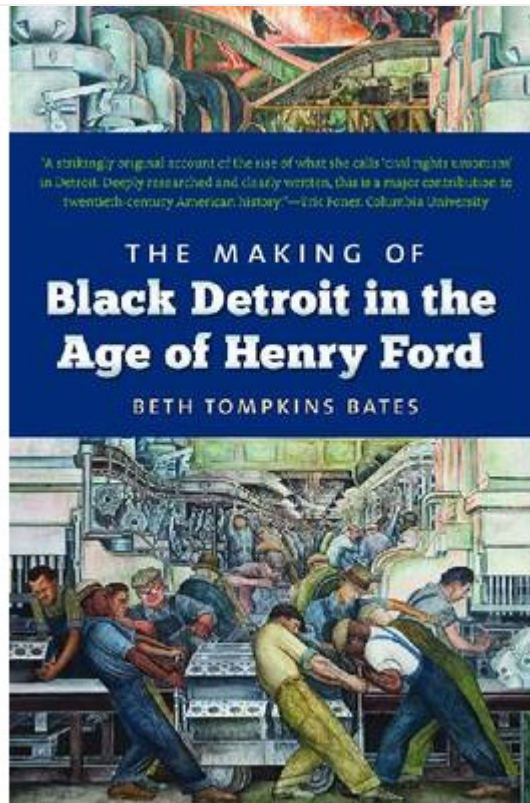


{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford



Volume 46 (2013)

Reviewed Work(s)

The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford. By Beth Tompkins Bates (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). Pp. xii, 343. Cloth, \$45.00.

In 1919, Ford Motor Company (FMC) became one of the first major companies to employ black workers in non-menial jobs. Henry Ford's willingness to breach the color line opened a new economic frontier for African Americans and in so doing, Ford developed a reputation as a trailblazer in the world of industrial labor relations. In her newest work, Beth Tompkins Bates is the latest scholar to posit that Ford's relationship with his black workers was far more complicated than previously thought. Bates, professor emerita at Wayne State University, claims that by raising economic expectations for black workers in Detroit, Ford unwittingly created a community with aspirations and expectations that exceeded what Ford was willing to offer. Faced with the decision to either remain loyal to Ford or protect their own economic interests through unionization, black workers ultimately banded together in a labor-based civil rights movement. Building upon her previous research on the collectivizing efforts of black Pullman workers in addition to a vast array of sources ranging from oral histories, political records, and the papers of various grassroots organizations, Bates demonstrates how black workers leveraged their numbers and newfound economic affluence not only to unseat Ford's political favorites, but also to force the FMC to end its closed shop policy in the early 1940s.

Before World War I, Henry Ford and other industrialists relied on immigrant labor to staff their factories. Although those black migrants who fled oppressive conditions in the South were drawn to opportunities in Detroit's burgeoning automotive industry, Ford and his cohort did not initially integrate them into their businesses. After the war, however, Ford no longer trusted foreign workers, who had grown increasingly interested in unionizing. Beginning in 1919, he sought out black laborers, whom he thought would demonstrate their appreciation through loyalty, reliability, and lack of sympathy for unionization. Not only did Ford employ black workers in record numbers and at wages equivalent to those of white workers, he also hired them for production and management positions previously not available to African Americans. Although Ford's policies toward his workers could be paternalistic and he

still tended to put black workers in the most difficult and low paying jobs, his factory also offered a unique chance for black workers to advance and improve their economic status. Ford's policies not only raised expectations for black workers, but also contributed to the development of a black middle class community.

Workers appreciated the opportunities they received from the FMC, but they also realized that the price they paid for that privilege was backbreaking work and acquiescence to second-class citizenship in Detroit. In the 1920s, shortly after FMC began hiring black workers en masse, those same workers started joining community political groups that advocated for an autonomous black community with self-appointed leadership. These groups were at odds with the so-called "old guard," or middle and upper class gradualists who sought uplift through the help and approval of the white community. Even so, black Detroit created an influential voting bloc, often campaigning for progressive politicians who directly opposed Henry Ford's preferences.

According to Bates, the Great Depression permanently altered Ford's relationship with his workers and forced black workers to choose whether or not they were loyal to their employer, and, as the Depression worsened, the relationship between Ford and his black workers deteriorated. When slowing sales forced Ford to cut wages and scale back the size of his work force, workers felt personally betrayed. Although Ford actually employed more black workers than ever, they were increasingly confined to the most dangerous jobs and given lower salaries because Ford knew they had fewer alternative employment options. Because black and minority workers were, despite Ford's boasts of equality, still twice as likely to be laid off, they created a more motivated voting bloc. A primarily black constituency managed to elect Frank Murphy as Mayor of Detroit, who campaigned on the issue of unemployment. Murphy's commitment to helping the "forgotten man" ran counter to Henry Ford's belief that jobs were more important than charity. Although political observers speculated that black Detroiters would vote for Henry Ford's candidate in order to keep their jobs, Murphy's election demonstrated that not only was black loyalty to Ford slipping, but that black voters were becoming an increasingly powerful force in Detroit politics.

Bates claims that black Detroit, energized by the racially charged Scottsboro case and the promise of the New Deal, became more supportive of agitators and less tolerant of accommodationist leaders. For his part, Henry Ford responded to increased collectivism with suspicion and anger toward his work force. The increasingly unbearable conditions at FMC spurred black workers to agitate for change. Black community organizations developed allies in the black elite and expanded their base of support in the hopes of getting black workers to join the United Auto Workers (UAW). Working class blacks were hesitant to join the union, concerned that white workers would use them and then abandon them. Aware that the sheer number of black employees made their support crucial to the success of the union at Ford Motor Company, black organizations urged the UAW to actively recruit black members and enforce equality measures. Buoyed by UAW-CIO's show of good faith and a 1941 Supreme Court decision finding FMC guilty of unfair labor practices, black workers finally supported the union. Ford continued to defy the union, but he could no longer command his workers' loyalties, and workers were increasingly open about their support for the union. When River Rouge workers unexpectedly went on strike in April 1941, black workers had completed their unlikely transition from loyal Ford supporters to union men.

Bates' book serves as a compliment to two other books about twentieth-century labor struggles in Detroit. Her explication of the unintended consequences of Ford's business practices serves as an epilogue to *The Five Dollar Day*, Stephen Meyer's history of the Ford Motor Company. However, she also details the racial strife and inequality that plagued Detroit's auto industry during the interwar period, foreshadowing the city's distress, decay, and ultimate decline in the post-World War II era as documented in Thomas Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis*. Bates does an excellent job of connecting Meyer's business history with Sugrue's cultural analysis.

Bates' title is somewhat misleading, however, as she has not explicated the making of black Detroit so much as she has described the making of a labor-based civil rights movement. She demonstrates a clear connection between Ford raising standards for black workers and his workers fulfilling the potential Ford saw in them, although not in the way Ford had intended. Instead of becoming loyal drones, his black workers

reached their potential by ultimately rejecting his tyrannical business practices in favor of a more inclusive model. It would have been interesting to see her take her conclusions further and explain how unionization changed race relations in Detroit or changed the lives of black workers for the better. Bates tells us about the political and economic progress of black Detroit in the interwar period, but the reader does not learn much about the cultural side of that development. She addresses the development of churches and community organizations, but only in terms of how they contributed to broad economic and political goals. Bates might have addressed how these organizations created a larger sense of community among black workers and their families. The lack of cultural analysis is the one weak spot in what is an otherwise thorough and expansive examination of the labor relations at one of America's oldest and most respected companies.

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