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Book Review - Gospel of the Working Class

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Off the **SHELF**

The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America. by Erik Gellman and Jarod Roll. University of Illinois Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-252-07840-8 \$30.00 (paper).

This work is accessible to anyone with an interest in labor and religion in the South during the Great Depression era, but is likely best suited to academic researchers in those fields. It traverses the lives and careers of its two protagonists, Owen Whitfield and Claude C. Williams, as labor organizers as well as Gospel preachers. The book chronicles the challenges, successes, and failures of the two men, one black and one white, as they attempted to organize farm laborers and revitalize their spirituality in the diaspora of the New South from Arkansas to Missouri, through Tennessee and Georgia.

Though the two men were friends and compatriots in the labor movement, and shared more similar traits and tendencies than differences, those differences are vital for understanding the role of race in the agrarian labor struggle in the New Deal South. As such, despite describing a friendship in the midst of a single and unique struggle, two distinct stories emerge—one the arc of Whitfield's lifelong struggle for racial justice, and the other the tale of Williams' transformation from traditional, racist, fire-and-brimstone minister to champion of black liberation and radical interpretation of the Gospel.

The authors go far beyond the traditional interpretation of their subjects and take an enormous leap forward in scholarship. They accomplish this by configuring the roles of race, religion, and partisanship into a more complex and complete examination, not only of Whitfield and Williams, but also of the region

and the era in which they worked. The bibliographic history concerning Whitfield and Williams has previously centered upon the two men as outcast members of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, and its rival, the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America. Rarely have those histories expanded upon the broader lives of Whitfield and Williams, and even more rarely have they been sympathetically told from the vantage of the two men themselves. The history of the STFU/UCAPAWA conflict has typically been a matter of little debate and told from the point of view of H.L. Mitchell, the STFU's founder and de facto archivist/historian. Mitchell's view was always that the rift between the two groups was a partisan one, with Mitchell, a Socialist, on the STFU side, and Whitfield and Williams, Garveyite and Communist respectively, leading UCAPAWA toward a hostile takeover of the STFU.

As Gellman and Roll note, however, the political affiliations of Whitfield and Williams were always tenuous and subject to their mercurial personalities. Moreover, argue the authors, the conflict between the two groups rarely concerned any brand of Marxist doctrine. Rather, the conflict actually was a result of their different personalities and their conflicting visions for the success of the movement. In all, the book finally rounds out decades of narrow, one-sided historical understanding about Whitfield and Williams, and it blurs the rigid interpretations of the roles of disparate groups and individuals working in the New Deal South. It is both an addition to and a reinvention of the works about the STFU, the role of both race and religion in the labor movement, and the rural South in the Great Depression.

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