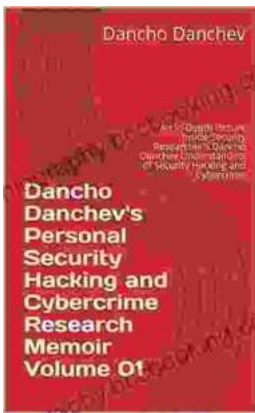
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