

C L E M E N T S C E N T E R F O R
S O U T H W E S T S T U D I E S
S O U T H E R N M E T H O D I S T U N I V E R S I T Y

You are invited to the Brown Bag Lecture Series

Wednesday, February 29, 2012

12 noon to 1 pm

Texana Room, DeGolyer Library
6404 Hyer Lane & McFarlin Blvd.

WHITE UNIONS, BLACK WORKERS, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE FORT WORTH AIRCRAFT INDUSTRY

Joseph Abel

The Summerlee Fellow for the Study of Texas History, 2011-2012



In the historiography of southern labor, the years following World War II are typically viewed as a time when African Americans were either courted by short-lived radical unions or abandoned by white labor leaders seeking to solidify their tenuous gains through the negotiation of discriminatory contracts. For black workers employed in the Convair Aircraft Corporation's Fort Worth plant, however, the path taken by District Lodge 776 of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) suggests that a more moderate path was also possible. Although they balked at promoting any form of social equality that might challenge the IAM's Anglo membership policies, District 776 officials argued that the strength of recently won collective bargaining agreements and the job security of all workers depended upon fair representation for black and white alike. Time and again union officials at Convair demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with black workers in adjusting shopfloor grievances.

Unlike the idealistic civil rights unionism espoused elsewhere in the South, this brand of pragmatic colorblind unionism was necessitated by the economic realities of the aircraft industry's unstable structural condition and fluctuating demand for labor. By examining the ways in which District 776 and the IAM negotiated the rocky terrain of race relations in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, this lecture seeks to demonstrate that a third way between the poles of radical interracialism and reactionary segregationism was indeed possible within the postwar southern labor movement.

Abel received his PhD in history from Rice University. As this year's Summerlee Fellow for the Study of Texas History, he is spending the academic year revising his manuscript "Sunbelt Civil Rights: Race, Labor, and Fair Employment in the Texas Aircraft Industry, 1940-1980" for publication with the University of Georgia Press.

Image: Howard Liberman, "Integrated Aircraft Factory Workers" (1943). Courtesy of NARA.

For more information or if you need special accommodations,
please contact swcenter@smu.edu or 214-768-3684.



www.smu.edu/swcenter