

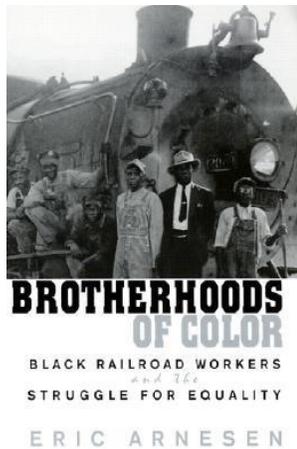
Book Review

A Shameful Legacy: "Race" and the Railroad Industry in the United States

A review of the book: *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality*, Eric Arnesen, Harvard University Press, 2002.

By Ike Nahen

"Race" has always, historically, been the Achille's Heel of the labor movement in the United States, the number one tool of the bosses and big business to divide, contain, and crush working-class struggles. In the history of the worker's movement in the U.S. there are few things as shameful as the legacy – decade-after-decade deep into the 20th Century – of blatant, in-your-face, segregationist practices, codified discrimination and race-hatred against African-American railroaders. The story of this oppression – and the resistance to it – is told in Eric Arnesen's *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality*. This book should be in the arsenal of every thinking railroader, of whatever "race" or skin tone, who wants to see an effective, united movement of railroad workers across craft lines, as part of a revived and powerful trade-union movement.



The Railway Labor Act: Double-edged Sword

The passage of the Railway Labor Act (RLA), in 1924, registered important advances for railroad workers, in that it was the first legal recognition by the U.S. government of trade unions by craft. The RLA set up collective bargaining mechanisms that facilitated legally binding contract settlements and the adjudication of grievances, in exchange for rail labor organizations essentially giving up the right to strike. These concessions to rail labor somewhat reigned in the carriers' unbridled prerogatives, and their employment of private and state violence over the decades of class war on the U.S. rails, from the Great Labor Uprising of 1877, through the struggles of the American Railway Union under the leadership of the legendary Eugene V. Debs at the end of the 20th Century. Additionally, the RLA also established the first federally protected pension system for any category of U.S. workers, eleven years before the passage of the Social Security Act.

The Railroad and the Institutionalization of Segregation

The most pernicious consequence of the RLA was that it froze into place existing, narrow craft categories of workers, and, with that, a system of racist discrimination and the exclusion of "non-white" workers from the legally recognized craft unions. It took decades of struggle in the yards, in the streets, in state and federal legislatures, and in the courts before the system began to weaken in the 1940s, under the impact of World War II labor shortages, and the entry of African American workers into the massively expanding war industries and the labor force as a whole. Further pressure mounted in the 1950s, as the Civil Rights Movement began to mobilize and fight, until the whole rotten structure collapsed in ignominy after the passage of the 1964 Federal Civil Rights Act. Over the next few years, Blacks were finally able to obtain jobs and union membership, working as locomotive engineers, firemen, trainmen, shopmen, office personnel, and other crafts beyond "their" craft as sleeping car porters, cooks, and dining car attendants. The doors also began to open to women, who began to enter the operating crafts and other skilled rail jobs in relatively larger numbers in the 1980s and 1990s.

Brotherhoods of Color is clear to point out that the source and ultimate responsibility for the racist practices and policies that confronted Black workers throughout the 20th Century lay with the private rail carriers, and the federal and state governments that catered to the needs and profits of capital. Nevertheless, these industry and state authorities were often aided and abetted by the racist and mean-spirited attitudes of the rail unions – the so-called "Brotherhoods" – as a cover for inaction, or even hostile action against Black workers, who were fighting a permanent defensive war to preserve the few relatively skilled jobs they had managed to secure.

Brotherhoods of Color meticulously documents the legal battles, doggedly fought by civil rights and workers' rights attorneys, in the mostly hostile territory of a criminal "justice" system that kept Black workers and their attorneys in an endless legal labyrinth. But this legalistic road was insufficient to bring about change. Rather, it was more of a marker and registration for the ebb and flow of the grass-roots struggle against job discrimination and segregation, which became unstoppable by the 1960s. Even in the period when Black workers were largely confined to the on-board crafts, Black-led unions representing many thousands of Black workers on the job were organized. The strongest was the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) which, under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph, became a powerful, prestigious organization in Black communities across the country. Randolph had the courage to threaten a mass March on Washington in early 1941 demanding: 1 - an end to segregation in the armed forces and 2 - that the massively expanding war industries hire and promote without discrimination. President Franklin Roosevelt was not happy but did issue Executive Order #8802 prohibiting discrimination in war industries under federal contract. This managed to placate Randolph, and the March on Washington was called off.

But the real heroes in *Brotherhoods of Color* are the rank-and-file workers themselves, fighting to preserve their jobs against the carriers, the state governments, and the racist Brotherhoods. Arnesen gives them their voice and records their efforts, their many defeats and some victories, which contributed mightily to the historic breakthroughs of the 1960s. The overall history documented comprehensively by Arnesen does reveal clearly that *all* advances, both large and small, were won as a byproduct of independent mass action – or the threat of it – from below.

Stop the Whitewashing of Our History!

In my 30-year railroad career, working as a brakeman-switchman, hostler, and locomotive engineer in Chicago, Washington, DC, and New York, on the Chicago and Northwestern and later Amtrak, I saw a transformation in the number of African-Americans, and then women, in the operating crafts. I can remember being in the locomotive cab, out in the Illinois countryside, listening to the stories of some of the first Black engineers that the carriers were forced to hire – and whom the craft unions gave up trying to exclude. These brothers related to me the BS they had to put up with initially, even as things began to get better and prejudices began to break down. It would be very educational and useful if our unions today would confront this blot on our history and dignity as organizations of labor. This is long overdue.

While the legacy of racist discrimination in the railroad industry – and in US social relations in general – have been dealt heavy-blows in the past several decades, race hatred and demagoguery remain a reference point for ultra-rightist forces (who are invariably anti-union) and their allies in the current social and political polarization in politics today. These voices are trying to get a hearing for their reactionary viewpoints in the working class and the tattered trade-union movement. I strongly recommend that RWU activists, and all railroaders, read and study Eric Arnesen's *Brotherhoods of Color*, not only for its rich evocation of the past, but as a reference point to arm ourselves politically for the inevitable class battles on the horizon.

