Abstract

Race, Rule and Republicans: Sun Ship and Unionization during World War II

This paper, drawn from my forthcoming book on the same subject, uses the Sun Shipbuilding and Drydock Company in Chester, Pennsylvania, a subsidiary of the Sun Oil Company, as a case study to explore the politics of anti-unionism during the 1930s and World War II. The Pew family, which owned both Sun Oil and Sun Ship and wielded tremendous power in the Republican Party both locally and nationally, sought to destroy any efforts at unionization during the 1930s and tried to use “racial benevolence” as a tool to undermine CIO campaigns during World War II. (Ironically the family’s legacy, the Pew Charitable Trusts, is a progressive force for positive change today.)

Pressured by the War Manpower Commission to add more shipways and to utilize black workers in jobs other than cleaning and laboring, the Sun Ship announced in May 1942 that it would open a completely new shipyard, its fourth, and operate it with Negro labor at every level, except supervision, which would be white. This enabled the company to “comply” with the President’s Executive Order prohibiting racial discrimination in employment, but enabled it to separate black and white workers, ostensibly preserve the racial status quo, and counter-attack unionization efforts by Industrial Union of Marine and Shipyard Workers of America (IUMSWA). The Pews framed their new shipyard as a “gift to Negroes” in an effort to keep blacks within the Republican Party in Pennsylvania and out of unions in Chester. Despite the public outcry against “jim crow,” the 4 Yard at Sun Ship laid its first keel in December 1942. At a peak in 1943, about 16,000 African Americans, mostly men, worked for Sun Ship. It became the largest private shipyard in the United States and the nation’s largest shipyard employer of African Americans.

Highlighting race (which in my mind always includes class and gender), particularly in terms of the #4 Yard, this paper offers a deep exploration of ideology, cultural beliefs, and habits of mind that fused ruthless anti-unionism with racial discourses designed to preserve corporate power. I examine the Pew family and the Republican Party, the experiences of black workers at Sun that both reinforced and hindered the Pews’ intentions, the racialized and gendered constructions operating at Sun Ship, and the specific ways the Pews manipulated these beliefs, including their carefully created public image as generous benefactors to Negroes. The paper closely examines the political/industrial patriarchs: brothers Joseph (Joe) Newton Pew, Jr. and J. Howard Pew (a leader in the Liberty League) who together headed Sun Oil, and their cousin John G. Pew, who served as president of Sun Ship from 1919 to 1952. Initially their efforts to win Negro loyalty, divide workers and foil IUMSWA met success. Joe Pew hired Emmett J. Scott, former right-hand man to Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee and in 1942 a staffer on Negro affairs at the National Republican Party in Washington, to head the new yard. Yet a fatal shooting at 4 Yard only days before the 1943 certification election shifted racial discourses and IUMSWA narrowly won. The Pews continued their efforts to undermine the union through foot-dragging, lawsuits, and exploiting divisions within Local 2. Although the Pews failed to achieve all of their goals, they did succeed (with help from unionists themselves) in killing Local 2 in 1949 when workers voted to switch allegiance to the Boilermakers, one of the most racist AFL unions in the country at the time.

The story of Sun Ship during these years, is a detailed lesson in how a right-wing political family and its allies used every trope, stereotype, and resonant discourse in their efforts to divide and disempower workers, discredit IUMSWA, attract blacks to the Republican Party, and perpetuate their power and authority locally, regionally, and nationally. Their success was mixed, but their effort and the resistance it provoked are telling and relevant.