ABSTRACT: “A Haven for Anti-Unionism: the Post-World War Two South and Veteran Reactionaries,” by Jennifer E. Brooks, Auburn University

Both the CIO and the AFL regarded returning World War II veterans as a unique constituency to be either sustained or recruited after the war. Concerned with continuing discrimination, southern black veterans did support postwar organizing campaigns, recognizing the CIO as an ally in their battle against Jim Crow. Southern white veterans, however, were a different story. Some white working class veterans supported the CIO’s postwar organizing drive; many others proved apathetic to, fearful of, or outright hostile to that economic and political agenda. This resistance undermined postwar efforts to turn the region in a more progressive direction.

Historians more often pose World War Two veterans as agents of change in postwar southern communities, though acknowledging that the type of “progress” these veterans pursued could vary widely. This paper goes even further, suggesting that southern white veterans constituted a distinct source of anti-union conservatism that contributed to organized labor’s postwar defeat in the region.

First, I examine the role of federal policy in shaping white veterans’ responses to postwar union drives, particularly the Selective Service Act of 1940 and the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944. The local administration of these federal entitlements provided an important context for a veteran’s decision to support or oppose an organizing
campaign. Thus, I point to a new institutional-structural factor that contributed to organized labor’s defeat in the South: employer manipulation of GI benefits to thwart postwar union drives.

But organized labor encountered not only reluctant veterans but also those who were downright hostile to the campaign. My second focus is to consider the negative reaction many white veterans had to the political and racial changes left in the wake of the war, and how that reaction redounded against organized labor. Their reactionary response to the postwar home front adds an important environmental factor to the difficulty organized labor encountered in the postwar South.

The role of southern white veterans in shaping organized labor’s fortunes had broader implications than just the collapse of regional and local union drives. That defeat threatened industrial unionism everywhere. Labor leaders and many progressives at the time considered Operation Dixie, the CIO’s postwar union campaign in the South, for example, to be pivotal to protecting union gains outside the region, not just in the South. The failure of this campaign sustained the South as a low-wage, non-union region attractive to footloose northern industries. In a very real sense, veterans’ anti-union conservatism eradicated the Mason-Dixon Line not as a border between North and South, but as a boundary between unionized and non-unionized America.
Veteran anti-unionism also helped to prevent the creation of a new constituency of enfranchised southern workers who could help limit the power of southern Democratic conservatives in Congress. Congressional Republicans allied with southern Democrats to enact the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, and the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959. Scholars regard both pieces of legislation as landmarks in organized labor’s gradual national retrenchment after World War Two.

Finally, many employers were quite willing to manipulate GI programs to their own advantage, defrauding scores of veterans of their federal and state benefits in the process. That context played an important role in organized labor’s southern defeat. It also highlights the problem with defining the domestic impact of the Second World War through the successful delivery of GI Bill benefits. All told, the story of white veterans and organized labor in the postwar South mandates that we reconsider our understanding of the war’s impact on the southern working class, and, by extension, on organized labor’s failure to reconstruct the postwar South.