

SACRIFICED TO CAPITAL:
THE DEGRADATION OF TEXTILE WORKERS IN THE EARLY POSTWAR ERA

by

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(Under the Direction of BETHANY MORETON)

ABSTRACT

When the wartime gains of mill hands threatened to break down the process of capital accumulation in one of the nation's largest industries, union leaders, government bureaucrats, academics, engineers, and mill men from the North and South—though for different reasons—strove to make sure that the textile factory would remain a site where profits could be made. The men and women who worked in the mills would be sacrificed for the cause.

INDEX WORDS: TEXTILE INDUSTRY, LABOR UNIONS, TEXTILE WORKERS UNION OF AMERICA, THE SOUTH, CAPITAL FLIGHT, NEW LEFT, TECHNOLOGY, STRETCH-OUT, THE STATE, HUMAN RELATIONS, RELATIONS TO CAPITAL

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Bruce and Sandra Wood, and my grandmother, Nancy Garber

Arritt.

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INTRODUCTION

Historians agree that World War II was a golden era for America's 1.5 million textile workers.¹ Long among the ranks of the nation's most poorly treated industrial laborers—the “step-children of American Industry,”² as the President of the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) called them—during the war years their real wages skyrocketed at a rate higher than any other group of workers,³ and for the first time they finally received some respect in their communities and on their shop floors.⁴ In the North, home to most of the woolen and worsted sector, the TWUA organized seventy percent of the industry and implemented strong contracts that protected workers from managerial arbitrariness. Even in the South, the union achieved a foothold in some of the most prominent firms, including Dan River Mills, which operated the largest textile plant in the world. Southern mill hands especially appreciated⁵ how workload clauses seemed to be a bulwark against the return of the “stretch-out of the stretch-out”⁶ they remembered from the 1930s. Unorganized mills, to keep the union at bay and, perhaps more importantly, to keep workers from leaving for higher paying jobs available in a booming

¹ Timothy Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For? The TWUA in the South, 1945-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 6-25; Clete Daniel, *Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretative History of Textile Unionism in the United States* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 125-153; William Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility: Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 87-115.

² Daniel, *Culture of Misfortune*, 147.

³ Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For?*, 19.

⁴ Douglas Flamming, *Creating the Modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884-1984* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 234-238.

⁵ Daniel Clark, *Like Night & Day: Unionization in a Southern Mill Town* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 107-110.

⁶ Quoted in Jacquelyn Hall, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 236.

economy, matched or exceeded union conditions.⁷ The prospects for textile workers everywhere were hopeful. There seemed little doubt that America had finally made room for the “stepchildren” at its table of abundance.

But it was not to be. Beginning with the first postwar recession of late 1948, the dreaded stretch-out returned and the TWUA proved unable and unwilling to prevent it. A few years later, wages failed to keep pace with inflation, and after that, even nominal wages began to fall.⁸ Much of the northern industry, where the TWUA was largely based, vanished as owners relocated to the South or cashed out of the business. Meanwhile, by 1952 all but a handful of southern locals had been crushed, and those that remained were utterly ineffective. By the mid-1950s, according to historian William Hartford, it was obvious that the “American century had passed by” the men and women who toiled in textile mills.⁹ The stepchildren had been put back in their place.

For the most part, historians have approached this turn of events, and the “misfortune” of textile workers in general, by locating the source of the problem in the South. If the TWUA could have organized all of Dixie, then hypothetically northern firms would have been forced to deal with their workers fairly instead of relocating and organized southern firms would not have needed to take an intransigent stance against the TWUA out of fear of being undercut by nonunion rivals. Starting from this premise, historians have attempted to explain the plight of textile workers by asking what it was about the South itself that was not conducive for unionism to take root. Some have placed

⁷ Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For?*, 49-55.

⁸ Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For?*, 156.

⁹ William Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility*, 174.

the blame on southern workers, who they claim were too docile,¹⁰ individualistic,¹¹ Christian,¹² racist,¹³ or caught up in paternalistic relationships with their bosses¹⁴ to see much appeal in the union. More recently, scholars have insisted that mill hands indeed wanted to join the TWUA, but the hostility of managers, law enforcement, city boosters, and state governments, combined with the unwillingness of the federal government to intervene to protect their right to organize, made it a risk that few people who were desperate for wages would be willing to take.¹⁵ Casting the issue as a southern problem fits well with the widely held view that American liberalism itself was shipwrecked on the shoals of the Southland.¹⁶ Implicit in the historiography is the belief that had the

¹⁰ Liston Pope, *Millhands and Preachers: A Study of Gastonia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Jonathon Gentry, “‘Christ is Out, Communism is On’: Opposition to the Congress of Industrial Organization’s ‘Operation Dixie’ in South Carolina, 1946-1951,” *The Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association*, pub. in *South Carolina Historical Association Journal*, 2003.

¹³ Michelle Brattain, *The Politics of Whiteness: Race, Workers, and Culture in the Modern South* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 217-220.

¹⁴ Barbara Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 176.

¹⁵ This interpretation is put forth by Michelle Brattain, “‘A Town as Small as That’: Tallapoosa, Georgia, and Operation Dixie,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81 (Summer 1997): 395-425; Clark, *Like Night and Day*; Minchin, *What do we Need a Union for?*; and Daniel, *A Culture of Misfortune*. See also James Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 96-122.

¹⁶ “The failure of Operation Dixie represents a critical turning point in American politics and a key to understanding the present political conjuncture...it is the failure of Operation Dixie that has allowed the Republican southern strategy, from Presidents Nixon to Bush, to be successful in shaping the more recent decades of American politics.” Michael Goldfield, “The Failure of Operation Dixie: A Critical Turning Point in American Political Development?,” in *Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History*, ed. Gary Fink and Merl Reed (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1994), 168-169. See also, Gary Gerstle and Steve Fraser, “Introduction,” in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), xv. The motif comes across strongly in Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 7-9; Stephen Cummings, *The Dixification of America: The American Odyssey into the Conservative Economic Trap* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998), especially 15-19; and Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2-3, 28-29.

South resembled the rest of the United States, the “American Century” would not have passed by textile workers after all.¹⁷

This thesis challenges the tendency to put the locus for the degradation of mill hands (and the working class in general) outside of the normal functioning of American capitalism. The wartime gains of textile workers—their rising power, wages, and sense of entitlement—posed a problem that went to the very heart of the process of capital accumulation. During World War II, turning a profit was not a difficult or mysterious task. Mills simply produced as much as they could and the government paid handsome prices for all of it.¹⁸ Yet as peace loomed on the horizon, mill men could not help but think back to a darker time, before the “golden era” of worldwide warfare, when incessant bouts of overproduction made textiles a risky business.¹⁹ As prospects for peace grew, so did their need to figure out how their companies might continue to change money into capital as they changed fibers into yarn and yarn into cloth.

Chapter one begins by examining a series of investigations carried out in the years immediately following the war for the express purpose of discovering how the textile industry could remain profitable. These studies warned that the demand for textiles would indeed decline in the near future and offered suggestions for how mills could make money in spite of the unfavorable market. Taken together, these recommendations called for major changes in the ways firms organized and carried out their production.

¹⁷ It is important here to note two facts that complicate this paradigm. For one, later in the twentieth century, when even the South no longer satisfied the needs of capital, industries simply left the United States all together. Furthermore, even workers who belonged to industries that were solidly organized North and South (automobiles, for example), could not use their trade unions to resist or gain control over management attempts to take back power on the shop floor.

¹⁸ Timothy Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For?*, 8-9.

¹⁹ On the industry’s previous, and unsuccessful, efforts to deal with overproduction, see in its entirety Louis Galambos, *Competition & Cooperation: The Emergence of a National Trade Association* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1966).

For one, companies would need to become more flexible. In a buyers' market, in which purchasers of fabric (such as apparel manufacturers and retailers) could be pickier about styles and costs, mills would need to increase their capacity to offer a wider variety of products, to rapidly adapt production to changes in consumer demand, and to substitute raw materials in response to fluctuations in the prices of fibers. Secondly, in order to capitalize on the postwar surge in consumer purchasing power, mills needed to make their products more compelling. They could do this by incorporating technology developed by public researchers during the war that improved the washability, luster, strength, shrinkage resistance, and other characteristics of fabric. Moreover, researchers suggested that mills enhance their marketing skills so that they would not only be responding to consumer demand, but anticipating and even creating it. The textile industry should help convince consumers that they needed new clothes, better clothes, and more clothes.

Above all, however, these studies emphasized that postwar profitability would depend on lowering per unit labor costs—on getting more value out of each worker without paying a commensurate increase in wages. Researchers recommended the implementation of labor saving machines, new processes for allocating job assignments and workloads, and new techniques to intensify each worker's labor. To these ends, they advised management to look to science. The research and development of new production methods would be the key to increasing the efficiency of each worker; or to reducing the time it took for a worker to make up the costs of her wages in order to expand that part of the day in which she was not paid for the value she produced. As the

Industrial Research Report warned, if workers responded by successfully shortening the work week, it would cancel out the profits to be made from increasing efficiency.²⁰

In sum, reports indicated that the textile industry would need to increase its productive *capacity* without actually increasing production. If firms utilized new technology to produce as much as they could, they would glut the market. Since this would drive the prices of fabrics down, it would undermine the potential for making profits. Mills would need to reduce costs not by producing more goods and spreading out costs over a larger number of units, but by decreasing the time it took to make each batch of goods. As the 1920s and 1930s demonstrated, if the textile industry as a whole were to remain viable in a capitalist system, competition among firms must not be based on producing the most, but on extracting more value from each unit of labor, a feat that required that management have the utmost flexibility to coordinate machine power and manpower to accommodate changing market conditions.

When mill men went about the task of securing the conditions necessary to keep their industry profitable, they did so with a remarkable degree of cooperation across different firms, geographic regions, and branches within the industry. Textile officials shared time studies, technological research, machine experiments, and tips to deal with a recalcitrant labor force. They belonged to an extraordinary number of trade associations. They met frequently to discuss their common concerns, strategize, golf, lounge, and have cocktails. In short, they were friends. Textile men did not try to profit at the expense of each other; they joined together to profit at the expense of the men and women working in their factories.

²⁰ Davis, *Economic Issues in Textiles*, 8.

Postwar researchers had stressed that their suggestions for restructuring production might not sit well with workers and so it behooved managers to seek out cooperation from their operatives. Trade journals indicate that executives indeed attempted to use psychological techniques and sly human relations tactics to temper worker resistance. Nevertheless, mill men increasingly complained that they could not fix what they called the poor attitudes of their laborers. When honey failed to induce workers to welcome their own degradation, managers North and South turned to vinegar. To squeeze more effort out of their employees and to gain the unilateral control over shop floor conditions that would give management the flexibility it desired, textile owners used their social power to make workers desperate enough to acquiesce. As the editor of *Textile Industries* boasted, accepting the reality of capital's prerogative would be a "tough and bitter pill to swallow," but capitalists had the power to force this pill down the throat of anyone impetuous enough to resist it.²¹

Historians of the postwar textile industry have overlooked how the wartime gains of workers threatened to impede capital accumulation because they have not interrogated what it was about the making of fabric, the process of production itself, that allowed for a return on investment—that transformed money into capital—at this particular historical moment. They have not asked how fabric could be made cheaper than it could be purchased on the open market.²² This has not been the lens through which they have

²¹ Editor, "Wailing and Gnashing," *Textile Industries* 114 (July, 1950): 73.

²² "The useful quality of labour-power, by virtue of which it makes yarn, was to the capitalist merely the necessary condition for his activity... What was really decisive for him was the specific use-value which this commodity possesses of being a source not only of value, but of more value than it has itself. This is the specific service the capitalist expects from labour-power... The use-value of labour-power, in other words labour, belongs just as little to its seller as the use-value of oil after it has been sold belongs to the dealer who sold it. The owner of the money has paid the value of a day's labour-power; he therefore has the use of it for a day, a day's labour belongs to him. On the one hand the daily sustenance of labour-power costs only half a day's labour, while on the other hand the very same labour-power can remain effective,

sought to understand the workings of capitalism. Instead, when historians have brought “capitalism” into the story, they have done so only to stress the “competitive nature” of the textile industry. It is portrayed as an *economic* system, in which resources are produced and distributed by possessors of capital competing against each other in the marketplace. Daniel Clark, in his case study of the Harriet-Henderson Mills in North Carolina, explains management’s intransigence about increasing workloads as a “local variable,” as evidence that “wild market fluctuations of the competitive, decentralized international textile industry influenced profitability far more than the demands of their employees did.”²³ He does not consider how mill men collectively defined their prerogative to unilaterally set workloads as the most crucial precondition for prospering in the postwar era. Timothy Minchin makes it clear from the very beginning of his monograph that the “competitive nature” of the industry was the primary concern of mill men. Even had they wanted to treat their workers fairly, they could not risk being underbid at the Worth Street market.²⁴

The decentralized structure of the textile industry certainly influenced the behavior of firms. At the very least, it established cost parameters beyond which mills just could not venture. Yet while it is true that competition was real, its existence was for the most part felt abstractly, and it remained only a background force. When scholars foreground (often implicitly) competition among firms, they distort the day to day concerns of management and obscure the fundamental social relationship—the

can work, during a whole day, and consequently the value which its use during one day creates is double what the capitalist pays for that use...The trick has at last worked: money has been transformed into capital.” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 300-301.

²³ Daniel Clark, *Like Night & Day*, 88.

²⁴ Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For?*, 4, 6, 9.

exploitation of workers by owners—on which capital accumulation in the industry was based.

While chapters one and two document the efforts of textile executives to reorganize the methods of production in their industry, chapter three takes a closer look at the role of science and technology in making this transition happen. The relationship between profits and scientific development was twofold. On the one hand, industry representatives kept up with the latest discoveries of fundamental research; they remained on the lookout for opportunities to appropriate new knowledge about scientific principles and apply them to the process of making profits. Unsurprisingly, this applied research, carried out by machine manufacturers, corporate engineering departments, and industry funded institutes, was undertaken to develop superior consumer goods and to reduce per unit labor costs. On the other hand, textile industrialists used their social power to actually shape the direction of fundamental research itself. The questions scientists asked about textiles—the “basic principles” they were most concerned to work out—reflected the interests and needs of capitalists. Tellingly, even at publicly funded labs, when scientists spoke about being attuned to the needs of the industry, in practice they meant the needs of people who invested money in the industry, not the workers who labored in it.

Between 1946 and 1956, even though the industry jettisoned 180,000 operatives, labor productivity skyrocketed by 47.5 percent.²⁵ Some scholars have seen in such numbers evidence that capital serves a socially useful function. Joseph Schumpeter, perhaps the most influential economist of the twentieth century, admits that capitalism is

²⁵ Donald Stabile, *Activist Unionism: The Institutional Economics of Solomon Barkin* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 160.

inherently exploitive, but nevertheless regards it as a supreme form of social organization because (he claims) it sets the stage for revolutions in production that lift humanity to new heights of material wealth and comfort.²⁶ “If we reject globalization [in the southern United States] because it is exploitive,” concurs the acclaimed southern historian James Cobb in collaboration with William Stueck, “we reject the simple realities of capitalism, which for all its manifold shortcomings, remains the only modern economic system that has demonstrated the capacity over time to improve the lot of those whom it exploits.”²⁷ What this logic means for workers is that they should accept—if not embrace—their exploitation by capital, not just for the benefit of society in the abstract but so that their children and grandchildren will have a better life once entrepreneurs can invest the profits obtained from their toil.

A close examination of the mechanisms that fostered technological growth in the postwar textile industry tells a different story about the social role and value of capitalists. Most innovations did indeed reflect the concerns of mill owners who needed to degrade their workers as a precondition for competing in a buyers’ market. But in large measure, the modernization of textiles was a thoroughly socialized endeavor. Public money financed research and development, which could not be carried out in the first place if not for a basis of socially accumulated knowledge. Public universities trained legions of textile engineers and provided much of the infrastructure to pursue scientific investigations. Publicly subsidized tax breaks underwrote the building of state-of-the-art mills. And publicly funded police and National Guard units made sure that workers did

²⁶ Geoffrey Ingham, *Capitalism: Key Concepts* (Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2008), 38-39.

²⁷ James Cobb and William Stueck, “Introduction,” in *Globalization and the American South*, ed. James Cobb and William Stueck (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), xv.

not challenge the “simple realities of capitalism.”²⁸ Capitalists took advantage of their power to direct the course of modernization and hoard its benefits for themselves. Textile owners did not operate in a symbiotic relationship with the brain and brawn of the social body, but a parasitic one.

Historians of the postwar industry have not paid attention to how the state played a central role in bringing about the degradation of textile workers.²⁹ In part, their treatment of the state fits well with a larger trend in the historiography that takes a view of “American politics that is more complex and contested than it often has been thought to be” rather than “assuming the power of business in politics.”³⁰ Starting with the premise that the state is a site of conflict—that it is “up for grabs,” so to speak—historians have explained away the unwillingness of the federal government to intervene on behalf of mill hands to “political trends,” i.e. the revival of conservatism in the late 1940s.³¹ A central theme of this thesis, to the contrary, is that the state was not waiting on the sidelines, struggling to decide whether it should help capital or labor; it was in the thick of the battle from the beginning, sponsoring research, offering subsidies, and cracking skulls to institute the stretch-out.³² As the authors of the Congressional Report

²⁸ The National Guard busted strikes in Morristown, Tennessee, in 1950 and Henderson, North Carolina, in 1958-59. Barry Truchil, *Capital-Labor Relations in the U.S. Textile Industry* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 100-101.

²⁹ Sociologist Barry Truchil and historian Phillip Wood take a Marxist view of the state, but they focus on the role played by local governments (state, city, and county) to keep labor docile and desperate. They have not documented the way governments at all levels financed and otherwise promoted the postwar stretch-out. Truchil, *Capital-Labor Relations*, 91-127; Phillip Wood, *Southern Capitalism: The Political Economy of North Carolina, 1880-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 94-106.

³⁰ Kim Phillips-Fein and Julian Zelizer, “Introduction,” in *What’s Good for Business: Business and American Politics since World War II*, ed. Kim Phillips-Fein and Julian Zelizer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

³¹ Minchin, *What do we Need a Union for?*, 79; Hartford, *Where is our Responsibility?*, 181.

³² Marxist theoreticians have built up a substantial and highly sophisticated literature that demonstrates the existence of profound fiscal and institutional interdependencies between the modern state and capitalist social relations. They have shown how the political and economic dimensions of society are co-developed—they are mutually constituted and structurally coupled. Such coherence means that the

made clear, if accumulation were to have broken down in the textile industry, the repercussions would not have been confined to the world of mill owners and their employees. They would have ramified to the detriment of machine makers, cotton growers, the banks and stockholders who financed textiles, and most importantly, the governmental bodies that depended on the tax revenues from all of the above. The fiscal basis of capitalist states, as well as their legitimacy, depends on their capacity to prevent or manage such crises. “Some shake-out might seem a good thing,” cautions geographer David Harvey, “but uncontrolled bankruptcies and massive devaluation exposes the irrational side of capitalist rationality in far too brutal a way for it to be sustainable for long without eliciting some kind of revolutionary (right or left) response.”³³

Finally, this thesis takes a fresh look at union policy and offers a more cynical interpretation of the role of the TWUA than the existing historiography, which equates

disruptions caused by a breakdown in the accumulation of capital would necessarily reverberate into the realm of the socio-political. And vice versa, a breakdown in the functioning of the state would necessarily disrupt the reproduction of capitalism, which above all depends on “extra-economic” relationships and mechanisms. Hence, even if individual state actors and individual capitalists are not cognizant of their mutual dependence, their structural entanglements and institutional articulations function as a feedback loop that ensures they will remain responsive and attuned to each other’s needs. The post-New Left has not offered an adequate theoretical response to this scholarship. Bob Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 1-53; Joe Painter, “State and Governance,” in eds. Eric Sheppard and Trevor Barnes, *A Companion to Economic Geography* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2003); Clause Offe, “The Theory of the Capitalist State and the Problem of State Formation,” eds. Leon Lindberg, Robert Alford, Colin Crouch, Clause Offe, *Stress and Contradiction in Modern Capitalism* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1975), 125-145; Nicos Poulantzas, “The Problem of the Capitalist State,” *New Left Review*, no 58 (1969): 44. Ellen Meiksins Wood, “The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, no 127 (May-June, 1981): 81; Ian Gough, *The Political Economy of the Welfare State* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 22, 32-37, 39-55, 62-75; Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience* (London: Lowe and Brydone, 1979), 18-19, 26-29; Paul Wetherly, “Can Capitalists Use the State to Serve their General Interests?,” in *Class, Power and the State in Capitalist Society: Essays on Ralph Miliband*, ed. Paul Wetherly, Clyde Barrow, and Peter Burnham (Palgrave Macmillan: Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2008), 109-131. For a Marxist analysis on the economic origins of politics, see Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 73-100. Not all Marxists emphasize codevelopment. For an “instrumentalist” approach that privileges the economic (rather than the socio-political) power of capitalists, see the works of Ralph Miliband, especially *The State in Capitalist Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

³³ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), 181.

the interests of the organization with the interests of the rank and file. For the sake of its organizational survival, the TWUA actually facilitated management's success in three crucial ways. For one, union leaders actively intervened to temper the resistance of workers to technological change. In some cases, the TWUA forced militant locals to give management more flexibility on the shop floor so that northern firms might remain competitive. Second, as it tried to organize the South (which according to the historiography, would have slowed down capital flight from the North, where the union was based), the TWUA was so willing to acquiesce on management's right to manage that it really did not offer workers a legitimate reason to pay dues or take the risk of joining a union. *It was clear that toilers everywhere were most concerned about the stretch-out, but TWUA contracts gave workers very little recourse to resist it, and in fact, the union intentionally downplayed the issue.* Third, union leaders bought into the ideological self-justifications of businessmen—they truly believed that capital provided a social function and that the dynamics of capitalism allowed for workers and management to cooperate for their mutual interests. Even as the industry's "modernization" scheme displaced workers *and* led to lower wages and higher workloads for those who remained employed, union officials continued to call it "progress" and even demanded *more* of it to keep northern firms in the market. And although technological improvements depended on the development of social knowledge, they shared the business community's analysis that human advancement was predicated on conferring privilege and power to capitalists.

Nevertheless, after the war, the TWUA found its love for capital unrequited. The very existence of the union—no matter how much it tried to extend the hegemony of capital or how ineffective it was in helping workers fight the stretch-out—created too

many rigidities and hassles for management to maximize its flexibility. As a result, traditionally northern firms either cashed out or moved South to enjoy a more salubrious “business climate.” In addition, those few southern companies, like the massive Dan River Mills, who had previously indulged the TWUA, expelled their locals as soon as they had the opportunity.³⁴

When the wartime gains of mill hands threatened to throw a wrench in the process of accumulation, union leaders, government bureaucrats, academics, researchers, and mill men from the North and South—though for different reasons—strived to make sure that the textile factory would remain a site for the transformation of money into capital. The men and women who worked in the mills would be sacrificed for the cause.

³⁴ In addition to making the issue of industrial relations in textiles a “southern problem,” historians have pointed to a number of historical contingencies to explain the rapid demise of the TWUA. Clete Daniel blames a personal rivalry within the highest ranks of the TWUA for pushing the union into a disastrous strike in 1951. “Before the strike, there had been outposts of labor-management accommodation seemingly secure enough to justify the hope that still more of the southern textile industry might, through patient and persistent effort, be brought within the union’s orbit.” In the aftermath of the strike, however, “there was wreckage so vast and despair so powerful that even its most devoted supporters were compelled to discount the TWUA’s prospects in the region.” Daniel, *Culture of Misfortune*, 232. Citing the assessments of top TWUA officials, Timothy Minchin agrees that the strike was “a pivotal event in southern labor history,” “a turning point for the union’s fortunes in the South.” Minchin, *What do we Need a Union for?*, 100, 3. Douglas Flamming, in his case study of Dalton, Georgia, argues that the onset of the Red Scare made union officials hesitant to “tap the region’s indigenous radicalism.” Douglas Flamming, “Christian Radicalism, McCarthyism, and the Dilemma of Organized Labor in Dixie,” in *Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History*, ed. Gary Fink and Merl Reed (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 211.

CHAPTER 1: “BACK ON THE BEAM”

Long before the end of World War II, according to historian Louis Galambos, textile mill owners sought to mitigate the way competition shaped their industry by undertaking “a search for an alternative to oligopoly.”¹ Beginning in the late nineteenth century, mill men joined together to limit production and fix prices. Although by the late 1940s leading southern industrialists were among the most vocal defenders of what they called “individualism,” twenty years earlier the president of the largest southern trade association announced that “the day of the individual has passed.”² In fact, two years before the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, over eighty percent of the American cotton industry belonged to the Cotton Textile Institute, an organization that asked for and received explicit permission from the government to curtail production. Although Galambos concludes that the structure of the industry limited the extent of cooperation that was possible, mill men nevertheless, with some exceptions, acted as a class in order to identify and resolve their common problems.³

After the war, even though textile executives had come to expound the philosophy of “individualism,” they continued to act cooperatively to advance common goals. In days gone by, firms had profited by working together to *increase* prices by limiting production and standardizing accounting procedures. Now, however, companies all of a sudden needed to *lower* the prices of their goods. For one reason, advances in paper-and

¹ Louis Galambos, *Competition & Cooperation: The Emergence of a National Trade Association* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1966), 44.

² Ibid, 114.

³ Ibid, 149, 161.

plastic-making technologies opened the door for the paper and chemical industries to make inroads into textile markets such as bagging and packaging. In addition, when war related demand finally subsided, an excess in productive capacity meant that buyers (like retailers and industrial textile users) could be choosier and mills would face pressure to lower their costs. This was all the more the case because the retail sector rapidly consolidated during the war, in large part due to government price controls that pushed tiny clothing sellers, who depended on large mark-ups, out of business.⁴ All of a sudden the ratio of buyers to sellers had fallen, and in important respects, this trend was self-perpetuating. For one reason, larger retailers could use their market power to exact better prices from mills to the point where small businesses could not compete. A parley of small retailers passed a resolution decrying that “manufacturers aren’t giving them enough mark-up, then using the profits made at small stores to dump goods at cheap prices with the big retailers.” Without independent retailers, they warned, “it will be a buyers’ market for sure.”⁵

Although the onset of a buyers’ market meant that the mills that produced textiles at the lowest price would have an advantage on Worth Street, it is wrong to suggest that the postwar industry was defined by competition between companies. Such “competition” needs to be seen as surface struggle: it could only exist in the first place on the basis of interfirm *cooperation*. The course of industrial development in postwar textiles was not the aggregate product of the decisions made by hundreds of isolated competing firms, but rather the result of a class-based effort to solve class-based

⁴ Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 61.

⁵ Anon., “Retailers Parley at the Homestead,” *Daily News Record*, February 6, 1951, 18.

problems. Rather than defraud each other, mill men worked together to intensify the exploitation of their workers.

The common interests of mill owners were fleshed out by a series of studies commissioned at the close of the war for the explicit purpose of finding out how to keep textiles profitable. Economist Hiram Davis, in an Industrial Research Report undertaken at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, laid out the "basic economic issues...more or less common to all textile industries" that cut "to the very heart of the textile business." The long wartime boom would sooner or later come to an end, Davis warned, and firms would have no choice but to slash their prices; if they wanted to maintain their profits, they would have to cut costs as well. To this end, Davis offered his expertise. Unfortunately for textile owners, because "experience indicates that the wage inflation acquired during a war carries over...those who expect markedly lower wage scales in textiles...or at least the return of pre-war levels...are probably going to be disappointed." Yet if mill men could not outright cut their workers' wages, how else could they lower their costs enough to ply wares in a saturated market? "There was a time," Davis continued, when "fortunate speculation in raw materials" was a common strategy, but "government operations in the raw materials market" had "lessened the opportunities" for such connivance. And although it was "customary to assume that some support for higher wage rates can always be squeezed out of the share of industry income going to management and investors," such a measure would be out of the question, as it would have "serious repercussions on the capacity of that business to

provide jobs.”⁶ In other words, if investors had to take cuts, they would simply move their money elsewhere. Who then, should take the squeeze?

“Are job payments balanced with job requirements?” Davis asked, rhetorically. “It would not be surprising,” he ventured, if “many jobs in textile production were overpaid and many others underpaid in terms of output.” Although wages had increased during the war, Davis explained, “there is little evidence that significant permanent progress was made in getting out more textiles per worker.” Hence, if outright lowering wages would be too crass, management must try and get more work out of each employee without granting a corresponding increase in pay. “The only permanent support for a higher return to wage earners in textile manufacturer,” Davis concluded, “is increased output per man hour.” “Here,” he stressed, “is real need for guidance by research.” Fortunately for mill men, “current discussion among the technicians foreshadows major developments” in just that direction. Nonetheless, Davis concluded the report with a warning to management: if it “suddenly goes all out for new labor-saving machinery...it would be almost certain to result in a drive by labor to have the work-week further shortened and work assignments frozen to past practice.”⁷ Davis feared that workers might view their increased capacity to produce as a reason to work less, not more, and thus attempt to offset the profits to be made from squeezing them.

Another study, carried out a year later in 1946 by economists at Princeton and funded by a textile trade association, offered similar advice for textiles to remain a hospitable home for capital. Like Davis, the researchers began with a warning that the sellers’ market of the war would indeed “change later into a buyers’ market.” Mills

⁶ Hiram Davis, *Economic Issues in Textiles: A Challenge to Research* (Philadelphia: Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, 1945), 2, 6, 15, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9, 6, 8.

would be selling fewer goods and face more pressure to keep their prices low. In such an environment, since wage cuts were off the table, it would be “necessary to explore to the utmost the possibilities of reducing labor costs per unit of output.” To this end, mills should continue to invest their massive wartime profits into “mechanical technology.” Yet even with “existing equipment,” they hastened to add, “significant gains may also be realized through the more careful appraisal of workloads and job assignments.” But how could owners upset previous shop floor patterns and intensify workloads without provoking massive resistance? The key, explained the Princeton economists, was for “managements and workers alike [to] recognize the existence of a mutual interest in the translation of comparatively high wage rates into lower labor costs per unit.” Managerial success would depend “largely upon the achievement of a flexible and cooperative attitude” among workers; employers would need to “develop labor-relations programs that will enlist the active cooperation of labor in reducing unit costs.”⁸

In addition to squeezing their employees, the Princeton study suggested that mills navigate the buyers’ market by enhancing their marketing skills and developing newer and better products. Consumers in postwar America would have more purchasing power, but in order to solicit a share of that cash, mills would need to make “products that have a glamorous appeal to the public fancy.” By remaining in “constant contact with the latest developments in technical research,” for example, mills could incorporate “new finishes and processes” that could “contribute to increased consumer appeal.” Most importantly, to stay abreast of a dynamic market, textile owners would need to eliminate rigidities in the production process. In order to obtain “flexibility in the year-to-year planning of

⁸ Archibald McIsaac, James Smith, and John Cadman, *Postwar Prospects for American Textiles: An Introductory Report* (Kent, Connecticut: Textile Foundation, 1946), 4, 16, 17.

productive operations,” mills would need to maintain “liquid funds for replacement or innovation.” Yet such flexibility, above all, required that management be able to exercise unilateral control on the shop floor, that it have the free hand to move about workers and adjust workloads with little regard to the needs and wishes of its labor force. Devoting the time and resources to hammering out compromises would institutionalize a rigidity that mills could not brook if they hoped to survive in a buyers’ market. As the Princeton economists concluded, it was “*absolutely necessary* to have flexibility of arrangements between workers [and] machines...in order to realize to the fullest extent the advantages of new and better methods.”⁹

A 1947 study commissioned by the Committee on Agriculture in the United States House of Representatives offered a remarkably similar prognosis of the textile industry: to profit in a buyers’ market owners would need to squeeze more value out of each mill hand. Yet unlike the previous studies, the viability of the textile industry was not the central issue. As the brainchild of Georgia Representative Stephen Pace, the Special Subcommittee on Cotton, which coordinated the study, was preeminently concerned about the fortunes of cotton “farmers.” If cotton textiles slumped after the war, how could the cotton grower continue to “get his fair share of what he produces?” The researchers tasked to resolve this problem began by breaking down each consumer dollar spent on textile products, and found that for the year 1939, forty cents went to retailers and wholesalers, forty cents went to manufacturers, three cents went to ginner, seven and a half cents to “farmers,” and the rest to various intermediaries like converters and jobbers. Looking at the same dollar from a different angle, researchers further found that throughout the entire process, forty-eight cents went to pay the wages and salaries of mill

⁹ Ibid, 9, 21, 16.

workers, a figure “more than six times as much as gross returns to growers for farm production of the cotton used.”¹⁰

To figure out how to redistribute the money spent on textiles so that more of it would end up in the hands of the “growers,” researchers painstakingly broke down every single step of the production and distribution process in search of opportunities to cut wages and increase profits. In so doing, they equated the well being of “farmers” to the well being of those downstream in the production process who also owned the “means of production.” They agreed with Hiram Davis, who in his Industrial Research Report noted that if mill owners could squeeze more value from their employees, they could continue paying high prices for raw materials. This analysis was even extended to the retail sector, where the Congressional study mentioned that “retailers’ margins may be reduced by the simplification of the selling process so as to permit and encourage self-service and self-selection by customers.” Researchers advised that “accurate labeling to show the quality and size of the products... would facilitate self-service methods.” “These and other economies in retailing,” they calculated, “would make possible substantial reductions in the cost of distributing cotton products, to the advantage of both cotton growers and consumers.” In other words, if retailers could reduce their labor costs without reducing their profit margins, a higher percentage of the consumer’s dollar could be allocated elsewhere.¹¹

The men assembled to carry out the Committee’s study directed most of their attention to the manufacturing stage of the process. The “best talents” in the country, as

¹⁰ “Cotton Goods Production and Distribution Techniques, Costs, and Margins, Project III,” in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Special Subcommittee on Cotton of the Committee on Agriculture, *Study of Agricultural and Economic Problems in the Cotton Belt*, 80th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1947), 108, 105.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 106.

an industry insider called them, put their heads together to determine how to restructure the process of production in the factory in order to get the most work out of each man and woman who labored in it. “The utilization of workers to their full potentialities,” they cryptically stated, “is perhaps the most effective means of reducing costs of manufacturing.” To this end, they recommended specific technological “improvements” (which will be discussed in chapter three) “as a means of reducing unit labor costs.” Like the other studies, the Congressional Report warned that “increasing the efficiency and reducing the costs of labor” would require subtlety and tact so as not to overly provoke workers. In this respect, researchers suggested that managements develop “labor-relations programs that will enlist the cooperation” of those whose exploitation they wish to intensify.¹²

Taken together, these three studies conceived that the wartime gains of workers presented the biggest obstacle to continued capital accumulation in postwar textiles. If the industry were to remain profitable in a buyers’ market, mill men would need to regain absolute authority on the shop floor and adjust production to enlarge the gap between the value that workers produced and the wages they were actually paid. It is improbable, however, that these studies actually redirected the course of industrial development in textiles by transforming the priorities of management. More likely, they simply articulated preexisting concerns, summarized trends, and diffused strategies that owners were already advancing. After all, researchers based their reports in part on consultations with industry insiders. While the reports did offer certain insights, their primary contribution was to make sure that everyone involved with the industry (union bureaucrats, government liaisons, and scientists) would be on the same page. When it

¹² Ibid, 105-106.

came to adopting labor-saving machinery, for example, mill men did not need to be incited by economists. They had already ordered so much that machine shops announced a three-year backlog on new deliveries.¹³ Other owners, anticipating that the rate of obsolescence of products and processes would accelerate as the industry reconverted to a buyers' market, marked up their allowances for depreciation.¹⁴ And, to be sure, mill men across the country shared the analysis that success in a buyers' market would depend on their capacity to squeeze their workers and regain absolute power on the shop floor.

The outlook of textile executives in 1946 was best summed up by the Manager of Personnel Development at Tubize—a rayon producer with factories in the North and South. In the Atlanta based journal *Cotton*, he explained, “We have been passing through a period of labor trouble, inefficient workmanship, and high unit costs. We realize that we are nearing the time when increasing competition for the available business is going to demand a material reduction in unit costs.”¹⁵ Glenn Gardiner, a human relations consultant, concurred, stressing that “the problem of getting a fair day’s work for a good day’s pay” in 1946 deserved “serious consideration by managing executives” now that the “pattern [was] set for a higher wage level.”¹⁶ The “problem” a textile executive reiterated in *Cotton*, was that “the curve representing output per manhour has been relentless going downward while the representing unit labor cost has been rising as though attached to a balloon.”¹⁷

¹³ Archibald McIsaac, et al., *Postwar Prospects for American Textiles*, 4; See also, Daniel Clark, *Like Night & Day*, 86.

¹⁴ Archibald McIsaac, et al., *Postwar Prospects for American Textiles*, 4.

¹⁵ Jack Wolf, “Getting Employees on the Management Team,” *Cotton* 110 (May, 1946): 71.

¹⁶ Glenn Gardiner, “Industrial Relations Need Reconversion Too,” *Cotton* 110 (April, 1946): 66.

¹⁷ Anon., “An Executive Views the News in Textiles,” *Cotton* 110 (October, 1946): 203.

It is important to reiterate that mills did not hope to lower prices by increasing total production in their industry, but by getting more production *per unit* of labor. Past experience showed that there was a tendency in the industry to overproduce, and the inevitable surplus of goods spelled danger for profit margins. “In peacetimes,” an executive explained, “it has been the curse of textiles that the mills alternately produced goods so rapidly that they had offsetting periods of slackness. It was always an industry of peaks and valleys.”¹⁸ Though mills never really solved the problem of overproduction in the postwar era,¹⁹ they were able to ameliorate its effects on profit margins by being able to expend less of each dollar received toward wages. Furthermore, by emphasizing productive capacity rather than actual output, mills strove for the flexibility to make specific batches of goods fast enough to meet immediate market demand before bubbles burst. While in earlier times mill men initiated the speedup solely to increase the rate of exploitation of their workers,²⁰ after World War II the speedup was designed to both squeeze labor and get products “on the market on time.”²¹

The project of making profits in the postwar era—which required instituting the stretch-out/speedup/squeeze—involved the collaboration of mill men across the country. When the economists from Princeton stressed that it was “urgently necessary” that “textile manufacturers in the different branches of the industry” take “united and aggressive steps” and enlist in “various forms of joint or cooperative action,”²² the evidence suggests that their audience was willing and able to heed the advice. Fortunately

¹⁸ Anon., “‘The Situation’ As Seen Across an Executive’s Desk,” *Cotton* 110 (February, 1946): 120.

¹⁹ Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For?*, 9-10.

²⁰ Phillip Wood, *Southern Capitalism: The Political Economy of North Carolina, 1880-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 8-9, 67.

²¹ Glenn Gardiner, “Industrial Relations Need Reconversion Too,” *Cotton* 110 (April, 1946): 66.

²² Archibald McIsaac, et al., *Postwar Prospects for American Textiles*, 9-10.

for textile officials in the 1940s, their predecessors had already laid the infrastructure to facilitate joint action, and it was only natural that they turned to these preexisting networks to tackle their new problems.

Seemingly every state with more than one spindle had its own textile trade association, which held yearly conferences that always included mill representatives from other states. In addition to state groups, most mills belonged to regional organizations like the Southern Textile Association (STA), whose members not only met yearly in a plenary session, but frequently in divisional conferences of the STA such as the Northern North Carolina and Virginia section. There were national organizations too, like the American Cotton Manufacturer's Institute (ACMI), which was formed in the late 1940s from a merger of the Cotton Textile Institute (whose activities were documented by Galambos) and the American Cotton Manufacturers' Association. While ACMI was primarily a southern-based association, its membership included several northern firms. Other large associations included the National Cotton Council, the National Association of Woolen Manufacturers, and the Rayon Institute. While these technically represented specific branches of the industry, the differences between sectors was becoming increasingly moot, as companies began to spin different fibers and/or blend fibers from different sources into a single yarn. J.P. Stevens, which owned cotton and woolen mills across the country—and blended synthetic fibers into their yarns—for example, actively participated in several of the organizations. In the words of the president of the Textile Foundation, a technical association that represented all sectors of the industry, “in the

textile world” of 1945, “the old, clearly-defined boundaries between different fibers, differing spinning processes, and different methods are disappearing.”²³

Trade associations played a major role in bringing mill men together as a *class*. In one way, they provided a forum where executives from disparate companies could come to realize and articulate the existence of common interests vis-à-vis their workers. Further, by establishing and cultivating personal connections between textile officials, they increased the likelihood that they would remain in solidarity in the face of potentially divisive issues. Association conferences were places of serious discussion, but just as importantly, they were sites to forge or rekindle friendships, to participate in a true peer experience. Convention planners took pains to make sure of it. At the 1948 meeting of the Alabama Cotton Manufacturers Association, for example, “ample time was provided for golf, boating, and other recreational activities” before proceedings “took on a serious vein.”²⁴ The 525 people who attended the 1951 convention of the Cotton Manufacturers Association of Georgia at the posh Sheraton Hotel in Daytona Beach were treated to a reception in the Bath and Tennis Club and invited to partake in a golf tournament.²⁵ Not to be outdone, their counterparts in South Carolina booked the Cloister Hotel on the Georgia Sea Islands, and enjoyed a “cocktail party and dinner” at the new Cloister Beach Club.²⁶

Trade journals also played an important role in fostering class cohesion. They too provided a medium for mill men to discover and talk out their shared prerogatives.

²³ Harold DeWitt Smith, “Annual Report of the President,” *Textile Research* 15, no. 12 (December, 1945): 2.

²⁴ Anon., “Business Men Must Participate in Politics—Says Forbes at Alabama Meeting,” *Textile Industries* 112 (May, 1948): 96.

²⁵ Helen Troxell, “525 Advance Registrations at the Sheraton Hotel,” *Daily News Record*, May 17, 1951, 22.

²⁶ Murray Wyche, “South Carolina Cotton Manufacturers Annual Convention,” *Daily News Record*, May 21, 1951, 1, 34.

Cotton, which later changed its name to *Textile Industries*, included a recurring section called “How Other Men Manage,” in which executives discussed shop floor problems. *Textile World* offered a feature called “The Round Table,” which was devoted to “an exchange of ideas” and “open to any and all readers discussing subjects relating to mill management, production, engineering, technology, etc.” In fact, all of the major trade journals gave space for mill men to state their concerns, offer advice, and even explicitly ask for tips to handle postwar issues. Journals were also a means to nourish interpersonal relationships. *Textile Industries* included a monthly section called “Personal Notes About the Men you Know” that kept readers up-to-date about the career changes, family matters, and even the deaths of their friends and colleagues. Perhaps most importantly, journals—as well as trade association media and conventions—provided the infrastructure to suffuse the industry with a cohering and coherent ideology. As historian Howell Harris explains, “It often seems that businessmen were the most important, as well as the most receptive, audience for their own propaganda and rationales.”²⁷ In order to harm their workers, mill men needed to be able to understand their actions as the “common sense” and “progressive” thing to do, and the better they could communicate and spread such a world view, the easier it would be to restructure the material conditions of textile production.

It should be stressed that mill men shared a number of concerns with other industrialists of the era and their ideological development in part reflected how they took part in a larger social movement of businessmen to reverse New Deal trends and take back the shop floor authority they had ceded to workers during the war. Harris sums up

²⁷ Howell Harris, *The Right To Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 96.

the general outlook of industrialists on the eve of reconversion: “At the level of the firm, it looked as if management might have only a very few years in which to win back territory it had lost to workers...many large firms turned on the heat, feeling that they had to act decisively while the time was right.” “Immediately after the war,” Harris argues, “it had still been possible to believe that liberal or radical reformism remained on the American political agenda.”²⁸ What was at stake in the minds of businessmen was the continued existence of capitalism itself. If their “right to manage” was challenged beyond a certain point, they rightfully feared, then socially necessary labor would cease to be organized according to the logic of capital accumulation.

Textile executives flocked together with their counterparts in other industries to amplify the message of national capitalist organs such as the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and the Chamber of Commerce. These institutions rallied capitalists to use their considerable economic and political weight to reeducate the public (and their workers) about the merits of the “free enterprise” system.²⁹ Textile men contributed to this effort through NAM (William Ruffin, President of Erwin Mills, a large textile complex in Durham, served as NAM’s President in 1951) as well as their own particular trade associations and networks. In countless journal editorials and convention speeches, mill men came to fluently articulate the language and concepts of “individualism”—a way of thinking about society that obscured the structural problems that gave purchase to corporatist, laborite, or socialist solutions—and in the process, made this discourse the lingua franca of the textile industry. For just one example, the editors of *Textile Industries* instructed their readers to think of ‘Capitalism,’ a word they

²⁸ Ibid, 95, 203.

²⁹ Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-60* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 1-9.

put in sneer quotes, as “nothing but the right on the part of anyone with the ability to create wealth, to own it, and to use it.” Even the “proletarian laborer who is thrifty enough to lay aside a few pennies a week out of his wages is a capitalist in exactly the same sense as Henry Ford.” ‘Capitalism’ did not obstruct freedom by conferring to individuals with wealth the power to exploit and exercise authority over individuals who lacked wealth. Rather, it unlocked the “very essence of freedom,” which was the “right to possess and use things.” In their terms, “no man needs to work as the wage servant of another unless he *chooses* such an arrangement.”³⁰

Textile officials encouraged each other to take advantage of their positions within their communities and factories in order to spread the ethos of “free enterprise” far and wide. A 1950 plenary of the National Cotton Council launched “one of the broadest national programs ever to come out of a cotton meetings... a program to combat the welfare state in a county-by-county campaign in the more than 3,000 counties in the US.” The Council, commented the editor of *Textile Industries*, was “ideally constructed to conduct such a ‘grass-roots,’ attack.” At a Southern Textile Association meeting devoted to the topic of “public relations,” Harold Whitcomb, the President of the unionized Fieldcrest Mills in Spray, North Carolina, proclaimed that “every member of management must be taught to indoctrinate new workers, the general public, and union leaders with the idea that the interests of the worker and the company are the same.” For mills to carry out this duty, “all members of management should learn as much as possible about basic economic truths so that they will be in a position to sell our system to the worker.” Beyond the factory, Whitcomb added, the “American system must be sold to local preachers and school teachers.” And just in case teachers could not get the

³⁰ Anon., “Capitalism and Freedom—Inseparable Companions,” *Textile Industries* 112 (May, 1948), 75.

message across in the classroom, “high school students should be given a trip through the plants.”³¹ Another PR specialist recommended that mills could reach the community by putting together an “employee publication” and circulating it to churches, dentists, doctors, and beauticians. As bait for non-employees to read the publication, the PR man suggested that mills “inject a great deal of town matter.”³² In an address to the Georgia Cotton Manufacturers Association convention in 1951, the Junior Vice President of Swift Spinning Mills, a huge non-union outfit in Columbus, told the audience that upholding “the dignity of man and the sanctity of his contracts” was the “fundamental story of the American way of life” and urged mill men to take this story “deep into every community.”³³ As William Ruffin put it best, it was the “duty” of textile officials, as “employers and as leaders in their communities... to make it their business to stress in all of their local contacts that the great strength of America was in the American character and in the American spirit.” What this meant, Ruffin clarified, was that “We’ve got to get that ‘individual’ concept of our personal citizenship obligations out of the moth balls.”³⁴ The irony that mill men relied on the discourse of individualism in order to pursue a collective agenda must have been lost on Ruffin and his cohort.

If competition had defined the industry, it might be expected that the only issues mill men could see eye to eye on existed outside of the factory, problems beyond the realm of competition—like negative public attitudes about “capitalism.” If this were the case, then the mere presence of trade associations and journals would not disrupt

³¹ Anon., “Need for Public Relations Cited at Danville STA Meeting,” *Textile Industries* 112 (May, 1948): 71.

³² Albert Carriere, “The Employee Publication—An Aid to Good Community Relations,” *Textile Industries* 114 (April, 1950), 183.

³³ Harry Riemer, “Swift to Replace Hardman as President,” *Daily News Record*, May 18, 1951, 1, 32.

³⁴ Anon., “Naming of Ruffin Hailed,” *Daily News Record*, March 30, 1951, 30.

historical narratives that emphasize competition between postwar textile firms. Yet the bulk of cooperative action was in fact centered on problems that existed at the site of production. Mill men readily shared mechanical and technical advice to reduce labor costs, as well as human relations tactics to secure a more tractable workforce. In other words, information that could give one firm a competitive advantage over another firm was often not kept as a proprietary secret. That this knowledge was shared—and even more often collectively produced in the first place—indicates that textile executives did not conceive of the primary axis of conflict as being between companies, but between employers and employees.

At an assemblage in Georgia, “textile men exchanged a wealth of information” relating to slashing and weaving techniques, from what type of starch they should use to “size” fabrics to how infrared heat could prevent yarn from sticking and allow for higher operating speeds.³⁵ Another conference in Georgia, dealing with carding and spinning, “indicate[d] the vast amount of information available by attendance and participation in a planned discussion.”³⁶ Cooperation was certainly not limited to attendance in “planned discussion.” Trade journals repeatedly published articles (often written by mill owners) giving such advice. *Textile Industries* even printed a special edition devoted to “modern production methods”—featuring over one hundred “short, to-the-point articles which emphasize what mills are doing to: 1) increase production, 2) lower operating costs, 3)

³⁵ Anon., “Slashing and Weaving Practices Described at Georgia Forum,” *Cotton* 110 (November, 1946): 66.

³⁶ Anon., “Georgia Mill Men Discuss Carding and Spinning,” *Cotton* 110 (April, 1946): 72.

improve quality, 4) utilize manpower more efficiently, 5) reduce and control waste, and 6) secure improved operating conditions.”³⁷

A favorite piece of information to share was time study data. Detested by workers, time study engineers developed step-by-step methods to maximize the efficiency of carrying out of each task in the mill. Such standards sped up the pace of work and severely restricted the motions of operatives to highly repetitive tasks. Managements claimed that time studies provided them with objective information about how long a task should take to complete and directed supervisors to shadow mill hands with stopwatches to make sure they were toiling as hard as the data indicated they should be. A “typical time study,” according to the President of Forstmann Woolen, a “time study leader,” could cut the duration of a process by “14.2 percent.”³⁸ One expert advised that managers should be certain to use a stopwatch to record the movements of battery fillers, the women who made sure that the batteries of automatic looms remained stocked with bobbins. “Most battery fillers soon learn that they can save a lot of steps by keeping the batteries from one-half to two-thirds full,” he warned. To make sure the girls stayed on their feet, “the supervisor should watch” them closely.³⁹ “Another time study admirer,” a factory owner running a mill in the Belgian Congo, requested “three sets of tear sheets of the article on time study and job evaluation.”⁴⁰ Even without knowing of their use in Africa, however, most workers would have probably affirmed that time studies were suitable for a colonial setting. In a report about participants at a convention

³⁷ Anon., “A Special Number: Modern Production Methods,” *Textile Industries* 114 (February, 1950): 98-100.

³⁸ Rudolph Leppla, “Man-and-Machine Charts can Increase Production,” *Textile World* 98 (January, 1948): 108.

³⁹ Wilmer Westbrook, “Battery Fillers are Important People,” *Textile Industries* 114 (March, 1950): 175.

⁴⁰ Anon., “Another Time Study Admirer,” *Textile Industries* 112 (July, 1948): 119.

in Mississippi who showed “much interest” towards learning “methods time measurement,” the *Daily News Record* explained that “MTM classifies all motions an operator makes into a group of 15 classifications: every reach, every move, every turn and every other body move is catalogued for time value.”⁴¹

In addition to sharing time study data for the practical purpose of cutting costs in the industry, it seems that many mill men offered this information in order to demonstrate their skills as a master, as if to convey their manhood in terms of their capacity to dominate the women on their floors. One industrialist bragged that he “got” an astounding ninety-three percent efficiency on his spindles at a seventy-five peg point/hour performance level, far exceeding the average in the industry (the peg point system was a standardized method to determine production rates). Another manager wrote in to question his calculations. How could he maintain ninety-three percent efficiency and give his girls the accepted fatigue allowance of thirteen –percent? “She can only be away from the job 5% of the time,” he responded. As he saw it, the rest of the allowance comes “by working slower than the 75-point-hour level or by working above it and stopping for short intervals when she can.”⁴²

Another way to stretch out workers was to eliminate their lunch break. Contributing to the “Round Table” in *Textile World*, one owner recommended that his peers replace their mill’s cafeteria with a “lunch wagon” so that workers could eat while they remained at their workstations.⁴³ In order to “save time,” Bachmann-Uxbridge constructed “smoking pens” on the factory floor, far enough away from the machines to avoid a fire hazard, but close enough so that workers could keep an eye on them in case

⁴¹ Unknown, “Much Interest in the Discussion of MTM,” *Daily News Record*, March 19, 1951, 28.

⁴² Anon., “How Other Men Manage,” *Textile Industries* 114 (March, 1950): 157.

⁴³ Anon., “The Round Table,” *Textile World* 98 (September, 1948): 156.

the yarn broke. “Sneaking a quick drag on a cigarette in the ‘powder room,’” company officials explained, “much as it might contribute to employee morale, more often contributes to lost time in production.” As a “compromise solution,” Uxbridge allowed each employee “to use the pen” once every two hours.⁴⁴

In the first couple of years after the war, it was unusual for mills to launch an aggressive, frontal attack to turn back the rising status of their workers. Deering-Milliken, a New York City based worsted producer, which was in the process of rapidly relocating its factories to the South, proved to be an exception to this trend. During World War II, Milliken had been coerced by the National War Labor Board (NWLB) to sign union contracts in a few of its southern plants. In the case of its Gaffney, South Carolina, facility, Milliken’s refusal to deal with the Textile Workers Union of America provoked the United States Army to seize the struck facility. Shortly after the NWLB was dissolved, however, Milliken terminated its contracts and sparked some of the longest strikes in southern history. At the Gaffney plant, workers struck for an incredible twenty-two months before the TWUA cut off their grocery money. Mill hands in Athens, Georgia, stayed out for twenty months. And at the mill in Huntsville, Alabama, Milliken workers walked the picket line for over a year. In each case, Milliken successfully rid its plants of the TWUA. Milliken could be unusually aggressive between 1946 and 1948 because, for one reason, it was a large chain composed of several mills and could easily shift production from a closed mill to one that was operating. For the most part, other mills did not demonstrate the same level of ruthlessness until a recession in late 1948 finally brought the wartime boom to an end. When the economy was still roaring, mills did not need to risk provoking their workers, many of whom could find a job elsewhere,

⁴⁴ Anon., “Smoking Area in Mill Saves Time,” *Textile Industries* 114 (February, 1950): 165.

especially in the North. And as the Milliken strikers demonstrated, operatives in the South also found conditions conducive for militancy.⁴⁵

Hence, in the early postwar period, mill men North and South looked first to more subtle “human relations” tactics to begin the process of bringing their workers back under control. In the South, even though only twenty percent of mill hands belonged to unions in 1946, managers appreciated the potential of human relations wizardry because they had to deal with a massive CIO financed effort to organize their region—a campaign dubbed by unsympathetic media as “Operation Dixie.” In New England, the situation appeared even worse. Although wages had risen more slowly in the North than in the South and the sectional wage differential had almost collapsed, the TWUA was now calling for cost of living adjustments—automatic yearly increases in pay to match the rate of inflation.⁴⁶ Executives across the country knew that when the postwar boom was over, they would all be in trouble if the growth of labor’s power was not stanchd. As one industry insider from New England commented, “Labor itself has become a large problem, demanding *concentrated* consideration of the industry.”⁴⁷

Unfortunately for mill men everywhere, the “labor problem” meant more than just a rising wage bill and the expansion of unionization. There was widespread concern among managers that worker “attitudes” had degenerated since the beginning of the war. As Gardiner put it, in an article titled “Industrial Relations Need Reconversion Too,” “The past several years of man-power shortages have induced some worker attitudes which are not conducive to high productivity. Higher hourly wages rates now accentuate

⁴⁵ Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For?*, 71-75.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 2, 15-19.

⁴⁷ Anon, “The New England Mill Situation,” *Cotton* (February, 1946): 121.

the need to get worker productivity and attitudes ‘back on the beam.’”⁴⁸ For Albert Russell, the president of a knitting company, the “attitude of labor” was downright exasperating. Reflecting on his workers’ disinclination to give what he defined as a “good day’s work” and take what he defined as a “good day’s pay,” Russell could only muster an exclamation: “So this is it!!!—The Postwar Era is Here.”⁴⁹ One mill man even wrote to the editors of *Textile World*, a journal published by the vociferously antiunion McGraw Hill,⁵⁰ asking them to add a new monthly feature called “Labor Lorn” to address the “irresponsible attitude of labor.”⁵¹

Yet the widespread embrace of human relations strategies was not simply a matter of making workers more tractable in the here and now. Textile executives, like other industrialists of the era, could see the storm clouds of recession looming on the horizon. Study after study had warned that the sellers’ market would come to pass. In general, most observers anticipated that business conditions would eventually return to normal. Like the labor-saving machines they had on backorder, then, mill men invested in human and public relations to have their houses in order for when the recession finally hit.⁵²

To cope with the “poor” attitudes of their employees, for the time being mill men strategized to find ways to train “first-line” supervisors to keep laborers content until the recession would afford them the chance to reinstitute “industrial discipline.”⁵³ “Training

⁴⁸ Glenn Gardiner, “Industrial Relations Need Reconversion Too,” *Cotton* 110 (April, 1946): 66-67.

⁴⁹ Albert Russell, “So This Is It—The Postwar Era is Here,” *Cotton* 110 (February, 1946): 163.

⁵⁰ The President of McGraw Hill often added cardboard inserts that featured his personal editorials into his publication. In the following example, he complained that the notoriously antiunion Taft-Hartley Act was not sufficiently antilabor: “NOTE: Paste this editorial in your hat. The Taft-Hartley Act fails to protect the public in many major particulars: Featherbedding, the art of getting paid for doing nothing, is left largely intact” *Textile World* 98 (January, 1948): 101.

⁵¹ Anon., “The Round Table,” *Textile World* 98 (January, 1948): 154.

⁵² James Olson, “Is your Company Prepared for Rough Weather?” *Harvard Business Review* 25 (September 1, 1947): 595-608.

⁵³ Anon., “Union versus Public Security,” *Cotton* 110 (February, 1946): 93.

Tomorrow's Textile Supervisors," announced a mill superintendent in *Cotton*, was essential because "Today's industry needs and is seeking a larger measure of goodwill and loyalty from its employees." The Textile industry "must modernize its supervisory staff," he warned. "Stockholders deserve the right to have capable supervisors" and "efficient production and favorable operating conditions depend" on it.⁵⁴ Because "discipline has been relaxed during the war years," one human relations expert explained to executives, "your overseers and foremen are the ones upon whom you must primarily depend for accomplishing [an] improvement in worker attitude...The supervisor is the one who has most to do with keeping the men sweet."⁵⁵ One way to keep workers "sweet," according to an owner of a northern plant who shared his methods, was to have supervisors "listen sympathetically" to an aggrieved operative. Then, once supervisors understood the complaint, they should not attempt to resolve it, but "ask leading questions which gradually move his thinking into the opposing point of view."⁵⁶ In a recurring feature of *Textile Industries*, a writer with the alias of "Old Timer" constantly encouraged owners to have their foremen study "psychology" and even become fluent in "psychological terms." In the past, according to "Old Timer," the primary role of supervisors was to make sure the machines were working properly. But today, "the foreman's paramount job is working people," not machines.⁵⁷

Good supervision would be especially critical if mill men hoped to take initial steps to replace equipment and modify workloads before a downturn in the national economy gave them the leverage to bulldoze previous shop floor patterns. To "reduce

⁵⁴ Anon., "Training Tomorrow's Textile Supervisors by a Mill Superintendent," *Cotton* 110 (November, 1946): 52, 148.

⁵⁵ Glenn Gardiner, "Pointers for Supervisors," *Textile World* 98 (September 1948): 158.

⁵⁶ Samuel Miller, "How to Handle Grievances," *Cotton* 110 (July, 1946): 75.

⁵⁷ Anon., "An Old Timer Says—Foremanship & Psychology," *Textile Industries* 112 (May, 1948): 149.

worker resistance to change,” Glenn Gardiner recommended that supervisors “announce it personally, if possible.” “Coldly posting a notice without giving the worker an opportunity to have his say and state his side of the case ahead of time is likely to make it all the more difficult to sell him the idea.” To make the transition smoother, Gardiner stressed that foremen should give a worker the opportunity to vent his frustration. If he can “get it off his chest,” it would be far less likely that he would “create an explosion.” When overseers found it necessary to have a worker perform an extra or unusual task, Gardiner advised, they should “put [their] order in the form of a question” to take the edge off of the request.⁵⁸

Not every mill man agreed that so many resources were needed to change the attitudes of workers. Robert Mack, in an article titled “Top Management’s Responsibility in Human Relations,” exclaimed that “The solution is so simple that most people overlook it...Top management in the South can regain the confidence of its people without going to any expense.” Mill workers were simple folk who did not require trained psychologists for supervisors, much less fatter paychecks or more say over the conditions of their work. “What they want today is friendliness, a cheery smile....They don’t care to get up on your level; they feel that would be too high for them.” Owners just needed to take a few minutes to “Go around to the machines and see the fellow who runs them. Let him know that he is doing a pretty good job. Ask him about his kids (he usually has some): find out if he lives in the village and if he has a garden. He may have a prize

⁵⁸ Glenn Gardiner, “Pointers for Supervisors,” *Textile World* 98 (September 1948): 158.

tomato that he'd like to tell you about. Talk about these little things that are dear to his heart. The next time he'll give you a big grin and he'll be a better worker for you."⁵⁹

According to most industry strategists, however, obtaining the compliance of workers would require more than asking about their prize tomatoes. On the eve of the recession, in October 1948, an assistant editor of *Textile World* enthusiastically relayed to the textile community how the nonunion Burlington Industries, one of the largest complexes in the South, used moving picture technology to pull the trick. In "Fabric of Our Lives," an "attitude-building-movie," "each of Burlington's 30,000 workers is shown that he has an important stake in the profitable operation of the plant, regardless of which of the widely varied jobs he fills." Questionnaires that employees were made to fill out at the end of the showings, the editor reported with delight, revealed "that the film is doing its job as well as or better than expected." Ninety-eight percent of respondents claimed they "enjoyed the movie a lot" and two percent "a little." To the question, "Did seeing the movie make you feel your job is more important to the company?," eighty-five percent answered "a lot," thirteen percent "a little," and only two percent "no." Even better, the "typical employee comment" included statements such as, "I am more obligated to try and do my job at the best of my ability...I think the film should help us to do a better job, also to appreciate the importance and worth of our job."⁶⁰ Despite their enormous commitment to crafting and honing human relations techniques, however, mill men found

⁵⁹ Robert Mack, "Top Management's Responsibilities in Human Relations," *Cotton* 110 (February, 1946): 99.

⁶⁰ William Newell, "Burlington Mills' Film Stresses Worker Importance," *Textile World* 98 (October, 1948): 103.

that when the economy was strong, the best—if not the only—way to keep their hands “sweet” was to enrich their pay checks.⁶¹

In late 1948, the long anticipated recession finally hit the United States economy. For many mass producing sectors, according to Howell Harris, it turned out to be “shallower and briefer than had been expected.”⁶² The same could not be said for the textile industry, where the “crash was just as severe as analysts feared it would be.” By the middle of 1949, relates William Hartford, one out of every five mill hands was out of work and many of the rest could only secure part-time employment. In New England, “the situation was especially bleak,” as twenty-six percent of the workers in Lawrence, the woolen producing capital of the world, and almost half of the hands in New Bedford, the center of northern cotton production, were “walking the streets.” In the middle of the crisis, Emil Rieve, the president of the TWUA, called Labor Day of 1949 “perhaps the gloomiest in our union’s history.”⁶³

Mill men, for their part, must have been disappointed that the sellers’ market was coming to an end. Yet the TWUA’s observation that “The employers look back wistfully to the lush days of 1946-48, when goods were sold before they were made, prices soared without restraint and average profits exceeded 30% on net worth” was far overdrawn.⁶⁴ Executives, as noted, had been anticipating the recession. They had been ordering labor saving equipment, “modernizing” their supervisors, and disseminating propaganda to erode the ideological pillars of the New Deal. According to trade journals, in fact, in light of the “attitude problems” of their workforce, it seems that many employers North

⁶¹ Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For?*, 48-55.

⁶² Harris, *The Right to Manage*, 131.

⁶³ William Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility? Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 116, 207.

⁶⁴ Anon., “Our Changing Industry,” *Textile Labor*, June 4, 1949, 4.

and South welcomed the downturn in business. What was a crisis for workers turned out to be an opportunity for mill men to restructure production and reestablish unilateral control in the work place. “In the textile sector of employee-relations,” a northern owner commented in December, 1948, “recent develops are enlightening.” “Many of the leaders of industry-wide and local unions have been undergoing an enforced education in business practices and industrial economy...Managements have found it feasible to introduce efficiency measures which they planned long ago but held back because they felt their help might rebel.” Rising unemployment, he concluded, had “stabilized” the “labor supply,” undermining the capacity of mill hands to find work elsewhere if they were mistreated at the textile factory.⁶⁵ Commenting on the situation in the South, the editor of *Textile Industries* admitted that when the recession first hit, mill men became “provoked at each other and unhappy about the whole thing.” But being “provoked at each other” was not the way to survive in a buyers’ market. They needed to redirect their ire towards a common foe—their workers. “Then we began to do what we should have done long ago. We looked around in our own mills. We hadn’t kept our machinery in good shape...We found job loads too low.”⁶⁶

The recession had given mill men the opportunity they were looking for to put the “stepchildren of American industry” back in their place. But they could not do it by themselves. Government officials at every level, researchers, academics, engineers, and even the leaders of the TWUA would help them force that “hard and bitter pill” down the throats of the nation’s textile workers.

⁶⁵ Anon., “Knitting Section,” *Textile Industries* 112 (December, 1948): 177.

⁶⁶ Anon., “It Couldn’t Happen To Us—But It Did,” *Textile Industries* 114 (January, 1950), 52.

CHAPTER 2: “A HARD AND BITTER PILL TO SWALLOW”

On the night before Valentine’s Day in 1951, there was little love in the chilled air of tiny Rockville, Connecticut. Just four days earlier, 1500 workers went on strike at the Hockanum Woolen Mill, a unit of the M.T. Stevens & Sons company, itself a unit of J.P. Stevens, one of the fastest growing textile firms in the world. And on this night, no less a figure than John P. Stevens Jr. himself had come down to Rockville from his office high in the Empire State Building to explain why his company was about to close down forever what was by far the community’s largest employer.¹

Hockanum was losing money, Stevens announced, and “there is a limit to how long it can go on without pulling its weight.” Though the company had not spent a dime to modernize the aged plant since it purchased it in 1946, the way Stevens saw it, the mill was inefficient because “a man does not produce nearly as much, we believe as he might, and as he could without any undue effort.” As such, Stevens announced that he could only continue to operate at Hockanum if the striking workers agreed to eliminate clauses in their union contract that limited the company’s authority to move them around the shop floor and unilaterally increase their workloads. Otherwise, John Stevens made clear, he would have to shut down the plant and rebuild in the South, “where we are wanted.”

This was not the first time the workers at Hockanum had heard this threat. A few days before the strike, John’s brother Abbott, the President of M.T. Stevens, sent an open

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the following account is based on reports, advertisements, and letters to the editor in *The Rockville Journal*, February 6, February 13, February 20, February 27, March 6, March 13, April 4, May 2, and July 12, 1951.

letter to every employee in his Rockville plant declaring in no uncertain terms, “the right on the part of the Company to arrange job assignments is absolutely essential to the continued operation of the Hockanum plants.” Driving home his warning with underlined text, Stevens added, “No matter how completely a strike here might shut these mills down and no matter how long such a strike might last, we cannot and will not operate these plants” without such a provision. If the workers decided to undertake such a futile strike, it would only bring them “trouble and hardship and suffering, debt and regret and bitterness for you and your family and this whole community.” In case a union member still had not grasped his point, Stevens tagged on a postscript to his missive: “the future of the Hockanum Plants is now in your hands.” Workers here had no reason to question the seriousness of the ultimatum. Just a few weeks earlier Stevens had shut down a mill in Massachusetts for exactly the same reason. Indeed, a union official in Rockville admitted it was “a good threat to hold over our heads” and that he “wouldn’t take it lightly.”² Across New England, hundreds of rusting textile mills served as ominous reminders that once capital moved south, there was little incentive for other corporations to modernize the antiquated buildings (Hockanum itself was built in the 1800s) when they could start fresh in Dixie.³

Eight days after John Stevens had graced Rockville with his presence, the superintendent of Hockanum ran an advertisement in the local paper, offering a final warning to the strikers. Titled “Whether or Not Stevens Mills Ever Reopen Must be Decided,” in bold typeface the ad declared: “**You lose everything by staying out and we**

² Anon., “Endeavor to Halt Spread of Woolen Worsted Closings,” *Daily News Record*, February 19, 1951, 20.

³ William Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility: Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 3.

assure you nothing can be gained by doing so. In fact further delay will bring about the closing of the mills in Rockville.” Though the mill and local union had agreed on wages and benefits, the issue still holding things up was the work assignment clause. On this decision, which “had been made at the highest level,” Stevens just could not budge. Perhaps fatigued after rounds of negotiating on the contractual language regarding the work clause, the superintendent snapped out a non-sequitur: “What is the story on the work load clause? It is this! The mills are your means of livelihood.” At a union meeting the night after the superintendent published his warning, a local officer read it out loud and then asked the crowd of eight hundred if there was a motion to have a vote to go back to work. None was made, and a month later, “with great regret,” Stevens announced it was liquidating Hockanum.

Unfortunately for workers everywhere, the closing of the mills at Rockville and Pentucket illustrated more than just the legendary penchant of the Stevens’ family to attack unions (thirty years later, the cruel and illegal antiunion tactics of a Stevens’ plant in North Carolina inspired the movie *Norma Rae*).⁴ Quite the contrary: the actions of John Stevens exemplified the increased willingness and capacity of mill men to discipline their workers in the wake of the 1948 recession, when executives across the country began to dispense with the soft human relations tactics that had failed to adjust the “irresponsible attitudes” of their workers.

At first, as the postwar reports advised, management hesitated to cut wages and sought instead to squeeze employees by increasing workloads. In the TWUA’s periodical, *Textile Labor*, the union leadership informed members that while a couple of

⁴ Timothy Minchin, “Don’t Sleep With Stevens!”: *The J.P. Stevens Campaign and the Struggle to Organize the South, 1963-80* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005), 105, 109.

small, outlier mills in the South had cut wages in early 1949, “there are signs that this won’t be the policy of the industry as a whole.” Instead, they warned, “a much more likely issue will be workloads...Northern bosses claim they’re too low, and blame the union for it. Southern bosses aren’t satisfied either, though Yankee owners claim Dixie is ‘paradise.’” In the cotton mill center of New Bedford, Massachusetts, prior to 1948 there were only two instances in which management sought to change workloads. During the next two years, there were fifty such incidents. Meanwhile, in the woolen industry, between 1950 and 1952, fifty separate mills demanded that the union agree to reopen the workload clauses in their contracts. The slump in business that started with the 1948 recession meant that not only would workers be more desperate for jobs, but companies could take strikes or close down in preparation of relocating without missing an opportunity to produce for a hot market.

Capital flight, as scholars have shown, has been the “trump card” for employers in their struggles against labor. When confronted by empowered workers determined to challenge the subjection of their social existence to the logic of capital accumulation, capitalists have been able to simply relocate their factories to places where workers were not (yet) willing or able to resist.⁵ To the dread of the business community, however, in the early postwar era many wage earners seemed eager to reorganize the economy according to a different logic—one that did not privilege the “right” of management to manage for the sake of engrossing the power and wealth of the propertied.⁶ When this challenge to “free enterprise” was manifested by national labor leaders, like Walter

⁵ The “trump card” analogy comes from Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA’s Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 9.

⁶ Howell Harris, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 95.

Reuther, in their calls for a corporatist “industrial democracy,” it could be co-opted, cordoned off to the realm of a policy debate between representatives of competing “interest groups,” and sapped of its radical energy.⁷ Much more dangerous, as textile executives like John Stevens would attest, was the way this challenge appeared on the shop floor, when workers like those at Hockanum absolutely refused to submit to the stretch-out.

In the face of such impetuosity, capitalists did not hesitate to play their “trump card,” escaping through a safety valve that in the mid-twentieth century released into Dixie—where for a number of reasons, it was much harder for workers to resist their domination. Between 1947 and 1957, northern textile owners permanently laid off over fifty percent of their employees, twenty-eight thousand in Lawrence, Massachusetts, alone just between 1950 and 1952.⁸ After another recession hit the industry in 1951, of the sixty-seven plants that were liquidated, only three of them were located in the South. According to one mill man, quoted in a 1952 *Wall Street Journal* article about the massive shift south, “only a darned fool would stay in New England” where labor was powerful. And even if there were a couple fools left, few financiers would fund them to operate in the North.⁹ Banks refused to grant loans and, on more than one occasion, stockholders threatened to rebel unless a northern executive obeyed the logic of accumulation and found workers who would let management manage.¹⁰

⁷ Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 98-140; Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London: Verso, 1986), 263-64.

⁸ Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility?* 151.

⁹ Richard Cole, “Wool-Mill Trek :Northern Factories Hit Southward Trail Under Lure of Lower Costs,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 1952, 1.

¹⁰ Anon., “American Woolen Stockholders Call for Investigation,” *Daily News Record*, March 28, 1951, 1, 4.

Historians of the textile industry have certainly recognized that the impetus for capital flight came from the successful efforts of northern workers to have some say over the conditions of their work. Nevertheless, they subsume this fact within a larger narrative that privileges competition between firms across geographic regions so that it comes across as if northern owners *lost* a contest to produce textiles at the lowest cost, and participating as they did in a “competitive” industry, had little choice but to close up shop.¹¹ It is more appropriate to situate the relocation of the textile industry within the historical framework established in chapter one—to see it as just a particularly dramatic example of an industry-wide movement to reinstitute shop floor discipline—a precondition for performing successfully in a buyers’ market. Like John Stevens, mill men—with their safety valve wide open—could insist on a change and tell their workers to “take it or leave it.”¹²

There were many losers in the deindustrialization of New England, but factory owners were not among them. Northern based companies like J.P. Stevens, Deering-Milliken, and Bachmann Uxbridge had hit on a formula that made them leaders in the industry.¹³ It entailed intensifying the exploitation of workers by regaining unilateral

¹¹ “A desire to *defend* the industry’s northern branches from *destructive* southern competition had always been an important motive of the TWUA’s organizing work (my emphasis)” Clete Daniel, *Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretative History of Textile Unionism in the United States* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 157; “The paramount importance of raising southern wages to *protect* New England was keenly felt by Rieve (my emphasis)” Timothy Minchin, *What do We Need a Union for?*, 102. Neither Daniel nor Minchin take pains to distinguish the interests between northern owners and workers, which this thesis argues were incompatible. To frame the narrative so that it seems that the “industry” itself needed protection is to collapse the position of mill hands and their bosses. Yet when the boat started sinking, only the captains of industry had life jackets—and in fact, the captains may have been poking holes in the keel. Even William Hartford, who thoroughly documents how northern owners benefitted from deindustrialization, wonders why “too few people shared [the] insight that the union was part of the solution rather than the source of the problem.” Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility?*, 127.

¹² Clipping from *American Textile Reporter*, May 14, 1953, Mss. 129A, Box 21, Woolen and Worsted Conference 1947, 1949-1955 folder, Textile Workers Union of America Records (TWUA Rcds.), State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives, Madison, Wisconsin (SHSW).

¹³ Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility?*, 91-92.

control on the shop floor, introducing new equipment, and incorporating flexible production practices. Yet this recipe for profit, like fresh okra, could only be cooked up in the South. For one reason, as numerous historians have shown, southern officials—from state legislators to United States Senators to small town mayors—went out of their way to guarantee that southern workers would remain ripe for “super-exploitation.”¹⁴

Furthermore, new machinery, which was an absolutely essential component to both squeeze workers and to participate flexibly in the market, could be installed more easily in the South. Of course, these two perks were interrelated. Labor cutting machines, even when they did not deskill a job, made workers more desperate and docile, which meant management could more easily assign ad hoc tasks and make ad hoc schedules to play the market. Yet updated technology was also needed to spin new fibers, blend fibers in new combinations, and to take advantage of government developed advances in fabric quality.¹⁵ Hence, to stay in the game, firms needed to purchase new equipment (which was an easy feat considering their wartime windfall profits), and the only logical place to install it was the South, where workers were far less able to resist the stretch-out/speedup/squeeze.

As for the firms that were not shifting investments to Dixie, only a very few acted sincerely to save the New England industry. Most northern owners, *especially* those who vociferously complained to their workers about “southern competition,” planned to benefit tremendously from deindustrialization. The story of American Woolen offers a

¹⁴ Phillip Wood, *Southern Capitalism: The Political Economy of North Carolina, 1880-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 10-16; James Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 96-122. According to Ernest Mandel, “super-exploitation,” or the extraction of above average rates of surplus value, drives capital development in the twentieth century. As such, elites of undercapitalized areas (like the US South) must repress their labor force to guarantee “surplus-profits” in order to attract investment. Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1987), 27, 75-104.

¹⁵ See chapter three.

case in point. Owners of over twenty percent of the nation's woolen looms in the late 1940s, it had for years set the collective bargaining pattern for woolen workers across the country. As such, the TWUA had a very high stake in keeping it solvent. When southward moving antiunion firms like J.P. Stevens initiated their "modernization" campaigns, union leaders practically begged American Woolen to keep up.¹⁶ But to no avail. "Their basic failing," decried the editor of *Textile Labor*, "has been unwillingness to re-invest part of their wartime profits in plant modernization." "Unlike the whalers of a century back," he lamented, mill owners were not even trying to save their industry. Yet not even pleas to their New England pride would stir American Woolen and others to "help themselves."¹⁷ The fact was, they were not "failing" at all.

Though American Woolen did construct a state-of-the-art plant in Raleigh, for the most part it was not intent on following the likes of Stevens to Dixie. Instead, it benefitted from the way capital flight disempowered labor generally, and it took advantage of the situation to cash out—running its mills into the ground while allocating enormous chunks of revenue to dividend payouts. After the United States invaded Korea and the Quartermaster once again came calling, it made sense for the company to keep its looms humming, and to make sure of it, executives even granted workers a nice raise in 1951 to keep them from going on strike. Even during the war, however, American Woolen officials continued to prepare their company for a merger, going so far as to divert funds from its styling and research departments, completely bucking the trend set by the leading firms of the day.¹⁸

¹⁶ Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility?*, 70-71, 121, 132, 153-156.

¹⁷ Anon., "The Bosses: Fat with Profits, They Yammer Enterprise but Don't Show Any," *Textile Labor*, September 3, 1949, 4.

¹⁸ Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility?*, 153.

When it became apparent that Korea would not lead to World War III,¹⁹ before cashing out American Woolen and other northern entities took the opportunity to humiliate their workforce, demanding and receiving substantial concessions—including wage give backs. At the same time Francis White, the President of American Woolen, was fattening up his company’s treasury to catch the eye of corporate raiders, he was placing the blame for deindustrialization on unions and misleading workers into believing that they might keep their jobs if they would just submit to management. “If any mills were to stay,” he announced at a speech in Lawrence, “workers would have to work harder and the union would have to ‘stop restricting’ the use of new machinery.” “No one loves New England and the New England people more than I do,” White told Chamber of Commerce members in Massachusetts. “I would regret greatly taking any action that would cause loss of employment or hardship...But you must realize that no mill and no legitimate business can provide employment unless it makes a profit by doing so.” “Hard work is the only formula for success,” he instructed his employees. “No one gets anything for nothing.”²⁰

After squeezing every cent he could from his workers and aged machinery, by 1954, White had accumulated nineteen million dollars in cash reserves, enough to attract the attention of “various financial vultures.”²¹ It was time to call it quits. When American Woolen started liquidating its plants, a committee of abased workers met with

¹⁹ As one insider remarked, somewhat guiltily, “it is sad commentary... that good news from Korea should mean bad news to business, and vice versa.” Marshall Jacobson, “Meyer Kestenbaum, President of Hart, Schaffner, and Marx,” *Daily News Record*, March 27, 1951, 1, 7. “The GI’s uniform which lasts six or seven months in training, may last only four hours in actual combat,” another observer explained. Anon., “Wool Prices High and Look to Remain that Way,” *Daily News Record*, February 6, 1951, 4.

²⁰ Address by Mr. Francis W. White, President of the American Woolen Company, *Bulletin of the National Association of Wool Manufacturers Volume LXXXI: Activities of the National Association of Wool Manufactures for 1951* (Wakefield, Mass: The Murray Printing Company, 1952), Section 3, 14-17.

²¹ Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility?*, 156.

mill representatives and offered “to make further monetary sacrifices and show greater cooperation.” But even though workers had finally aired what owners would call an appropriate attitude, the golden parachutes had already been pulled and the company stated that “even if the workers in Lawrence would be willing to work for nothing, the decision to close would not be changed.”²²

Although American Woolen was no longer considered an industry leader, in a perverse way it still set the trend for New England firms. Several executives pulled the same trick as Francis White, “milking” their workers and factories dry to accumulate liquid reserves, which increased the value of their stocks. Indeed, for the northern companies that could not keep up with Stevens, deindustrialization proved to be a godsend. As long as there was expansion in the industry, i.e. as long as capital could proceed to flee the North, the value of their old equipment stayed somewhat high as machine shops bid on it to recycle the frames, parts, and the metal itself.²³ Owners betrayed their true feelings about “southern competition” when the TWUA attempted in 1949 to gather their support for a bill to raise the federal minimum wage, which would only impact textile manufacturers in the South. To the union’s apparent disbelief at the “reluctance of employers to even help themselves,” only one mill man agreed to sign on.²⁴ Responding to suggestions that the government should slow down the deindustrialization of the North by limiting the construction of new textile mills, Francis White called such remarks “just conversation” and added that “the time for such

²² Chupka to Officers, August 13, 1954, Mss. 129A, Box 21, Woolen and Worsted Conference 1947, 1949-1955 folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

²³ Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility?*, 150.

²⁴ Anon., “The Bosses: Fat with Profits, They Yammer Enterprise but Don’t Show Any,” *Textile Labor*, September 3, 1949, 4.

nonsense is fast running out.”²⁵ If the safety valve were closed, northern workers would regain power, reverse the trend of their degradation, and in the process, preclude the accumulation of capital.

Like other strategies to erode the leverage of mill hands in the postwar era, capital flight was a cooperative effort. One owner from a “large industrial city” whose plant was recently organized by the TWUA wrote to the editors of *The American Wool and Cotton Reporter*—who held stock in several mills—asking for advice on how to escape to the South with impunity. Though he had “recently secured a plant in a rural district” where the “labor supply” was “more adequate,” he just knew “that the union will undoubtedly attempt to charge us with a runaway shop,” which in 1950 the National Labor Relations Board still considered to be an unfair labor practice. Though his attorney had explained to him that “most successful plant removals have been accomplished so thoughtfully that there were no charges filed or they were dismissed before reaching the N.L.R.B.,” the owner still needed practical advice on how to accomplish the feat. “It has occurred to me that if any man in the industry would be familiar with some of the facts involved, in a successful removal,” he told the editors, “it would be yourself...and with further possibility that you might be able to refer me to others who have accomplished successfully what I am attempting to do.”

The editors were happy to oblige, and they published their advice so that others may too have the information. “We are proud that you have referred the matter to us,” they replied. “Why don’t you get in touch with Roger Milliken. He is a young fellow, the

²⁵ Address by Mr. Francis W. White, *Bulletin of the National Association of Wool Manufacturers*, Section 3, 19.

head of the whole business, really a fabulous man. Get the whole story from him, or have your lawyer get in touch with his lawyer.”

In their Madison Woolen Mills in Madison, Maine—in which we were a stockholder—they ran into a bad labor situation. They were running, as we remember it, eight looms to a weaver. They decided that in order to keep the mill running they must run ten looms to the weaver. When the job was put up to the weavers—it was an organized mill—they all went out on strike. So Milliken shut down the Madison plant....But, that doesn't mean that Milliken didn't continue to make woolen goods...Milliken controlled the big Gaffney cotton mill at Gaffney, South Carolina, and it was during the boom years, with Gaffney organized, that Milliken shut it down altogether and kept it shut down for about a year, until he licked the everlasting daylights out of the union... We are sure that Milliken liquidated Dallas [mill in Huntsville, Alabama] to get rid of the g-d union, to give them a hell of a licking, to show them that he would do the same in all of his mills—if he has to.

“You can find plenty of precedents,” they assured their readers.²⁶

For their part, southern owners appreciated the way capital flight from the North helped them to discipline their own workers. For one reason, because eighty percent of TWUA members worked in the North, the decline of the northern industry meant the decay of the union itself. While the TWUA had little success in winning contracts at southern plants, its very existence impeded mill men from taking the upmost advantage of the new market conditions. A significant amount of evidence suggests that southern executives increased wages and improved working conditions in order to blunt organizing campaigns in Dixie.²⁷ For example, in 1950 an organizer in Cedartown, Georgia, reported that on the eve of a certification election, the Goodyear plant (which spun tire cord) was letting the women in its spinning department “ride the gravy train!!” “It is our belief,” he added, “that the Company will have to tighten the work assignments

²⁶ Exhibit No. 1, *The American Wool and Cotton Reporter* LXIV, No 12, March 23, 1950, Senate Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations, *Labor-Management Relations in the Southern Textile Industry: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Labor-Management Relations*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., Part 2, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 90A.

²⁷ Minchin, *What Do We Need A Union For?*, 49-55.

of this department if they are to compete” for orders.²⁸ The decline of the TWUA drastically weakened the only countervailing force to the power of mill men in the South. Financially and morally weakened after a 1951 “general strike,” the union could no longer push wages in the region or provide much help to the remaining locals, whose situation grew more precarious every day. After granting wage increases in 1946, 48, 50, and 51, southern owners refused to give another raise until 1955 and throughout the decade snuffed out almost every local in Dixie.²⁹

Above all, southern mill men were happy to see the deindustrialization of the North because of the lessons it conveyed to their own workers and communities. The sentiment was best encapsulated by an executive writing in *Textile Industries*. “People in all walks of life—lawyers, doctors, school teachers, and even a few textile workers—have learned at long last that capital goes where it is wanted.” “What happened in New England,” he went on, “can happen in Georgia, Alabama, and the Carolinas.” The message was clear: “It remains a fact that very few people are going to invest unless they have some reasonable expectation of getting it back...[and] to earn interest.” What would it take for investors to earn interest? How could workers, boosters, and managements ensure that the factory continued to be a site for the transformation of money into capital? “It is a hard and bitter pill to swallow,” the executive concluded, but “low productivity per man hour” was obstructing the way capitalists were letting their money work for them.³⁰ For the sake of industrialization in the South, workers would need to take the squeeze.

²⁸ Organizing Report: Pedigo to Rieve, January 19, 1950, 2A, Box 6, Northwest Joint Board folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

²⁹ Minchin, *What do We Need a Union For?*, 157-160, 111-112, 141-144.

³⁰ Anon., “An Executive Views the News in Textiles,” *Textile Industries* 114, (July, 1950): 73.

Though most historians have long ago abandoned the canard that southerners were docile workers sincerely devoted to pleasing their paternalistic bosses, it bears repeating that resistance to the postwar speedup was not endemic to the North.³¹ In the midst of the 1949 recession, nonunion doffers in McColl, South Carolina, responded to the stretch-out by wildcatting and 460 TWUA members walked out of their Dalton, Georgia, yarn mill instead of “letting their employer become both judge and jury in making workload changes.”³² Unionized workers at the Egan Cotton Mill south of Atlanta closed the plant in 1950 due to a workload increase, even after management offered to increase wages by twenty percent.³³ Mill hands in Aragon, Georgia, wildcatted in 1950 in response to increased workloads, shutting the plant down for a week.³⁴ In 1951, “protesting the workload,” these same workers wildcatted again.³⁵ The following year, right on schedule, they walked out again without authorization when the company increased workloads.³⁶

A few miles down the road from Aragon, at the Cedartown, Georgia, worsted plant owned by Massachusetts based Bachmann-Uxbridge, operatives struck for almost a year—the longest any local stayed out in 1951— because of the company’s intransigence over “working conditions” and “workload” policies.³⁷ Historian Timothy Minchin misinterprets the Cedartown strike, calling it the result of the TWUA leadership’s decision “to strike as many plants as possible” to raise southern wages in the 1951

³¹ For an overview of the historiography, see *Timothy Minchin, What do We Need a Union For?* 228 (footnote #3).

³² Anon., “That ‘Honeymoon’ is Just Green Cheese to Dixie Workers,” *Textile Labor*, April 2, 1949; Anon., “Untitled,” *Textile Labor*, August 6, 1949.

³³ Organizing Report, October 10, 1950, 2A, Box 6, Northwest Joint Board folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

³⁴ Organizing Report: Pedigo to Rieve, January 19, 1950, 2A, Box 6, Northwest Joint Board folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

³⁵ Mark Waits, “Aragon Workers Quit Jobs at Midnight,” *Cedartown Standard*, July 31, 1951.

³⁶ O’Shea to Rieve, February 2, 1952, 2A, Box 18, NW GA O’Shea folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

³⁷ Mark Waits, “Strike Begins at Cedartown Textiles,” *Cedartown Standard*, February 22, 1951.

general strike.³⁸ To the contrary, the Cedartown strike was a local response to the industry-wide stretch-out. Indeed, as the only unionized woolen plant in the South, workers here took advantage of the TWUA's desperation to keep it alive, and acted much more radically to defend their shop floor rights than even most of their northern brethren. Knowing that the TWUA would cover their bail and court costs, they refused to obey injunctions that severely limited picketing and physically prevented scabs from entering the plant. Worker militancy in Cedartown was best explained by a striker who wrote to the local paper to defend the actions of her local: "Before we had a contract, if the boss didn't want you to work he would tell you, your job would not run that day, you could go home then as soon as you were out the door, he put someone he liked a little better on your job. There was nothing we could do. I ran a Foster Winder. One morning, Wiley Carter came and told me I would have to run 80 spindles instead of 40 which I had been running. For three weeks I ran those 80 spindles before I learned they had 2 winder hands on the 2nd shift. I was doing twice as much work as the two. But I didn't get any raise in pay."³⁹ Evidence suggests that these dramatic acts of worker militancy expressed only a fraction of the discontent felt by workers in the South toward the stretch-out. Field organizers repeatedly reported the existence of such animosity to union headquarters.

But if there was so much resentment brewing toward employers, then why did the TWUA fare so poorly in organizing southern workers? There is an extensive historiography dealing with this question. As noted in the Introduction, the most established interpretation points to the bitter antiunionism of southern officials and their

³⁸ Minchin, *What do We Need a Union For?*, 113.

³⁹ Pearl Spann, "Letter to the Editor," *Cedartown Standard*, May 7, 1951. Strikers would take the opportunity to repay Wiley Carter for such deeds, firebombing his house in the middle of the night. *Cedartown Standard*, June 29, 1951.

willingness to intimidate workers and even break the law to make their region conducive for industrial relocation. While these factors make it easy to understand the relative lack of overt union activism, the fact remains that many workers continually voted “no-union” on their secret ballots—away from the gaze of law enforcement and belligerent bosses. Timothy Minchin explains that operatives nevertheless voted against the union because mill men were willing to maintain union wage scales and working conditions to keep the TWUA at bay.⁴⁰ While this may have been true during the early days of Operation Dixie, this analysis does not shed light on why many workers refused to embrace the union even after the implementation of stretch-out/speedup/squeeze and after their wages failed to keep pace with inflation. In at least one case, even operatives who wildcatted to resist workload changes soundly rejected the union in a subsequent certification election.⁴¹

Very few historians have suggested that the TWUA was insufficiently radical to capture the aspirations of southern mill hands.⁴² To the contrary, when they have written about the incompatibility between the national union and the southern rank and file, most have placed the blame on the racial conservatism of the latter. There is certainly some truth to this argument. All but the most menial and poorly paid jobs in the southern textile industry were reserved for whites, and white mill hands had economic as well as psychological incentives to keep it that way. Hence, the CIO’s increasing commitment to

⁴⁰ Minchin, *What do We Need a Union For?*, 49-53.

⁴¹ A year after a “stretch-out...caused workers to attempt direct action” in the Blue Ridge town of Fries, Virginia, workers voted against the TWUA 664 to 292. Report on Washington Mills Company Election, September 4, 1953, 1A, Box 19, Staff Correspondence, Southern folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

⁴² A couple exceptions include Goldfield, “The Failure of Operation Dixie,” 181-182 and Nelson Lichtenstein, “From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era,” in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 140, 136. Lichtenstein suggests the appeals of Operation Dixie fell flat because they were based in business unionism and thus did not “articulate [southern workers’] specific class-oriented interests” which meant “workers found their consciousness shaped by the parochial interests of their union.”

racial equality could be seen as a legitimate threat to the privileges conferred by white skin. As labor historian Michelle Brattain concludes in her study of Northwest Georgia, “As textile workers labored to extend union influence in the 1950s, they also faced the unanticipated challenge of reconciling the politics of whiteness with the politics of the CIO-PAC...In the 1950s, the civil rights movement complicated white workers’ identification with the labor movement and reinvigorated the logic of their identification with southern elites.” But even Brattain stresses that before the issue of civil rights came to national prominence, the “struggle had been a relatively straightforward one between classes of whites.” Mill men in Georgia, like their counterparts elsewhere across the country, took advantage of the recession in late 1948 to implement “speed-ups, layoffs, and drastic reductions in the workweek.” The liberalism of the CIO was not a pressing concern for workers who did not look to the TWUA to rescue them from the squeeze.⁴³

It was the national leadership’s conciliatory position on workloads and its increasing willingness to acquiesce to the prerogatives of management that made the TWUA unsuitable as a vehicle to advance the interests of mill hands. In trying to slow down the deindustrialization of its northern base, union leaders moderated their position on shop floor rights—and this tactic reverberated southward, undermining the TWUA’s appeal to workers in Dixie and elsewhere. At precisely the same moment that textile workers most desired to take a militant stand to protect their bodies and minds against the stretch-out, their union postured itself to management as an “agent of industrial transition,” and promised to help owners restructure the industry in return for higher

⁴³ Michelle Brattain, *The Politics of Whiteness: Race, Workers, and Culture in the Modern South* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 197.

wages for the membership.⁴⁴ Like other hierarchical unions confronted by the business community's postwar campaign to retake control over the shop floor, the TWUA retreated in the face of capital's intransigence and doubled down on what Stanley Aronowitz calls the "narrowly defined 'economic' side of the bargaining."⁴⁵ Yet it would be technically incorrect to claim that the leaders of the TWUA "sold out," because as much as they would have liked to, mill men were not buying. In this regard, the non-oligopolistic structure of the textile industry did make a difference. It was easier for coal and auto owners to grant large wage concessions in return for the union acquiescence on management prerogatives because it was unlikely (at the time) that a competitor would enter the market and undersell them. Textile owners navigating a tempestuous buyers' market would not ask its picky consumers to pick up the tab on the extra "bread and butter" for its workers. And mill men cooperated with each other to ensure that they could take back the wartime gains of their operatives without giving up anything in return.

Even though textile owners were not willing to buy them off, the TWUA nevertheless helped to mold the rank and file to the rigors of a buyers' market. Paralleling the efforts of mill men to adjust the attitudes of workers, the union first tried to weaken resistance by persuading operatives to change their minds. They even used the same pejorative that management used to describe opposition to the speedup: featherbedding, a term whose feminine connotations implicitly challenged the manhood of the male hands who refused to work harder. "What's Reasonable Workload?" asked the editor of *Textile Labor*, rhetorically, in the midst of the recession. "TWUA is against

⁴⁴ Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility?*, 126.

⁴⁵ Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 222.

featherbedding or sweating.” In the same breath, the editor red-baited the featherbedders. “The communists—they are against any upward change in machine assignments; they say it’s capitalist exploitation.”⁴⁶ And not only were recalcitrant workers soft and pink, according to the TWUA they prevented the realization of “the kind of life we should have in America,” which depended on the elimination of “artificial restrictions on production.” “TWUA believes in progress. We want our industry to produce more goods at lower prices. Therefore we welcome new machinery which helps bring this about... Big gains come about through new machinery, new processes, and better mill layout. Yet we recognize that even when management accepts this truth, some hurdles remain. The highest of them is habit. A worker who has run the same job in the way for a generation doesn’t accept change easily... Let’s be sure our resistance to change is based on something better than a fear of the unfamiliar.”⁴⁷

When a “particularly militant” shop committee in Greensboro, Georgia—a rural community thirty miles south of Athens—refused to give in when their company insisted in 1949 on having “some sort of machinery to change workloads” without the consent of workers, officials from the TWUA sided with management and threatened to withhold funds in case of a strike. It was unacceptable to both mill owners and TWUA representatives that the local in Greensboro had “fantastically low work-loads as compared to the industry.”⁴⁸ An examination of a “typical” contract in the South during the late 1940s reveals just how far the union was willing to go to accommodate mill men. In an agreement with the Fitzgerald Mills Corporation in Central Georgia, the TWUA

⁴⁶ Anon., “What’s a Reasonable Workload?,” *Textile Labor*, February 5, 1949.

⁴⁷ Kenneth Fiester, “Editorial,” *Textile Labor*, June 18, 1949.

⁴⁸ Organizing Activities: Mary Leila Cotton Mills, December 30, 1949, 2A, Box 18, NW GA O’Shea folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

permitted management to make unilateral changes to workloads at any time. After ten days, workers were granted the privilege of asking the company to “re-check to ascertain whether the workload or standard is not reasonable.” Only after the mill had the opportunity to reconsider its decision could the local begin the long, drawn-out process of filing a formal grievance to an arbitrator. Throughout the entire grievance process—which could take years—“the workload and standard” decided by the company would “continue in force and effect.”⁴⁹ In nearby Griffin, Georgia, TWUA officials admitted that in the contract they arranged, “the workload provisions is [sic] weak.”⁵⁰ After workers accepted a contract in the small Atlantic Cotton Mills in Macon, the union was still “having trouble building up support” because it could not address “the big problem”: “the workload changes that are being instituted by the company.”⁵¹ At Macon Textiles, a woolen plant recently opened by M.T. Stevens after it fled Rockville, there was “considerable discontent over workloads” after the company “discharged all of their overseers and replaced them with young college technical people who graduated from Georgia Tech.” Nevertheless, the TWUA did not appeal to the workers, who would not even secretly sign union cards, much less agree to pay dues.⁵² It is hardly any wonder that the vast majority of workers in Central Georgia felt the same way. The union was entirely unwilling and unable to protect them from the stretch-out.

In his local study of the Harriet-Henderson Mills in Eastern North Carolina, historian Daniel Clark comes to precisely the opposite conclusion. Clark argues that the

⁴⁹ Mss 396, Box 103, South-correspondence folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

⁵⁰ H.D. Lisk to Rieve, February 28, 1950, 2A, Box 6, Lisk, H.D. Georgia State Director folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

⁵¹ H.D. Lisk to Rieve, July 25, 1950, 2A, Box 6, Lisk, H.D. Georgia State Director folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

⁵² H.D. Lisk to Rieve, November 28, 1950, 2A, Box 6, Lisk, H.D. Georgia State Director folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

major appeal of the TWUA for mill hands in Henderson during the 1950s was that the union enabled them to “vigorously challenge workload increases.” This fact, he claims, problematizes postwar labor studies that lament the “narrowing of focus, a constricting sense of what was possible, and severely limited aspirations” among unions. While Clark thoroughly documents that “the primary concern of most millhands was workloads,” his own evidence proves that the same could not be said for the union itself. Like other contracts in the industry, the agreement at Henderson allowed management to unilaterally institute workload changes. For a month after the modification—during a “trial period”—workers could not even file a grievance, and they had to obey their supervisors at the risk of being fired. When management threatened to dismiss mill hands who refused to submit to an especially egregious workload increase in 1958, the workers wildcatted and shut down the plant. In a matter of hours, a representative of the TWUA was on the scene. He had come to the rescue of management. “I had to spend some hours over here the other day doing some things that are very distasteful for me to do,” the union official later reported. Four years earlier, the union convinced operatives to end a strike and accept intensified workloads on the condition that the mill would release its time-study data so the union could prove that the assignments were too demanding. When management reneged on its promise, the TWUA was powerless to do anything about it, and officials “caught hell” from the members.⁵³

Workers at Henderson were unusually militant and they fought hard to keep their local when Marshall Cooper, the owner of the mill, finally got around to busting it in

⁵³ Daniel Clark, *Like Night and Day: Unionization in a Southern Mill Town* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 104, 2, 45, 106, 144, 134.

1958.⁵⁴ Rank and file members credited the TWUA for everything from the “blacktopping of their roads” to higher wages, yet even Clark admits that this was more a “perception of a causal relationship” than an accurate understanding of the union’s role. In fact, the TWUA had accomplished very little for workers, especially when it came to protecting them from the stretch-out.⁵⁵ What made the operatives in Henderson stand out from their counterparts across the South was that the TWUA had somehow distilled union dues from their anger.

But if the union was unwilling or incapable of protecting workers from the stretch-out, what explains the eagerness of owners to destroy locals? Ironically, the reason does revolve around issues of shop floor control. Although mill hands could not use the union to resist changes, they could nevertheless rely on it to give owners a headache. Workers at Henderson filed hundreds of grievances to protest the squeeze, and this required management to allocate resources to justify itself before arbitrators. Moreover, every time supervisors needed to make a substantial change on the line, they had to go through the tiresome process of instituting a trial period, which slowed down production. While postwar contracts entailed the growth of bureaucratic machinery that removed the locus of conflict from the shop floor and undermined the power of workers, they also slowed down management’s efforts to reorganize the labor process. The very existence of the union proved to be too much of a “rigidity” for owners to tolerate in a buyers’ market. As Marshall Cooper explained in an interview to Clark years later, “You

⁵⁴ Though Clark inexplicably calls their tactics “counterproductive,” mill hands kept the plant shutdown for months—even with the National Guard in town—by terrorizing scabs with dynamite. *Ibid*, 188.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 151.

had all this equipment you done bought and you weren't getting all the best results out of it. That's where the damn union comes in."⁵⁶

Marshall Cooper was unique among mill men in that he tolerated the TWUA for as long as he did. As Clark makes clear, Cooper knew he could have busted the local anytime he chose throughout the 1950s.⁵⁷ Most owners took the opportunity to destroy the unions in their shops as far back as 1951, when the TWUA launched a "general strike" in the South, calling out over 40,000 workers—half of the unionized hands in Dixie. The two historians who have extensively studied the strike portray a self-destructing union carrying out its own coup de grâce. For Clete Daniel, the strike was caused by reckless leaders trying to win support of the rank and file by displaying their "virility." Tragically, "Before the strike, there had been outposts of labor-management accommodation seemingly secure enough to justify the hope that still more of the southern textile industry might, through patient and persistent effort, be brought within the union's orbit." In its aftermath, "there was wreckage so vast and despair so powerful that even its most devoted supporters were compelled to discount the TWUA's prospects in the region."⁵⁸ According to Minchin, Emil Rieve, the President of the TWUA, called the strike because he genuinely believed the Korean War provided the same opportunity as World War II to coax the government into involving itself in southern industrial relations. Rieve figured that crippling textiles—an important defense industry—would force the Army to stabilize production by insisting that southern mill owners at least follow the law. Citing the assessments of top TWUA officials, Timothy Minchin agrees

⁵⁶ Ibid, 96-99, 141.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 133.

⁵⁸ Daniel, *Culture of Misfortune*, 211, 205.

that the strike was “a pivotal event in southern labor history” “a turning point for the union’s fortunes in the South.”⁵⁹

To view the strike as a “turning point” is to place it outside of the context of mill men’s campaign to restructure production for a buyers’ market. The transformation of industrial relations in textiles came after the recession of late 1948 when management could finally proceed to institute the speedup/stretch-out/squeeze. Rather than give weight to the decisions of union leaders, it is more appropriate to situate the 1951 strike in a narrative dominated by capital—to understand it as the TWUA’s desperate attempt to receive wage increases in return for relinquishing control of the shop floor. This was the union’s final plea to the industry to establish the sort of long term, “bread and butter” collective bargaining agreements found in autos and coal. Even though workers across the South were steaming against the stretch-out, the TWUA made the issue about a twelve percent wage increase and explicitly downplayed the problem of the speedup. In a postmortem of the failed strike, Ken Kramer, a TWUA representative, attributed the low enthusiasm many workers showed toward the effort to the union’s unwillingness to prioritize shop floor matters. “The work load issue ought to be stressed over and over again, since it is the one issue that all members of the local felt together on. The main appeal of the union should be for the right to continue to do the job of keeping the company in line on work-loads.”⁶⁰

Mill men, for their part, saw the strike as a prime opportunity to permanently rid the South of the union’s presence. And this, like the other steps they took to restructure production after the war, was a collective effort. Even Minchin, who otherwise

⁵⁹ Minchin, *What do We Need a Union For?*, 104, 100, 3.

⁶⁰ Ken Kramer to Emil Rieve, May 15, 1951, 1A, Box 20, Southern Strike Situation folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

emphasizes the “competitive nature of the industry,” allows that the actions of owners during the strike “typified the way that postwar southern textile manufacturers acted with a close degree of cooperation in union affairs, even between organized and unorganized companies.”⁶¹ Daniel Clark, on the other hand, remains skeptical: “Although TWUA officials often charged, and feared, that southern mill owners conspired to destroy functioning union locals...most managers did not have to deal with organized workers...and in a volatile market for textiles, they had other more pressing concerns... Strident antiunionism did not necessarily translate into a willingness to bear any share of the burden in ridding the region of organized labor.”⁶² Yet the evidence is overwhelming that owners were indeed willing, if not eager, to share such a “burden.”

Deemphasizing the point in a footnote, Minchin writes of the 1951 strike that “southern textile management did act with a considerable degree of unity during this period.” Minchin cites a former vice president of Erwin Mills, who “recalled that the major southern companies acted together very closely in these years, especially when it came to deciding wages or dealing with the union.” Moreover, according to the official, presidents of the big firms were good friends who constantly strategized, “90% of it on the golf-course or by telephone.” When it became clear that the TWUA was going to strike, executives at Dan River Mills and nearby Marshall Field decided that Dan River would try to operate while Marshall Field would close up completely so that its nonunion workers could be shuttled to Danville as scabs.⁶³ But the extent of collusion went far beyond a circle of friends in the upper piedmont. When officials at Brookside Mills in Tennessee agreed to the twelve percent wage hike on the eve of the strike, “the firm was

⁶¹ Minchin, *What do We Need a Union For?*, 111.

⁶² Clark, *Like Night and Day*, 150.

⁶³ Minchin, *What do We Need a Union For?*, 236-237.

immediately called and harassed by other Southern Mill Owners.” In response to the peer pressure, the secretary-treasurer at Brookside “emphatically denied there was any truth” to the agreement and apparently rescinded the offer.⁶⁴ In May, when the strike was officially lost, editors of the *Southern Textile Bulletin* prided mill men for their willingness to stick together. “It did us good to observe the general solidarity of management. Among executives there developed a desire to get the matter settled, and not to allow the union to nibble the industry to pieces, mill by mill.”⁶⁵

A few days before the walk-out in late March, at the annual convention of the American Cotton Manufacturers Institute, the *Daily News Record* reported that “the strike threat is the principal topic of discussion” even though most of the Institute’s members represented nonunion companies. At the ACMI, “the general opinion expressed in lobby conversations was to the effect that this could be a good time to make an issue of the union’s approach.” “Referring to the decision of the Hockanum unit to liquidate, an important mill executive says he is unable to understand the reasoning of labor leaders who failed to recognize that this was inevitable.”⁶⁶ George Swift, the owner of a nonunion plant in Columbus, Georgia, and president of the ACMI, insinuated that struck plants could undermine the union by going after strikers who were “paying off installment purchases of automobiles, homes, [and] refrigerators.”⁶⁷ As Timothy Minchin relates, mill men mastered this tactic in 1951, offering to pay off loans for workers who scabbed and pressuring local banks and businesses to call in loans for

⁶⁴ Anon., “Brookside Officials Denies Agreeing to 12% Raise,” *Daily News Record*, March 14, 1951, 2.

⁶⁵ Clipping from *Textile Bulletin* May 1951, 1A, Box 20, Southern Strike Situation folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

⁶⁶ Howard Rains, *Daily News Record*, April 6, 1951, 1, 27.

⁶⁷ Anon., “Southern Mill Men: Limit of 10% Seen on Raises,” *Daily News Record*, March 30, 1951, 1.

workers who remained on the picket line.⁶⁸ Explaining that the strike gave management the opportunity to stand up “for its “right to run its own business and make its own decision,” another speaker at the ACMI couched the struggle in terms of “a fight between the concept of men as a free and responsible individual and men as docile and regimented dependents.” With more than a little irony, he added, “it would have been tragic if this group [of “free and responsible individual” men] was forced to enter the period of outside influences and uncertainties which lie ahead without the closest possible coordination of thought and effort.”⁶⁹

There is also some indication that textile owners conspired with bureaucrats from the Office of Price Stabilization—a government agency set up to check inflation during the Korean War—to guarantee that mill men would remain united. Leading up to the strike, executives had been urging the OPS to adjust wartime price controls on finished textiles so they could pass on the rising costs of raw materials to consumers. The OPS agreed that mill men needed some relief and for several weeks it had been crunching the numbers to determine how much it would give. In the meantime, managements had quite naturally held off on contracting for orders until they were given the go ahead to mark up their prices. If the OPS had officially granted the markup before the strike, then there would have been some incentive for mill men to start taking orders again—and therefore a chance that a particular owner might compromise with the TWUA on the twelve percent raise. Such a compromise would have put pressure on other mills (union and nonunion) to grant the same increase. It would have also undermined the united effort to crush the Textile Workers Union of America. After the strike was over, Senator John

⁶⁸ Minchin, *What do We Need a Union For?*, 141-148.

⁶⁹ Unknown, “Robert Jackson,” *Daily News Record*, April 2, 1951, 29.

Sparkman of Alabama let slip that he was at an ACMI meeting before the strike in which a “southern cotton textile industrialist had told Price Stabilizer Michael V. Disalle that manufactures wanted OPS to hold the recently-issued ‘tailored’ price regulation for cotton goods in abeyance at a time when the strike was on.”⁷⁰ Whether such a meeting happened or not, Disalle did hold off on releasing the regulation until the strike was lost.

As predicted by southern owners, the 1951 strike provided the opportunity to wipe out the union’s foothold in Dixie. Many flat out refused to sign new collective bargaining agreements and the weakened TWUA was in no position to fight back. Yet the strike’s failure also turned out to be a boon for manufacturers in the process of cashing out in the North. Emboldened by the fierce stand of their southern brethren, New England mill men resolutely insisted on their right to institute the speedup. In response, TWUA leaders doubled down on their own efforts to make their dwindling northern base amenable to the needs of capital. Behind closed doors, at an emergency Woolen and Worsted Policy Committee meeting in July 1951, union leaders agreed on the need to allow the squeeze. From then on, the TWUA would settle for a “clause [that] would let the company unilaterally change workload assignments for a trial and experimental period when either a new machine or fiber is introduced,” even while it recognized “the link between new machinery and more work.” “It is my opinion,” explained John Chupka, the head of TWUA’s woolen and worsted division, “that unless the woolen industry gets in on some of this a lot more mills are going to close down.” “I firmly believe our representatives should accept the responsibility of keeping the mills competitive,” another union official who did not work on the floor concurred. “No matter how you do it, you will be faced with the problem of seeing the light and accepting the

⁷⁰ John Norman, Untitled, *Daily News Record*, May 21, 1951, 1, 35.

workload clauses in your plants in the areas you represent,” he warned the delegates. “Nobody wants a workload. Everyone is reluctant to a change,” chimed another official. “However, facts are facts.” Only Joe Heuter, who represented workers from Philadelphia, argued that mill hands themselves should have some say over the union’s new direction. “This type of clause is not acceptable in my area...I am opposed to making a policy which is going to impose as a possibility on our people something they don’t agree with. We have one [workload clause], a very tight one. Changes in the method of production shall only be made through collective bargaining.”⁷¹

At the Woolen and Worsted Conference in early 1952, union leaders made the new policy official. “I don’t have to tell you that every employer we are under contract with is knocking on our door for change in work assignments and yes, even cuts in wages. In view of the technological changes and the unemployment, this is mounting.” “Our wages are really not what will determine whether we will have a full market,” added research director Solomon Barkin. “That used to be. We are in a new world where we must meet conditions, whether we like it or not....All of a sudden we have new machinery, new methods, new equipment, and every time that comes in it creates problems for us.” “We have to change the way we perform on our job,” said Barkin, who never worked a day of his life in a mill.⁷² When Bachman-Uxbridge, a Massachusetts company in the process of moving south, demanded workload concessions from its remaining northern workers in 1952, Chupka instructed the rank and file that it was their

⁷¹ Minutes of the Woolen and Worsted Policy Committee, July 11, 1951, Mss. 396, Box 276, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

⁷² Minutes of the Woolen and Worsted Conference, January 6, 1952, Mss. 396, Box 276, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

responsibility to “increase efficiency through union management cooperation.”⁷³ In negotiations with American Woolen in February, union leaders agreed to give the company the same leeway to make shop floor decisions as its counterparts enjoyed in the South. While they managed to convince much of the membership at American Woolen not to strike (and to continue to pay dues), they were not so lucky elsewhere.⁷⁴ Hands at Dorr Woolen in New Hampshire wildcatted and thousands more (including Heuter’s operatives in Philadelphia) disaffiliated with the CIO. Nevertheless, the United Textile Workers (of the AFL) proved to be just as unable to advance the interests of workers and in a couple of years several locals trickled back to the TWUA. By the mid-1950s, defeated and disillusioned, workers had few options but to follow the dictum of their union president and “face the facts of life in our industry and adapt ourselves to these conditions.”⁷⁵

⁷³From John Chupka to Bachmann-Uxbridge Workers, February 9, 1954, 1A, Box 21, Woolen and Worsted folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

⁷⁴Minutes of the Woolen and Worsted Policy Committee, July 11, 1951, Mss. 396, Box 276, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

⁷⁵Quoted in Gabriel Kolko, *Main Currents in American History* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 161.

CHAPTER 3: THE FRUITS OF RESEARCH

“For when technological development is seen as politics, as it should be, then the very notion of progress becomes ambiguous: what kind of progress? progress for whom? progress for what? And the awareness of this ambiguity, this indeterminacy, reduces the powerful hold that technology has had upon our consciousness and imagination, and it reduces also the hold upon our lives enjoyed by those whose social power has long been concealed and dignified by seemingly technological agendas. Such awareness awakens us not only to the full range of technical possibilities and political potential but also to a broader and older notion of progress, in which a struggle for human fulfillment and social equality replaces a simple faith in technological deliverance, and in which people, with their confidence restored, resume their proper role as subject of the story called history.”¹

-David Noble

Between 1946 and 1956 mill men spent four and a half billion dollars to reorganize the work of making textiles.² By all accounts, the industry experienced something akin to a technological revolution. “Although historically backward and resistant to technological advance,” the President of Bachmann-Uxbridge said of his industry in 1951, “in recent years its modernization programs almost beggar description. By research into new methods, new machinery, new buildings and new equipment of all kinds, it has lifted itself up.”³ “It has been the golden age of all times in scientific advancement” exclaimed a speaker before an audience of Georgia mill men. “As we stand on the threshold of a new tomorrow, I do firmly believe that the time is here when Americans can and must catch up spiritually with scientific advancement.”⁴ Leaders of the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) agreed: “For the first time in history,

¹ David Noble, *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), xiv-xv.

² Donald Stabile, *Activist Unionism: The Institutional Economics of Solomon Barkin* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 160.

³ Alfred Cook, “Special Edition on Modern Production,” *Daily News Record*, June 4, 1951, Section 2, 3.

⁴ Anon., “Hardmann Calls for Leadership and Special Service,” *Daily News Record*, May 18, 1951, 1.

textile technology is worthy of the name,” they declared, equally enthralled by the wonders of science.⁵

As the work of historian David Noble demonstrates, when it comes to explaining processes of technological change, scholars must clear the air of discourses that place scientific endeavor outside the realm of the social—on a higher plane, detached from worldly structures of power and above the influence of human conflict.⁶ Research and development do not take place in such a vacuum. What gets to be considered a “problem” in the first place, an issue deemed worthy of devoting resources towards finding a “solution,” is not determined by any sort of objective criteria but by a social barrier that prevents the poor and working class from using the scientific method and the tools of technology to address their own concerns, aspirations, and fears. In the postwar textile industry, workers could have greatly benefitted by innovations that cut down the noise of machinery, reduced the lint they were sucking into their lungs, or otherwise made work more comfortable and pleasant. Had this been the case, it is unlikely that Georgia mill owners would have been such crusaders for the cause of science. Indeed, the billion dollar campaign to transform the industry left mill work even more difficult than before. And this was not an unintended consequence. “Modernization” was a key component in the effort to institute the stretch-out/speedup/squeeze. Innovations in textiles were conceived in *political* terms, as a means to transfer power from labor to capital. Clearly, “progress” for some was predicated on the suffering of others.

From the outset, mill men looked to science and technology for ways to undermine the wartime gains of their workers. They did not need economists from

⁵ Editor, “Our Changing Industry,” *Textile Labor*, June 4, 1949.

⁶ David Noble, *Forces of Production*, 42-46.

Princeton to tell them to “explore to the utmost the possibilities of reducing labor costs per unit of output” by “realiz[ing] to the fullest extent the advantages of new and better methods.”⁷ Advertisements placed in trade journals by machine makers and consulting firms, designed to catch the attention of plant managers, indicated precisely what mill executives expected from technological innovation. “Are you Getting a Fair Day’s Work for A Fair Day’s Pay?,” asked a company called American Associated Consultants, which offered to rearrange work patterns to maximize the efficient use of laborers, who they grouped with other factory inputs. “As production engineers we specialize in the utilization of LABOR-EQUIPMENT-MATERIAL.” “Ask for our list of satisfied clients,” the company bragged of its usefulness, “It reads like the Blue Book of American Manufacture.”⁸ General Electric produced a film called “Textiles Unlimited,” a “full-color sound movie on Textile Mill Modernization,” and marketed it to mill men who, “with labor costs up... don’t want to miss a single opportunity to cut manufacturing costs.”⁹

As with their other steps to make the textile factory a site for the transformation of money into capital, executives turned to each other as allies first and competitors second. Their primary institutional mechanism for cooperatively developing their means of production was the Textile Foundation, a trade group established by act of Congress in 1930 to encourage the pooling of funds for research that made little sense for a single firm to pursue. At the close of the war, the Foundation took on extraordinary importance as it became clear that technological development would be a crucial dimension in the

⁷ Archibald McIsaac, James Smith, and John Cadman, *Postwar Prospects for American Textiles: An Introductory Report* (Kent, Connecticut: Textile Foundation, 1946), 4.

⁸ Advertisement, *Textile Industries* 114, no 4 (April, 1950): 243.

⁹ Advertisement, *Textile Industries* 114, no 1 (January, 1950): 41-42.

institution of the stretch-out. "The value of this instrument," proclaimed President Harold DeWitt Smith at the 1945 annual convention, "can be as great as the industry wills to make it." "That a cooperative effort to improve the technological foundation on which textile progress must be built," Smith declared, "is advantageous, not merely from the standpoint of cost, but also because of the greater accomplishment which is obtainable by coordinated action."¹⁰ Although Smith claimed that there was a need for much "basic knowledge" in textiles, the Foundation was not capitalized to formulate and solve problems of no commercial interest to mill men. "It is generally recognized that no clear line of demarcation exists between the fields of fundamental or basic research and that research which is described by the term 'applied,'" admitted the editor of *Textile Research*, the journal published by the Foundation. "Certainly the type of fundamental research conducted consists of the application of fundamental principles of the sciences and, in turn, the findings will be applied to the problems of mill research and developments."¹¹

The number one "fundamental research project" undertaken by the Foundation was an investigation into the "mechanical properties of fibers."¹² Just a few decades earlier, in 1920, the German chemist Hermann Staudinger hypothesized that molecules came together to form long chains called polymers and that the behavior of the polymer could be altered by manipulating the configuration of its molecules. Operating from Staudinger's insights, in a matter of years, scientists had invented tools (like the ultracentrifuge) to break down polymers into individual units and reconstruct them piece

¹⁰ "Annual Report of the President," *Textile Research* 15, no 12 (December, 1945): 1-5.

¹¹ Frontispiece of Industrial Section, *Textile Research* 19, no 4 (April, 1949): 215.

¹² J.H. Dillon, "Harold DeWitt Smith: His Life and Works," Address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, *Textile Research* 17, no 7 (July, 1947): 355.

by piece into novel formations. The Textile Foundation was particularly keen to learn how such advances in the understanding of polymers could be applied to enhance the “spinning quality” of cotton and wool fibers.¹³ Yet even this seemingly “objective” scientific inquiry into the “nature of things” was politicized by the social relations through which it was undertaken.

The Foundation looked to organic chemistry to develop fibers that would enable textile owners to get more work out of each worker. Of particular concern to mill men was the problem of yarn breakages. “Ends down” (yarn breaks) brought the line to a stop. As such, it was the duty of operatives to watch for breaks and tie knots as soon as they occurred. If the problem of end breakages could be alleviated, managers could hire fewer hands to monitor more machines. It was in the context of the postwar squeeze that scientists redoubled their efforts to restructure cotton and wool polymers to make the fibers less prone to tearing. Dozens of tests in the 1940s indicated that the “optimum” fiber for the speedup was somewhat long (with a degree of polymerization [DP] around 1000 molecules), internally flexible (the molecules could contort without breaking), and finely textured.¹⁴ When National Cotton Council member and former Department of Agriculture official Earl Berkley waxed about the way fibers could be optimized to enhance the “ease of spinning,” he did not have in mind the ease of the job of the woman who ran the spindles.¹⁵

The effort to minimize end breaks was not limited to the realm of the molecular. In 1948, the *Journal of the Textile Institute* devoted an entire monthly issue to the

¹³ Earl Berkley, “Cotton: A Versatile Fiber,” *Textile Research* 18, no 1 (January, 1948): 87.

¹⁴ K.S. Campbell, Abstract, *Textile Research* 18, no 1 (January, 1948): 62, from H.F. Mark, *American Dyestuff Reporter* 36 (June 16, 1947), 323-7.

¹⁵ Earl Berkley, “Cotton: A Versatile Fiber,” *Textile Research* 18, no 1 (January, 1948): 80.

problem, which it conceived in terms of increasing “production per man hour.”

Engineers ran experiments on seemingly every component of the spindle, isolating as independent variables everything from the speed of the motor to the weight of the traveler (the device that imparted twist to the yarn).¹⁶ Machine building companies also got in on the action. Westinghouse discovered that “uniform warp tension” meant “FEWER broken ends” and developed a machine it advertised as “A SURE WAY to increase production.” H&B Textile Machinery promised that on its equipment “ends down are nearly as scarce as hen’s teeth” and published a “letter recently received from a well known New York firm, operating a group of southern mills” that testified to the fact. The Pneumafil Corporation invented a device that sucked up loose yarn after an end breakage so that it would not tangle around the beams and create a time consuming mess. The apparatus, according to the company, was “essential for competing at a profit in a buyers’ market.”

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Were workers to have had control over the implementation of new technology, mill hands might have heartily welcomed “solutions” to the problem of end breakages. With the potential to reduce the time it took to make cloth, in theory labor saving machinery could have been used to augment real wealth while extending the duration of socially available leisure time. As it was, the decline of breaks actually made work more exhausting and stressful. Because new machinery reduced the amount of time a spinner needed to devote to each machine, owners took the opportunity to lay off hands and give women more spindles to tend. While there were fewer knots to tie, there were also more machines to monitor and more bobbins to fill. In his case study of the Harriet-Henderson

¹⁶ L.A. Fiori, Abstracts, *Textile Research* 18, no 6 (June, 1948): 383, from *Journal of the Textile Institute* 38 (December, 1947).

¹⁷ Advertisements, *Textile Industries* 114, no 1 (January, 1950), 48, 28, 43.

mills, Daniel Clark provides telling examples of how “modernization” made life more difficult for workers. When the company installed overhead blowers to bluster away debris that made yarn more prone to breakage, there was no room left on top of the spinning frames for women to store their replacement bobbins. As a result, the company gave them “wheeled carts that held nearly two hundred pounds of roving when full” and expected them “to push these carts as they patrolled their frames.” Not only were the carts difficult to push, they proved to be dangerous hazards when dragged between narrow aisles of machinery. The introduction of Pneumafil only compounded the problem. Previously, spinners could spot a breakage from the end of the aisle because it would cause a visible ball-up. But because Pneumafil sucked up the loose yarn before it could tangle, workers had to constantly pace the aisles (pushing heavy carts) while straining their eyes to find broken ends.¹⁸

Of course, the stretch-out was predicated on technological developments other than the reduction in the number of ends down. Engineers figured out how to speed up almost every piece of equipment in the factory, from the openers to the carders to the bleachers.¹⁹ One company even invented a new broom to hasten the work of the black janitors.²⁰ An “emphasis on continuous-type machinery” translated into the elimination of workers who moved products from one location in the plant to another. Such developments particularly targeted doffers—the men responsible for transferring bobbins throughout the mill—whose occasional wildcat strikes would shut down the entire

¹⁸ Daniel Clark, *Like Night & Day: Unionization in a Southern Mill Town* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 136-138.

¹⁹ Findings summarized in “Cotton Goods Production and Distribution Techniques, Costs, and Margins, Project III,” in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Special Subcommittee on Cotton of the Committee on Agriculture, *Study of Agricultural and Economic Problems in the Cotton Belt*, 80th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1947), 158-194.

²⁰ Advertisement, *Textile Industries* 114, no 3 (March, 1950), 55.

operation.²¹ Even the widespread installation of air conditioning at this time, which one historian credits to the activism of the TWUA,²² was implemented to “attain highest efficiency.”²³ Climate control offered mills a way to optimize humidity levels, which researchers claimed would help maintain friction among fibers and diminish the chances of a tear. Owners were also looking to eliminate windows, which “could let in dust and grime” that might alter the uniformity of the yarn and lead to breaks.²⁴ Windowless plants would have been impossibly uncomfortable without air conditioning, especially in the South (and managers had to work in them too).

In terms of increasing production per man hour, the stretch-out was an unqualified success. Between 1946 and 1956, even though the industry jettisoned 180,000 operatives, labor productivity skyrocketed by forty seven and a half percent.²⁵ Yet this impressive feat could not have been achieved without the active participation of federal and state governments, which financed, organized, and provided the infrastructure for research into technological “improvements” that facilitated the stretch-out.

The extent of the federal government’s involvement in assuring the postwar success of textiles was best illustrated by a massive Congressional Report commissioned in the mid-1940s by the Special Subcommittee on Cotton. As documented in chapter one, the report concluded that the viability of both the textile and cotton industries would depend on intensifying the exploitation of mill hands and explicitly conceived of

²¹ “Cotton Goods Production,” 158.

²² “The TWUA did hasten the day when textile mills would attain levels of comfortable temperatures.” Stabile, *Activist Unionism*, 145. For Stabile, this amounted to evidence “that unions can act as a countervailing power for the public good, even when they are acting in their own self-interest (145).”

²³ A.L. Landau, Abstract, *Textile Research* 18, no 4 (April, 1948): 258, from E. Howlett, *Textile Manufacturer* 74 (January, 1948): 22-26.

²⁴ Roy Palmer, “Windowless Mill Construction,” *Textile Industries* 114, no 5 (May, 1950): 87.

²⁵ Stabile, *Activist Unionism*, 160.

modernization as “a means of reducing unit labor costs.”²⁶ Of the twelve members on the study’s central steering committee, half worked for the United States Department of Agriculture, one was a United States Congressman, and the chair was the President of Mississippi State University. Public officials were even more directly involved with the part of the study dealing explicitly with textile technology. The chairman of this segment’s committee hailed from the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. Other government agencies represented included the United States Tariff Commission, the Bureau of Agricultural and Industrial Chemistry, and the Production and Marketing Administration. The only post reserved for a union official in the entire project was given to Solomon Barkin, the research director of the TWUA. Even if the committee had not candidly stated that it conceived of technological innovation as a way to squeeze more value out of workers, its line of inquiry would have betrayed the idea. In a painstaking analysis of each operation in the textile factory, researchers scoured for ways to eliminate mill hands, speed up the line, and otherwise make the process of production more flexible so managers could make “timely adjustments in manufacturing to consumer requirements.”²⁷

Still another ensemble of bureaucrats investigated how further industrialization in the South would work to the benefit of capital in toto.²⁸ Among them were three representatives from the US Department of Commerce, two from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, one from the Department of Interior, one from the Tennessee Valley Authority,

²⁶ “Cotton Goods Production,” 105.

²⁷ “Cotton Goods Production,” 110.

²⁸ The following is taken from “Industrialization in the South, Project VII,” in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Special Subcommittee on Cotton of the Committee on Agriculture, *Study of Agricultural and Economic Problems in the Cotton Belt*, 80th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1947), 558, 579, 588, 589. For more on Roger Milliken, see Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: Norton, 2009), 79-81.

two public university professors, a member of the Brookings Institute (a “free enterprise” think tank), and an official from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Tellingly, like mill owners from the North and South, the committee understood the industrialization of the South as a way to keep the “economic structure” of America “flexible.” Yet “this transformation,” they advised, “will require time, patience, inventiveness, and harmonious collaboration between individuals, groups, and government at the Federal, State, and local levels.” “To make this possible,” the researchers (perhaps with themselves in mind) called for the state to “carry on research and promote the application of research to business enterprises.” Further, they suggested that the federal government “promote use of the large surplus war plants in the South.” The M.T. Stevens Company, after failing to impose the stretch-out on its workers in Rockville, Connecticut, utilized precisely such a plant at its new worsted facility in Macon, Georgia. The committee’s “most important” recommendation, however, was for the state to “maintain a substantial federally financed investment program designed to encourage industrial expansion or other readjustment that will increase productivity.”

The Congressional Report made clear that the industrialization of the South would need to proceed on a socialized course. “If important needs do develop which cannot be met by private sources, they will probably consist particularly of new technological developments and improvements, the financing of which requires substantial amounts of long-term credit,” the researchers explained. “Research is a prime mover of industrialization. Research creates industries. Industries, in fact, cannot survive long in the modern competitive world without research. The discovery of new processes, the development of new products, the creation of substitute materials, and the similar benefits

which research brings to industry, serve to generate new and wider uses for the products of industry and to promote industrialization.” The safety valve through which capital was escaping to the South would be greased with public assistance.

The fruits of research, in order to be effective in promoting industrialization, have to be applied to particular operating problems of individual business concerns. This involves three types of specialized assistance: (1) Scientific and technical information, including data on new materials and products and new equipment or processes; (2) statistical data and analyses of market conditions and developments, including the business outlook; and (3) management practices and policies regarding such questions as financing, accounting systems, inventory controls, etc. Wherever possible, these types of work should be undertaken at regional and local levels by such organizations as State development agencies, chambers of commerce, trade associations, other business and industrial groups, universities, schools of business, and business-research organizations... In addition, the Federal Government can assist materially in this work by acting as a clearing house—collating, integrating, and giving widespread distribution to the results of research and the operating procedures developed in any particular region.

Yet not every penny flowing from the public coffers should go directly to capital.

The committee called for a “second type” of investment to “protect and improve the human resources of the South as more adequate health and educational services; improved housing; and protection against old age, involuntary unemployment, and the cost of medical care.” “But,” the researchers hastened to add, “The measures of unemployment compensation, including sickness and accident compensation, should reflect prevailing wage differentials and not encourage voluntary idleness.” Too generous of a safety net, they understood, might defeat the purpose of capital flight to the South. For the economy to be “kept flexible,” capitalists needed a pool of labor desperate enough to take any type of work, no matter how degrading or exploitive. Although mill men liked to explain their attraction to southern workers in cultural terms, often

referencing their shared “Anglo-Saxon” heritage and “common understanding of the inherent rights of the individual as well as the property rights of the stockholders,”²⁹ behind the scenes there was much concern that such “harmonious relations” might be endangered if workers had access to alternative sources of subsistence. A paltry social wage helped to assure that textile workers in the South would remain desperate. The contrast with the North was stark. In Massachusetts, for example, the average payment per case of state general assistance was (in current dollars) \$50.30; in Georgia, it was \$15.39.³⁰

Congress demonstrated its commitment to underwriting the scientific advancement of the textile industry with the passage in 1946 of the Agricultural Research and Marketing Act. The bill allowed for the appropriation of \$22,850,000 for “fundamental” research projects. Much of this money went to the USDA’s Southern Regional Research Laboratory in New Orleans.³¹ Here, government workers “constantly evaluate their developments for use by industry, constantly confer with industry, and in many other ways cooperate with cotton manufacturers.” And “attention is constantly given to the opportunities for increasing production efficiency and reducing costs.” Researchers discovered that cotton varieties with longer boll periods developed cell walls with molecular configurations that made the fibers stronger and less likely to tear. They also found that “impregnating” the polymers with foreign substances (like plastics) could improve the strength and quality of the yarn by slowing degradation, increasing dye

²⁹ Remarks of John P. Baum, Vice-President of J.P. Stevens & Company, September 16, 1953, *Bulletin of the National Association of Wool Manufacturers Volume LXXXIII* (Wakefield Massachusetts: The Murray Printing Company, 1954), 3-127.

³⁰ Barry Truchil, *Capital-Labor Relations in the U.S. Textile Industry* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 38-39.

³¹ Unknown, Abstract, *Textile Research* 19, no 3 (March 1949): 230, from DL. Smith, “Cotton Plans a Research Program,” *American Dyestuff Reporter* 37 (December 27, 1948): 866.

affinity, and bolstering water repellency. Yet the Research Laboratory did not limit its investigations to the behavior of polymers. Public workers also undertook “mechanical-processing research to develop new or improved machinery for the more efficient and economical manufacture of high-quality cotton yarns and fabrics.”³² Clearly, the “fruits of research” were cultivated with the tastes of mill men in mind.

The United States government also facilitated the exodus of capital to the South, and hence the stretch-out, by means other than subsidizing research and development. When given the opportunity, the War Labor Board—the government agency established to maintain industrial harmony during WWII—adamantly refused to close the sectional wage differential, even though studies showed that the cost of living in the Piedmont was on par with that in New England. This policy decision was made at the highest levels. According to Clete Daniels, one of Roosevelt’s “closest confidants,” James Byrnes, ordered the Director of Economic Stabilization Fred Vinson to block “any WLB order that threatened the cotton-rayon industry’s North-South wage disparity.”³³ Government officials also failed to act after it became clear—thanks to a Congressional hearing—that the tax code strongly encouraged northern owners to sell their assets to firms that were expanding in the South. “Carry-back” provisions gave businesses that lost money the option to deduct their losses from future tax obligations. This meant that the many northern mills that operated at a deficit in 1949 could write off their losses in later years. Yet mill men appreciated these provisions not because they encouraged future enterprise, but because they were fungible—they would be transferred during a merger. It made northern firms all the more appealing to giants like Textron and Deering-Milliken, who

³² Walter Scott, “Some Recent Developments in Cotton Research at the Southern Regional Research Laboratory,” *Textile Research* 19, no 7 (July, 1949): 436-439.

³³ Daniel, *Culture of Misfortune*, 148-150.

would pay good money for “carry-back” notes they could use to substantially reduce their taxes. Not all government subsidies for capital flight took such a circuitous route. During the Korean War, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation sold money at a steep discount to mills that were absconding to Dixie as fast as they could.³⁴

Perhaps the most essential institution for bringing the state and capital together was the public university. In the South, textile industrialists and the taxpaying public co-funded textile engineering and research departments at Clemson, Alabama Polytechnic (Auburn), Georgia Tech, North Carolina State, and the University of Virginia. In Georgia, mill men created the Textile Education Foundation to “maintain close contact” with the A. French Textile School at Georgia Tech. Between 1945 and 1950, the Foundation gave the school, as part of a “gentlemen’s agreement,” a lump sum of \$12,500 annually to be matched by the Board of Regents. Beginning in 1951, rather than hand over money without earmarks, the Foundation “suggested that should the textile school need some expensive and specialized equipment” it would need to submit “a recommendation” to be reviewed by mill men. Nevertheless, Georgia textile mills would continue “to provide supplemental compensation to certain faculty members,” and “provide travel expense funds to permit” faculty and students to “visit Georgia mills and to maintain closer contact with the textile industry and its activities.”³⁵ That same year, Herman Dickert, the director of the French School, was named secretary-treasurer of the Textile Operating Executives of Georgia. “Our association is keenly interested in the textile school as a vital element in our industry,” said the General Superintendent of the Atlanta Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills of Dickert’s appointment. “We know that the

³⁴ Hartford, *Where is our Responsibility?*, 179-181.

³⁵ Murry Wyche, “Brumby Elected President of Textile Education Foundation,” *Daily News Record*, May 22, 1951, 1, 28.

associations between our members and the faculty and textile student body at Georgia Tech serve to strengthen both us and them.”³⁶

In official proclamations, industry representatives portrayed the public university as a site for objective research, as an apolitical space where disinterested scientists could investigate the workings of the world. “A center where the fundamental science basic to a given industrial field is the major objective of research,” a trade journal reporter wrote in 1945, “appears to be the solution to the problem of fundamental research in the highly decentralized textile industry.”³⁷ Notwithstanding how even the most basic research was politicized by the social structures in which it was performed and applied, it was clear that textile schools remained quite attentive to the specific concerns and problems of their corporate sponsors. As David Noble explains, “it is no accident that technical people are often allied so closely with the owners of capital...technical people strive continuously to anticipate and meet the criteria of those in power simply so that they may be able to practice their calling.”³⁸ In the midst of the stretch-out, when managers at the Spray Cotton Mills in North Carolina were having trouble coming up with a piece rate system to get more work out of their doffers, they “turned over”³⁹ the problem to the Institute of Textile Technology’s center at the University of Virginia, a graduate program chartered by the state in 1945 to research the “application of fundamental and technical developments to commercial size textile machinery.”⁴⁰ In response to their requests, the

³⁶ Murry Wyche, “Dickert Named Sec-Treasurer of TOEG,” *Daily News Record*, March 6, 1951, 36-37.

³⁷ Unknown, Abstract, *Textile Research* 15, no 6 (June, 1945): 232, from H.S. Taylor, “Higher Education and Research for Textile Chemists,” *American Dyestuff Reporter* 34 (January 1, 1945).

³⁸ Noble, *Forces of Production*, 43.

³⁹ R.A. Butler, “Workable Incentive Plan for Doffers,” *Textile Industries* 114, no 3 (March, 1950): 87.

⁴⁰ Unknown, Abstract, *Daily News Record* 15, no 5 (May, 1945), from Anon., “Textile Technology Institute building,” *American Wool and Cotton Reporter*, April 12, 1945.

students and faculty at Virginia invented an automatic hank counter, which management at Spray celebrated as a “workable incentive plan.”⁴¹

Textile schools also catered to the industry’s increasing need for time study engineers and technically savvy overseers. In fact, they were “literally bursting at the seams” trying to accommodate the demand.⁴² As noted in chapter one, many textile executives considered the “modernization” of their supervisors to be a key component for surviving in a buyers’ market. “We here in New England have heard about textile courses and what they have done for the textile industry of the South,” announced the President of the Rhode Island Textile Association after his organization decided to fund “courses designed to cover scientific, engineering, and management aspects” at Rhode Island State University.⁴³

Nevertheless, some mill men grew to resent their dependence on educated youngsters. A 1950 editorial in *Textile Industries* about a recent graduate who impetuously demanded a high starting salary hit a nerve. As one reader complained, “most of the technically trained men in the textile industry who have reached high positions started off in the textile plants on the lowest jobs. They worked twelve hours a day or longer, suffered unnecessarily under men who came up an even harder way, were looked down upon by men and generally had a hard row to hoe. They do not desire to make the road too easy for the present day college student.” “But,” he sighed, “with the textile industry so urgently needing the technically trained men...the industry may not be

⁴¹ Butler, “Workable Incentive Plan for Doffers,” 87.

⁴² Hunter Marshall, “What the Textile Industry Means for a State,” *Textile Industries* 112, no 7 (July, 1948): 131.

⁴³ Unknown, “Rhode Island State to Offer Textile Courses,” *Daily News Record*, March 27, 1951, 28.

able to overlook the technically trained man who is interested in the starting salary, fringe benefits, and his retirement plan.”⁴⁴

Although they were not always fully appreciated by some of the mill men who depended on them, technicians, engineers, educators, and researchers formed close institutional and personal ties with representatives from industry. And these interconnections were cemented by an ideological glue—a mutual understanding of science, capitalism, and the appropriate place of workers. Academics and technicians joined industry trade associations, subscribed to industry trade journals, and attended the frequent galas sponsored by executives. A Georgia Tech professor was so impressed by an essay in *Textile Industries* titled “Communists, Socialists, and Other Reactionaries” that he wrote a letter to the editor just to say how “most excellently thought out and expressed” he found it to be.⁴⁵ Tellingly, government researchers and academics were featured along with mill men in the personal sections of the journals, such as *Textile Industries*’ “Notes about the Men you Know.”

Convincing workers to “catch up spiritually with the cause of scientific advancement” proved to be a more difficult task. It was not uncommon for mill hands to vigorously oppose the introduction of new machines or processes, even after TWUA leaders made it official policy to allow management to streamline restructuring.⁴⁶ But rank and file workers had very few reasons to be optimistic about their chances in the

⁴⁴ Anon., “Comments on April Editorial: ‘How Far Must We Go?’” *Textile Industries* 114, no 5 (May, 1950): 163.

⁴⁵ “It is contended that most of the tribes of pre-Columbian American Indians were Communists...There seems to have been one very universal adjunct to Communism, and that was the destruction of the unproductive. When some tribesmen get too old to contribute their share to the communal store, the young people are said to push the old ones through a water hole down under the ice...Some tribes are said to have eaten the incompetent.” Anon., “Communists, Socialists, and other Reactionaries,” *Textile Industries* 112, no 4 (April, 1948), 86-87.

⁴⁶ See chapter two.

struggle. Their union leaders actively collaborated with management to “keep the industry competitive.”⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the federal government enthusiastically promoted “modernization” with direct funding and subsidies like favorable depreciation allowances and low interest loans. Even the language of restructuring worked against them. The term “modernization” implied progress, a step-forward from a necessarily “less modern” stage of development. Such an idiom positioned operatives who resisted new technologies as a priori “conservative” and “backward.”⁴⁸ The American Society of Mechanical Engineers resolved that “human engineering” would be needed to convert workers whom an editor of *Textile World* called “human maladjustments resist[ing] the advances of economics and engineering.”⁴⁹ Opponents of “progress” could be dismissed as “Luddites” and scorned for standing in the way of human advancement.⁵⁰

By the late 1940s, it was common practice for mills to hold “open houses” to show off their latest equipment to the community. While the stated purpose for such events was to foster closer relationships between mill and town, they might have also served to change the way mill hands felt about technological developments. Managers staged the open houses so that workers themselves became de facto tour guides; it was they who showcased the wonders of *their* machines to retired hands, community leaders, and their own families.⁵¹ In crucial ways, this set-up was reminiscent of what scholar Tony Bennett calls an “exhibition”—it was orchestrated not so much to display artifacts, but to exhibit the “preferred audience”—as arranged by planners—to itself. Perhaps the

⁴⁷ See chapter two.

⁴⁸ Talk on Workloads, 1949, Mss. 396, Box 103, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

⁴⁹ Howard Knowlton, “Human Engineering is Stressed by ASME,” *Textile World* 98, no 3 (March, 1948): 137.

⁵⁰ Editor, “An Answer to the Luddites,” *Textile Industries* 112, no 9 (September, 1948): 115.

⁵¹ For example, see “Calhoun Mills Holds Open House,” *Textile Industries* 114, no 3 (March, 1950): 95.

most important audience at the open house was not the community members on tour, but the tour guides who were staged to see themselves as on the side of capital, to take pride in *their* control over technology, “to know rather than be known, to become the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge.”⁵²

It was not just bosses who tried to convince mill hands to welcome new machines—and the new work assignments that came with them. Historian William Hartford finds that after the war, union officials began adding a column called “On the Job” to *Textile Labor* that “described recent technological breakthroughs” to workers, “explained why employers would need to implement them to remain competitive,” and “provid[ed] assurance that the union would be there to protect them” when it happened.”⁵³ Although union leaders privately conceded “the link between new machinery and more work,”⁵⁴ to the rank and file they depicted modernization as a good thing for workers. In an article about a new warp spooling machine, for example, they downplayed the fact that the equipment would bring layoffs and deskilled the task. “The machine is reported to offer a greater degree of safety,” the writer assured. “It is reported to be from one and a half to three times faster than other spoolers... Workers will substantially increase their productivity.”⁵⁵ According to economist Donald Stabile, in his exegesis on the thought of Solomon Barkin, the Research Director of the TWUA who wrote the column, Barkin felt that “workers might have to be taught to accept the changes that technology brought, for such acceptance would not automatically happen.” “That

⁵² Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” *New Formations* 4 (Spring, 1988): 73-102, 76.

⁵³ William Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility? Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 104.

⁵⁴ Minutes of the Woolen and Worsted Policy Committee, July 11, 1951, Mss. 396, Box 276, TWUA Rcds., SHSW

⁵⁵ Anon., “On the Job,” *Textile Labor*, August 20, 1949.

outlook,” Barkin assumed, “was another service a union or its research staff could render to workers.”⁵⁶

Bureaucrats in the union used the same language as mill men to describe the restructuring of the industry. “Our union has never tried to prevent progress,” the TWUA declared in an advertisement in the *Boston Herald*, in response to American Woolen’s accusation that workers were “restricting the use of new machinery.”⁵⁷ “TWUA believes in progress,” exclaimed the editor of *Textile Labor*. “We want our industry to produce more goods at lower prices. Therefore we welcome new machinery which helps bring this about.”⁵⁸ In fact, in New England at least, union leaders seemed far more enthusiastic about “modernization” than did the mill owners who were in the process of cashing out of the business. “Our Union does not restrict the productivity of individual workers or interfere with the efficient introduction of new machinery...the blame [for inefficiency] could lay with Management,” asserted John Chupka, the head of the union’s woolen and worsted department. “More efficient operations [requires] greater expenditure of profits into a realistic modernization program. Unless this is done, no company can expect to compete in a competitive market irregardless as to whether their plants are located in the North or the South.”⁵⁹

The campaign to restructure production in the textile industry was just as much an ideological project as it was a technical one. It was important that the implementation of new machines and processes, no matter how much they disempowered workers, be seen as the “common sense” thing to do. Yet not only did mill men need to portray

⁵⁶ Stabile, *Activist Unionism*, 125.

⁵⁷ Clipping, February 22, 1952, 1A, Box 21, Woolen and Worsted folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

⁵⁸ Anon., Editorial, *Textile Labor*, June 18, 1949.

⁵⁹ John Chupka, Press Release in Response to Francis White, February 22, 1952, 1A, Box 21, Woolen and Worsted folder, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

technological development as a “social good,” they had to make sure all the credit for it was ascribed to the “system of free enterprise.” Considering how “modernization” was a thoroughly socialized endeavor, this was no small task. But the stakes could not be higher. When “in a word, the development of the social individual...his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body...appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth,” Marx says in the *Grundrisse*, “the theft of alien labour time...appears a miserable foundation in face of this new one.”⁶⁰ For mill men, and indeed the business community as a whole, it was crucial that the real foundation of wealth remain obscured, that it not “appear” at all.

Hence, the power and prestige of mill men, their self-estimation and social legitimacy, rested on the resuscitation of a discourse fashioned to defend preindustrial economic relationships. “Why America has the highest living standard in the world,” explained William Ruffin, the President of Erwin Mills in Durham and the first southern president of the National Association of Manufactures, was because “the belief in the individual meant that every man could develop his own talents, work out his own problems. It meant, if a man wanted to do better, the way was clear for him to do so. That desire for a better life, a better standard of living, turned into the drive to improve our economy.”⁶¹ “The American textile industry has been built on the American principle of free competition,” proclaimed the narrator of a propaganda film produced by Textile Information Services in 1953. “Down through the years its progress has been a steady march...In textiles as in all of our industries, the race to compete has led as it inevitably must to better mills, better methods, better men, and eventually to a better way of life,” he

⁶⁰ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973), 705.

⁶¹ Unknown author and title, *Daily News Record*, March 29, 1951, section 2, 12.

continued, in synch with patriotic background music and images of state-of-the-art southern plants.⁶² It was still the “lone investor,” with the foresight and courage to invest rather than consume his money, who formed the backbone of American prosperity. “Time was when the Investor was a necessary and honored figure in the American scheme of life,” opined an editor of *Textile Industries* in response to the recalcitrance of some southern mill hands before the 1948 recession. “The bait which tempted the Investor was, of course, the hope of profit, and in those days profit was considered a very first-class and legitimate thing. You could travel the length and breadth of America in those times and hardly find a person who would decry a profit, and had anyone done so, he would have been considered at least queer, and probably much worse.” “It never occurred to him,” the editor continued, “that he was not going to be a public benefactor in bringing a nice payroll into this place which needed one...He foolishly conceived the idea that the people who, in his inexperience he had assumed were to be benefited by this plant, would be happy to come into this nice modern plant and learn a few simple, easy manual tricks which he would teach them at his own expense in order that the marvelous new machinery could become productive.”⁶³

“Production,” reiterated Robert Jackson, the executive vice president of the American Cotton Manufacturers Institute, could only be “generated by the right of management to run its own business and make its own decision.” It could not “be achieved if we are forced to do battle at the same time on a second front—a battle for men’s minds—a war of ideas and ideals—a fight between the forward the concept of men

⁶² Louis Louft, *The Greater Goal: Human Dividends from American Industry* (Textile Information Service, 1953), 23 min., 19 sec.; from *Prelinger Archives*, MPEG <<http://archive.org/details/GreaterG1953>>, quote begins at 4 min., 23 sec.

⁶³ Editor, “The Investor,” *Textile Industries* 112, no. 10 (October, 1948): 85-86.

as a free and responsible individual and men as docile and regimented dependents.”⁶⁴

Mill owners, according to a speaker at the Alabama Cotton Association’s annual convention, had taken upon themselves the burden of being “Solomon and Midas wrapped up into one bundle.” “Not only are you men required to run your mills during these difficult times, but also most of you have the job of running your entire community or at least assuming the lion’s share of all civic enterprises. You are forced into an active part in politics to see that you have at least sound men in charge of your local affairs. You are called upon for liberal donations of time and money to churches, schools, hospitals, and recreation projects. Chambers of commerce and civic clubs depend upon you. You have to be a father confessor and nursemaid to all your employees.”⁶⁵

For their part, southern boosters who liked to consider themselves “progressive” pushed “free enterprise” discourse as a subtle way to erode community support for striking workers. Henderson Lanham, the self-proclaimed “pro-labor” Congressman from Northwest Georgia, in the midst of a 1951 strike in Cedartown told a crowd of workers on Labor Day that “Without a doubt, we have the greatest industrial system the world has ever seen. While most of the world has been in economic chaos, our American system of free enterprise, sparked by the profit motive, has been producing.”⁶⁶ Although Lanham was known to pander to the large population of industrial workers in his district (he was the only member of the Georgia Congressional Delegation to vote against Taft-Hartley), there is little doubt that his “up-town” friends in Cedartown (including the attorney of the

⁶⁴ Unknown, “Increased Production as Panacea for Inflation,” *Daily News Record*, April 2, 1951, 29.

⁶⁵ Harry Riemer, “Thomas Russell Speaks to Alabama Cotton Association,” *Daily News Record*, April 16, 1951, 1, 28.

⁶⁶ “Lanham’s Address to Polk County Labor Day Crowd,” *Cedartown Standard*, September 5, 1951.

struck mill)⁶⁷ had alerted him to the fact that national press about the strike “violence” was marring the area’s reputation as a good place for business.⁶⁸ Such publicity galvanized Lanham into action. “Laws of economics are not too well known or understood,” he lectured workers who were six months into the nation’s single longest strike of 1951. “As a matter of fact, economics has been called the ‘dismal science.’ Nevertheless, there are certain basic and fundamental principles of economics that must be observed...One of these elemental economic laws is that production is the key to our economy and to any real advance in the laborers’ welfare. We have not always understood this law in the past.” “At one time,” he told the two hundred and fifty men and women who walked out over the stretch-out—all of whom would lose their jobs⁶⁹—“it was believed that the work of each individual should be limited to so to furnish more work for others.” “This theory was exploded long ago by Adam Smith.”⁷⁰

Union leaders also propagated what was basically a liberal understanding of capitalism: that there was nothing inherently incompatible between the interests of capital and labor, that both capitalists and labor served a vital social purpose, and that with proper government regulation and—of course—with a strong union presence, capitalism could generate a tremendous amount of wealth without vitiating democracy in the process. When managers insisted that the success of the industry depended on their “freedom” to “increase efficiency,” i.e. institute the speedup, union officials echoed their prescriptions. “If we’re going to win the kind of life we should have in America and all

⁶⁷ Mundy to Lanham, series IV, box 39, folder 1, Henderson Lanham Papers, Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens.

⁶⁸ “We are positive that reports of these recent acts of lawlessness which were published in newspapers from coast to coast could do nothing but present Cedartown and Polk County in a most unfavorable light,” wrote the Chamber of Commerce in a newspaper advertisement. *Cedartown Standard*, June 29, 1951.

⁶⁹ Organizing Report, August 8 1952, 2A, Box 6, TWUA Rcds., SHSW.

⁷⁰ “Lanham’s Address to Polk County Labor Day Crowd,” *Cedartown Standard*, September 5, 1951

over the world, we can't have artificial restrictions on production by either management or labor," reasoned the editor of the TWUA's organ.⁷¹ The real need of the textile industry, declared Baldanzi, was for "efficient and enterprising management." "The problem which confronts us," he claimed, was "the manufacturers who are showing lack of enterprise and who are refusing to build up through adequate modernization of equipment, management, merchandising, research facilities, product development and sales organization, the type of enterprise required in the year of 1949." "The competent manufacturer in New England is at no disadvantage."⁷² The union, wrote Solomon Barkin, the brains of the TWUA, in the *Harvard Business Review*, recognized the "needs for managerial discretion" and "management's need for freedom to adjust operations and reduce costs." "This kind of arrangement could not be made if the union concerned did not enjoy reasonably enlightened leadership (with a competent technical staff) and cooperative relationship with management," Barkin assured.⁷³

"The idea that in a pluralistic society, government and labor could act as a counterforce to business through collective bargaining would follow Barkin throughout his life and work," explains Donald Stabile. "He had always been skeptical of the claims of Marxian socialists and communists. As a reformer, he sought to find a middle way between capitalism and socialism along the lines of industrial democracy, placing himself squarely in the camp of the industrial pluralists." "Instead of holding to a conflict theory

⁷¹ Anon., Editorial, *Textile Labor*, March 19, 1949

⁷² Talk on Workloads, 1949, Mss. 396, Box 103, TWUA Rcds., SHSW

⁷³ Solomon Barkin, "Handling Work Assignment Changes," *Harvard Business Review*, June 1, 1947, 473-484, 473-4.

of labor relations, Barkin believed that a system of labor and management cooperation is possible and that it would I pose a higher level of responsibility on both parties.”⁷⁴

Union leaders, in short, did not challenge the legitimacy of the stretch-out or the socio-political structures that enabled it. Not even the suffering of the workers they represented could shake their notion of “progress.”

⁷⁴ Stabile, *Activist Unionism*, 23, 89.

EPILOGUE

When textile mill owners launched their aggressive campaign to stretch out their workers in the aftermath of the 1948 recession, leaders of the TWUA showed more concern about the future of their organization than they did about the bodily integrity of the men and women who paid them dues. Without consulting the rank and file, union officials decided that shop floor issues would no longer be a priority. They had come to realize that mill owners needed to exercise their “right to manage” in order to stay competitive and were not about to rally mill hands to obstruct the accumulation of capital. Instead, TWUA bureaucrats cut their losses and followed their survival instincts. They would market themselves to mills as “agents of industrial transition,” attempt to convince the rank and file that technological innovation was a good thing, and help establish as “common sense” the belief that capitalism could accommodate the interests of both capital and labor. Rather than fan the flames of worker discontent against the stretch-out, the TWUA played the part of a cold, wet blanket. In a word, it was an agent of deradicalization.

According to historian Jeremy Brecher, there are inherent contradictions built into the union/worker relationship. Unions have a vested interest in the preservation of capitalism. The organizations themselves cannot continue to exist unless the firms they “bargain” with—their host organisms, so to speak—succeed. The opposite, of course, does not hold true; and union leaders can become suddenly militant when their organizations (not just workers) are attacked. Such officials—bureaucrats, administrators,

and specialists—have a very real stake in the “successful maintenance of relations between workers and management.” They have a relationship to capital that is fundamentally different from the workers they purport to represent.¹

The problem of unions, however, cannot be understood without taking into consideration the role of the capitalist state. Capitalism is not an economic system—it is a social system that rests on political domination. In the case of the textile industry, the state was not waiting on the sidelines, struggling to decide whether it should help capital or labor; it was in the thick of the battle from the beginning, sponsoring studies, offering subsidies, and cracking skulls to make sure that one of the nation’s largest capitalist sectors would continue to remain viable.

As officially recognized by the state and integrated into the apparatus of the government, unions are severely restrained from taking measures that would breakdown the process of accumulation. Yet they must continue to look toward the state for redress and for protection, and they encourage workers to do the same. The TWUA did not call for sympathy strikes, secondary boycotts, wildcats, or slowdowns (all of which would have been illegal), but for arbitration and government investigations. Needless to say, they vehemently discouraged mill hands from being what they called “violent,” even though strikers had the most success at keeping their plants closed down when scabs were terrified to come to work and local businesses were terrified to cut off their credit.² And yet, in terms of keeping the union alive, they were successful; the TWUA salvaged just enough dues paying members to keep the hierarchy afloat.

¹ Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), X-XVII.

² Industrial “violence,” it needs to be said, has been defined by the state, capital, unions, and scholars (including labor historians) to include only the actions that can be undertaken by workers—like sabotage, murder, property destruction, assault, and so on. Forcing men and women to sacrifice their bodies and dignity for the sake of capital apparently does not count.

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