

Rank-and-File Radicalism within the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s

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In the following article are presented some unusual features of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, the only period in which the KKK was a mass movement. In no way should this essay be interpreted as an endorsement of any aspect of this version of the Klan or of any other parts of Klan activity. Nonetheless, the loathsome nature of the KKK of today should not blind us to what took place within the Klan 70 years ago, in various places and against the wishes and ideology of the Klan itself.

In the U.S. at least, racism is certainly one of the most crudely reified phenomena. The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s is one of the two or three most important — and most ignored — social movements of 20th century America. These two data are the essential preface to this essay.

Writing at the beginning of 1924, Stanley Frost accurately surveyed the Klan at the crest of its power: “The Ku Klux Klan has become the most vigorous, active and effective organization in American life outside business.”¹ Depending on one’s choice of sources, KKK membership in 1924 can be estimated at anywhere between two and eight million.²

And yet, the nature of this movement has been largely unexplored or misunderstood. In the fairly thin literature on the subject, the Klan phenomenon is usually described simply as ‘nativism’. A favorite in the lexicon of orthodox historians, the term refers to an irrationality, racism, and backwardness supposedly endemic to the poorer and less-educated classes, and tending to break out in episodic bouts of violently-expressed prejudice. Emerson Loucks’ *The Ku Klux Klan in Pennsylvania: A Study of Nativism* is a typical example. Its preface begins with, “The revived KKK and its stormy career is but one chapter in the history of American nativism,” the first chapter is entitled, “Some Beginnings of Nativism,” and in the book’s concluding paragraph we learn that “Nativism has shown itself to be a perennial.”³

Kenneth Jackson, with his *The Ku Klux Klan in the City*, has been one of a very few commentators to go beyond the amorphous ‘nativism’ thesis and also challenge several of the prevailing

¹ Stanley Frost, *The Challenge of the Klan* (New York, 1969), p.1.

² Between five and six million is probably the soundest figure. Morrison and Commager found “garnered in the Northeast and Midwest an all-time peak of six million members.” *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York, 1950), vol. II, p.556. Jonathon Daniels estimated that “the supposedly Southern organization had sprawled continentally from beginnings in Atlanta in 1915, up from 100,000 members in 1921 to 5,000,000 in 1924.” *The Time Between the Wars* (Garden City, New York, 1966), p. 108.

³ Emerson Loucks, *The Ku Klux Klan in Pennsylvania: A Study of Nativism* (New York, 1936), pp. vi, 1, 198.

stereotypes of the Klan. He argues forcefully that “the Invisible Empire of the 1920s was neither predominantly southern, nor rural, nor white supremacist, nor violent.”⁴ Carl Degler’s succinct comments corroborate the non-southern characterization quite ably: “Significantly, the single piece of indisputable Klan legislation enacted anywhere was the school law in Oregon; the state most thoroughly controlled by the Klan was Indiana; and the largest Klan membership in any state was that in Ohio. On the other hand, several southern states like Mississippi, Virginia, and South Carolina hardly saw the Klan or felt its influence.”⁵ Jackson’s statistics show clearly the Klan’s northern base, with only one southern state, Texas, among the eight states with the largest membership.⁶ It would be difficult to even begin to cite Jackson’s evidence in favor of terming the Klan an urban phenomenon, inasmuch as his whole book testifies to this characterization. It may be interesting to note, however, the ten urban areas with the most Klansmen. Principally industrial and all but one of them outside the South, they are, in descending order: Chicago, Indianapolis, Philadelphia-Camden, Detroit, Denver, Portland, Atlanta, Los Angeles-Long Beach, Youngstown-Warren, and Pittsburgh-Carnegie.⁷

The notion of the KKK as an essentially racist organization is similarly challenged by Jackson. As Robert Moats Miller put it, “in great areas of the country where the Klan was powerful the Negro population was insignificant, and in fact, it is probable that had not a single Negro lived in the United States, a Klan-type order would have emerged.”⁸ And Robert Duffus, writing for the June 1923 *World’s Week*, conceded: “while the racial situation contributed to a state of mind favorable to Ku Kluxism, curiously it did not figure prominently in the Klan’s career.”⁹ The Klan in fact tried to organize “colored divisions” in Indiana and other states, to the amazement of historian Kathleen Blee.¹⁰ Degler, who wrongly considered vigilantism to be the core trait of the Klan, admitted that such violence as there was “was directed against white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants rather than against the minorities.”¹¹

Which brings us to the fourth and last point of Jackson’s thesis, that the KKK was not predominantly violent. Again, his conclusions seem valid despite the widespread image of a lynch-mad, terroristic Klan. The post-war race riots of 1919 in Washington, Chicago, and East St. Louis, for example, occurred before there were any Klansmen in those cities,¹² and in the 1920s, when the Klan grew to its great strength, the number of lynchings in the U.S. dropped to less than half the annual average of pre-war years¹³ and a far smaller fraction than that by comparison with the immediately post-war years. In the words of Preston Slosson, “By a curious anomaly, in

⁴ Kenneth Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915–1930* (New York, 1967), p. xi.

⁵ Carl Degler, “A Century of the Klans: A Review Article,” *Journal of Southern History* (November 1965), pp. 442–443.

⁶ Jackson, op.cit., p. 237.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁸ Robert Moats Miller, “The Ku Klux Klan,” from *The Twenties: Change and Continuity*, John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner and David Brody, eds. (Columbus, 1968), p. 218.

⁹ Robert L. Duffus, “How the Ku Klux Klan Sells Hate,” *World’s Week* (June, 1923), p. 179.

¹⁰ Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan* (Berkeley, 1991), p. 169.

¹¹ Degler, op.cit., p. 437.

¹² William Simmons, head of the Klan in 1921, testified — without challenge — that the post-war race riots in Washington, East St. Louis and Chicago took place before there were any Klan members in those cities. See *Hearings Before the Committee on Rules: House of Representatives, Sixty-Seventh Congress* (Washington, 1921), p. 75.

¹³ Daniel Snowman, USA: *The Twenties to Viet Nam* (London, 1968), p.37.

spite of...the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, the old American custom of lynch law fell into almost complete disuse.”¹⁴

A survey of *Literary Digest* (conservative) and *The Nation* (liberal) for 1922–1923 reveals several reported instances in which the Klan was blamed for violence it did not perpetrate and unfairly deprived of its rights.¹⁵ Its enemies frequently included local or state establishments, and were generally far from being meek and powerless victims.

If the Ku Klux Klan, then, was not predominantly southern, rural, racist, or violent, just what was the nature of this strange force which grew to such power so rapidly and spontaneously in the early-middle '20s — and declined at least as quickly by 1925? The orthodox ‘nativism’ answer asserts that it was just another of the periodic, unthinking and reactionary efforts of the ignorant to turn back the clock, and therefore futile and short-lived. A post-Jackson, ‘neo-nativist’ position might even concede the points about racism and violence not being determinant, and still essentially maintain this point of view, of recurrent, blind efforts to restore an inchoate but rightist version of the past.

But a very strong pattern regarding the Klan introduces doubts about this outlook, namely, that militantly progressive or radical activities have often closely preceded, coincided with, or closely followed strong KKK efforts, and have involved the same participants. Oklahoma, for example, experienced in a mere ten years the growth and decline of the largest state branch of the Socialist Party, and the rise of one of the strongest Klan movements.¹⁶ In Williamson County, Illinois, an interracial crowd of union coal miners stormed a mine being worked by strike-breakers and killed twenty of them. The community supported the miners’ action and refused to convict any of the participants in this so-called Herrin Massacre of 1922, which had captured the nation’s attention. Within two years, Herrin and the rest of Williamson County backed one of the very strongest local Klan organizations in the country.¹⁷ The violently suppressed strikes of the southern Appalachian Piedmont textile workers in 1929, among the most bitterly fought in twentieth century labor history,¹⁸ took place at the time of or immediately following great Klan strength in many of the same mill towns. The rubber workers of the huge tire-building plants of Akron, the first to widely employ the effective sit-down strike weapon in the early 1930s, formed a large part of that city’s very sizeable Klan membership,¹⁹ or had come from Appalachian regions where the KKK was also strong. In 1934, the very militant and interracial Southern Tenant Farmers Union was formed, and would face the flight of its leaders, the indifference of organized labor, and the machine-guns of the large landholders. Many of its active members were former

¹⁴ Preston W. Slosson, *The Great Crusade and After* (New York, 1930), p. 258.

¹⁵ See *Literary Digest*: “Quaint Customs and Methods of the KKK,” (August 5, 1922) A Defense of the Ku Klux Klan,” (January 20, 1923), esp. pp. 18–19; “The Klan as the Victim of Mob Violence,” (September 8, 1923), p. 12; *The Nation*: “Even the Klan Has Rights,” (December 13, 1922), p. 654.

¹⁶ See Garin Burban’s “Agrarian Radicals and Their Opponents: Political Conflicts in Southern Oklahoma, 1910–1924,” *Journal of American History* (June 1971). Burbank argues that the Socialist Party and the Klan had different constituencies in Oklahoma, but much of his own data contradicts this conclusion. Esp. pp. 20–21.

¹⁷ See Paul M. Angle’s *Bloody Williamson* (New York, 1952), esp. pp. 4, 210 28–29, 137–138.

¹⁸ See Irving Bernstein’s *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920–1933* (Baltimore, 1966), pp. 1–43.

¹⁹ Jackson, op.cit, p. 239. Akron had the eighth largest membership of U.S. cities.

Klansmen.²⁰ And observers of the United Auto Workers have claimed that some of the most militant activists in auto were former Klansmen.²¹

The key to all these examples of apparently disparate loyalties is a simple one. As I will show, not only did some Klansmen hold relatively radical opinions while members of the Invisible Order, but in fact used the Klan, on occasion, as a vehicle for radical social change. The record in this area, though not inaccessible, has remained completely undeveloped.

The rise of the Klan began with the sharp economic depression that struck in the fall of 1920. In the South, desperate farmers organized under the Klan banner in an effort to force up the price of cotton by restricting its sale. "All throughout the fall and winter of 1920–22 masked bands roamed the countryside warning ginneries and warehouses to close until prices advanced. Sometimes they set fire to establishments that defied their edict."²² It was from this start that the Klan really began to grow and to spread to the North, crossing the Mason-Dixon line in the winter of 1920–21.²³

The KKK leadership "disavowed and apparently disapproved of"²⁴ this aggressive economic activism, and it is important to note that more often than not there was tension or opposition between officials and members, a point I will return to later. In a southern union hall in 1933, Sherwood Anderson queried a local reporter about the use of the Klan for economic struggles: "This particular hall had formerly been used by a Ku Klux Klan organization and I asked the newspaper man, 'How many of these people [textile workers] were in on that?' 'A good many,' he said. He thought the Ku Klux Klan had been rather an outlet for the workers when America was outwardly so prosperous. 'The boom market never got down to these,' he said, making a sweeping movement with his arm."²⁵ Klan officials never spoke in favor of such uses of the Klan, but it was the economic and social needs that often drew people to the Klan, rather than religious, patriotic, or strictly fraternal ones.²⁶

This is not to say that there wasn't a multiplicity of contributing factors usually present as the new Klan rose to prominence. There was a widespread feeling that the "Glorious Crusade" of World War I had been a swindle. There was the desperate boredom and monotony of regimented work-lives. To this latter frustration, a KKK newspaper appealed for new members with the banner, "JUST TO PEP UP THE GAME. THIS SLOW LIFE IS KILLING ME."²⁷ And with these feelings, too, it is quite easy to imagine a form of progressive social or political activism being the result. As Stanley Frost commented in 1924, "the Klan movement seems to be another expression of the general unrest and dissatisfaction with both local and national conditions — the high cost of living, social injustice, inequality..."²⁸ Or, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. offhandedly revealed in a

²⁰ See Thomas R. Brooks' *Toil and Trouble* (New York, 1971), p. 368, and Jerold S. Auerbach's *Labor and Liberty: The LaFollette Committee and the New Deal* (Indianapolis, 1966), p. 38.

²¹ Irving Howe and B.J. Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther* (New York, 1949), p. 9.

²² John Higham, *Strangers in the Land* (New York, 1968), pp. 289- 290.

²³ Donald A. Crownover, "The Ku Klux Klan in Lancaster County, 1923–1924," *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society* (1964, No.2), p. 64.

²⁴ Higham, op.cit., p. 290.

²⁵ Sherwood Anderson, *Puzzled America* (New York, 1935), p. 114.

²⁶ Neill Herring, a veteran progressive and scholar from Atlanta, has testified to this kind of utilization of Klan organization as enabled by a structure that "left a fair measure of local independence of action." Letter to author, March 25, 1975.

²⁷ Miller, op.cit., p. 224.

²⁸ Frost, op.cit., p. 270.

comment about Huey Long, “despite his poor white sympathies, he did not, like Hugo Black in Alabama, join the Klan.”²⁹

The activities of the Klan have very commonly been referred to as “moral reform,” and certainly this kind of effort was common. Articles such as, “Behind the White Hoods: The Regeneration of Oklahoma,” and “Night-Riding Reformers,” from Fall 1923 issues of *The Outlook* bespeak this side of Klan motivation.³⁰ They tell how the Klan cleaned up gangs of organized crime and combated vice and political corruption in Oklahoma and Indiana, apparently with a minimum of violence or vigilantism. Also widespread were Klan attempts to put bootleggers out of business, though we might recall here that prohibition has frequently been endorsed by labor partisans, from the opinion that the often high alcohol consumption rates among workers weakened the labor movement. In fact, the Klan not infrequently attacked liquor and saloon interests explicitly as forces that kept working people down.

It is on the plane of ‘moral’ issues, furthermore, that another stereotype regarding the KKK — that of its total moral intolerance — dissolves at least somewhat under scrutiny. Charles Bowles, the almost successful write-in Klan candidate in the 1924 Detroit may-oralty race, was a divorce lawyer (as well as being pro-public works). It cannot be denied that anti-Catholicism was a major plank of Klan appeal in many places, such as Oregon. But at least part of this attitude stemmed from a “belief that the Catholic Church was a major obstacle in the struggle for women’s suffrage and equality.”³¹

Margaret Sanger, the birth control pioneer, gave a lecture to Klanswomen in Silver Lake, New Jersey, a speaking engagement she accepted with no little trepidation. She feared that if she “uttered one word, such as abortion, outside the usual vocabulary of these women they would go off into hysteria.” Actually, a real rapport was established and the evening was a great success. “A dozen invitations to speak to similar groups were proffered. The conversation went on and on, and when we were finally through it was too late to return to New York.”³²

At any rate, a connection can be argued between ‘moral’ reform and more fundamental reform attempts. “I wonder if anybody could ever find any connection between this town’s evident immoralities and some of the plant’s evident dissatisfaction?”³³ pondered Whiting Williams in 1921. He decided in the affirmative, that vice in the community is the result of anger in the mill or factory. And Klan members often showed an interest in also combating what they saw as the causes of ‘immoralities’ rather than simply their manifestations.

Hiram Evans, a head of the Klan, admitted in a rare interview in 1923 that “There has been a widespread feeling among Klansmen that in the last few years the operation of the National Government has shown weakness indicating a possible need of rather fundamental reform.”³⁴ A 1923 letter to the editor of *The New Republic* details this awareness of the need for deep-seated changes. Written by an opponent of the Klan, the passage expresses “The Why of the Klan”:

“First: Throughout all classes there is a growing skepticism of democracy, especially of the current American brand. Many Americans believe there is little even-handed justice administered

²⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston, 1960), p. 45.

³⁰ Stanley Frost, “Night-Riding Reformers,” *The Outlook* (November 14, 1923); Frost “Behind the White Hoods; The Regeneration of Oklahoma,” *The Outlook* (November 21, 1923).

³¹ Robert Klan Goldberg, *Hooded Empire: the Ku Klux Klan in Colorado* (Urbana, 1981), p. 23.

³² Margaret Sanger, *An Autobiography* (New York, 1938), pp. 366- 367.

³³ Frost, op.cit., p. 86.

³⁴ Frost, op.cit., p. 86.

in the courts; that a poor man has little chance against a rich one; that many judges practically buy their places on the bench or are put there by powerful interests. The strong, able young man comes out of college ready to do his part in politics, but with the settled conviction that unless he can give full time there is no use 'bucking up against the machine.' Furthermore he believes the machines to be equally corrupt. The miner in West Virginia sees the power of the state enlisted on the side of the mine owner."³⁵

Throughout the literature there is a strongly prevailing tendency to deal with the social composition of Klan membership by ignoring it altogether, or, more commonly, by referring to it in passing as "middle class." This approach enabled John Mecklin, whose *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (1924) is regarded as a classic, to say that "The average Klansman is far more in sympathy with capital than with labor."³⁶ In large part this stems from looking at the top Klan officials, rather than at the rank and file members. William Simmons, D.C. Stephenson, and Hiram Evans, the men who presided over the Klan in the '20s had been, respectively, a minister, a coal dealer, and a dentist. But the membership definitely did not share this wholly "middle class" makeup.

Kenneth Jackson only partially avoids the error by terming the Klan a "lower middle-class movement,"³⁷ a vague appellation which he corrects shortly thereafter: "The greatest source of Klan support came from rank and file non-union, blue-collar employees of large businesses and factories."³⁸

Returning to the subject of socio-political attitudes of Klan members, available evidence strikingly confirms my contention of a sometimes quite radical frame of mind. In the spring of 1924, *The Outlook* magazine conducted a "Platform of the People" poll by mail. When it was found that an organizational request for ten thousand ballots came from the New Jersey and Pennsylvania Ku Klux Klan, pink ballots were supplied so that they could be separately tabulated. To quote the article, "Pink Ballots for the Ku Klux Klan": "The ballots returned all came from towns and small cities in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Of the total of 1,139 voters, 490 listed themselves as Republicans, only 97 as Democrats, and 552 as Independents. Among them are 243 women."³⁹ Approximately two-thirds (over 700) responded regarding their occupations. "The largest single group (209) is that of skilled workmen; the next (115) is of laborers." The rest includes workers (e.g. "railway men") and farmers, plus a scattering of professionals and merchants. The women who listed their occupations were mainly housewives.

Despite the generally high percentages of abstention on most of the issues, the results on the following selected topics show clearly radical leanings:⁴⁰

³⁵ Mary H. Herring, "the Why of the Klan," (Correspondence) *The New Republic* (February 23, 1923), p. 289.

³⁶ John Moffat Mecklin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (New York, 1924), p. 98.

³⁷ Jackson, op.cit., p. 240.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

³⁹ "Pink Ballots for the Ku Klux Klan," *The Outlook* (June 25, 1924), pp. 306-307.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 307-308. My percentages involve slight approximations; they are based on averaging the percentages given for Republicans, Democrats, and Independents proportionally.

Percent	Approved:	Ignored:	Condemned:
“Compulsory freight reduction”	30	77	3
“Nationalization of the railroads with cooperative administration by workers, shippers, and public”	24	72	4
“Federal Aid for Farmers” Co-operatives”	30	68	2
“Federal purchase of wheat”	20	68	2
“Price fixing of staple farm products”	23	75	5
“Further extension of farm credit”	32	67	1
“Equal social, legal, and industrial rights for women”	41	56	3
“Amendment enabling Congress to prevent exploitation of children in industry”	45	54	1
“Federal Anti-Lynching Law”	38	60	2
“Establish Federal Employment Bureau”	37	60	3
“Extension of principle of Federal aid for education”	91	9	0
“Abolition of injunctions in labor disputes”	20	73	7
“Nationalization, and democratic administration by technicians, workers, and consumers, of coal mines”	23	72	5
“Government control and distribution of high-power transmission”	33	64	3

Also favored were immigration restriction and prohibition. *The Outlook*, obviously displeased with the response, categorized the Klan participants as “more inclined to accept panaceas at face value, willing to go farther. In general,” they concluded, “this leads to greater radicalism, or ‘progressivism.’”⁴¹ The Klan movement declined rapidly within a year of the poll, and research substantiates the enduring validity of *The Outlook* editors’ claim that “The present table provides the only analysis that has ever been made of the political views of members of the Ku Klux Klan.”⁴²

With this kind of data, it is less surprising to find, for example, that the Socialist Party and the Klan formed a 1924 electoral alliance in Milwaukee to elect John Kleist, a Socialist and a Klansman, to the Wisconsin Supreme Court.⁴³ Robert O. Nesbitt perceived, in Wisconsin, a “tendency for German Socialists, whose most conspicuous opponents were Catholic clergy, to join the Klan.”⁴⁴ The economic populist Walter Pierce was elected governor in Oregon in 1922 by a strong agricultural protest vote, including the endorsement of the Klan and the Socialist Party. Klan candidates promised to cut taxes in half, reduce phone rates, and give aid to distressed farmers.⁴⁵ A recent study of the Klan in LaGrande, Oregon revealed that it “played a substantial role in supporting the strikers” during the nationwide railworkers’ strike of 1922.⁴⁶

In fact, the KKK appealed not infrequently to militant workers, despite the persistent stereotype of the Klan’s anti-labor bent. An August 1923 *World’s Work* article described strong worker support for the Klan in Kansas; during the state-wide railroad strike there in 1922, the strikers “actually did flock into the Klan in what seems to have been large numbers.”⁴⁷

Charles Alexander, who wrote the highly regarded *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*, though generally subscribing to the anti-labor Klan reputation, confessed his own inability to confirm this image. Referring to himself, he said, “the writer has come across only two instances of direct conflict between southwestern Klansmen and union organizers, one in Arkansas and one in Louisiana.”⁴⁸ Writing of Oklahoma, Carter Blue Clark judged that “violence against the International (sic) Workers of the World and radical farm and labor groups was rare...”⁴⁹ He found sixty-eight incidents of Klan-related violence between 1921 and 1925, only two of which belonged to the “Unionization/Radicalism” category.⁵⁰

Goldberg’s study of the KKK in Colorado found that “despite coal strikes in 1921, 1922, and 1927, which primarily involved foreign — born miners, the Klan never resorted to the language of the Red Scare.” During the Wobbly-led strike of 1927, in fact, the Canon City Klan formed an alliance with the IWW against their common enemy, the ruling elite.⁵¹

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁴³ Jackson, *op.cit.*, p. 162.

⁴⁴ Robert O. Nesbitt, *Wisconsin: A History* (Madison, 1973), p. 467.

⁴⁵ George S. Turnbull, *An Oregon Crusader* (Portland, 1955), p. 150. “Promises and Lies,” (editorial) *Capital Journal* (Salem, October 31, 1922).

⁴⁶ David A. Horowitz, “The Ku Klux Klan in LaGrande, Oregon,” *The Invisible Empire in the West*, ed. Shawn Lay (Urbana, 1992), p. 195.

⁴⁷ Robert L. Duffus, “The Ku Klux Klan in the Middle West,” *World’s Work* (August, 1923), p. 365.

⁴⁸ Charles Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Louisville, 1965), p. 25.

⁴⁹ Carter Blue Clark, *A History of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma*. Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Oklahoma, 1976), p. 115.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁵¹ Goldberg, *op.cit.*, pp. 122, 146.

Virginia Durr, who was Henry Wallace's Progressive Party running mate in 1948, gives us a picture of the Klan of the '20s and labor in the Birmingham area:

"The unions were broken...So, the Ku Klux Klan was formed at that point as a kind of underground union and unless you were there and knew it, nobody will believe it. They will say, 'Oh, but the Klan was against the unions.' Well, it wasn't."⁵²

Gerald Dunne found that "ninety percent of Birmingham's union members were also involved with the Klan,"⁵³ and that the Klan in the state at large attacked the Alabama Power Company and the influence of the ruling Bankhead family while campaigning for public control of the Muscle Shoals dam project and government medical insurance.⁵⁴

In the '20s the corrupt and inert officialdom of the United Mine Workers was presided over by the autocratic John L. Lewis. Ku Kluxers in the union, though they had been officially barred from membership in 1921, formed a coalition with leftists at the 1924 convention in a fight for union democracy: "Then the radical- s...combined with the sympathizers of the hooded order to strip Mr. Lewis of the power to appoint organizers."⁵⁵ Though this combination was narrowly defeated, "Lewis was outvoted in a first test of the question as to whether local executives and organizers should be appointed by the national officials or by the rank and file. The insurgents, headed by the deposed Alexander Howat and spurred on by the members of the Ku Klux Klan, who exerted a lobbying influence from the convention doorways, combined to carry the first vote."⁵⁶ Though officially denied membership, strongly pro-UMW sources have admitted that, in fact, a great many union members were Klansmen. McDonald and Lynch, for example, estimated that in 1924 eighty percent of UMW District 11 (Indiana) members were enrolled in the KKK⁵⁷. An examination of the *Proceedings* of the 1924 union convention supports this point; areas of Klan strength, such as Indiana, Illinois and Pennsylvania voted very decisively against Lewis, in favor of the election of organizers by the rank and file.⁵⁸

A *New Republic* article in March, 1924 told of the strength of the Klan in Williamson County, Illinois, scene of the "Herrin Massacre" referred to above. The anti-Klan piece sadly shook its head at this turn of events in an area of "one hundred percent unionism."⁵⁹ Buried in the middle of the account is the key to the situation, an accurate if grudging concession that "the inaction of their local labor leaders gave to the Ku Klux Klan a following among the miners."⁶⁰

The following oral history account by Aaron Barkham, a West Virginia miner, is a perfect illustration of the Klan as a vehicle of class struggle — and of the reason for its official denunciation by the UMW. It is worth quoting at length:

"About that time 1929, in Logan County, West Virginia, a bunch of strike-breakers come in with shotguns and axe handles. Tried to break up union meetings. The UMW

⁵² Virginia Durr, Interview (conducted by Susan Thrasher and Jacque Hall, May 13–15, 1975), University of North Carolina Oral History project.

⁵³ Gerald T. Dunne, *Hugo Black and the Judicial Revolution* (New York, 1977), p. 114.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 118, 121.

⁵⁵ Cecil Carnes, *John L. Lewis* (New York, 1936), p. 116.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵⁷ David J. McDonald and Edward A. Lynch, *Coal and Unionism* (Silver Spring, Md, 1939), p. 161.

⁵⁸ United Mine Workers of America, *Proceedings of the Twenty-Ninth Consecutive and Sixth Biennial Convention* (Indianapolis, 1924), p. 686.

⁵⁹ "Ku Kluxing in the Miners' Country," *The New Republic* (March 26, 1924), p. 123.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

deteriorated and went back to almost no existence. It didn't particularly get full strength till about 1949. And it don't much today in West Virginia. So most people ganged up and formed the Ku Kluck Klan."

The Ku Klux was the real controllin' factor in the community. It was the law. It was in power to about 1932. My dad was one of the leaders til he died. The company called in the army to get the Ku Klux out, but it didn't work. The union and the Ku Klux was about the same thing."

The superintendent of the mine got the big idea of makin' it rougher than it was. They hauled him off in a meat wagon, and about ten more of the company officials. Had the mine shut down. They didn't kill 'em, but they didn't come back. They whipped one of the foremen and got him out of the county. They gave him twelve hours to get out, get his family out."

The UMW had a field representative, he was a lawyer. They tarred and feathered 'im for tryin' to edge in with the company. He come around, got mad, tryin' to tell us we were wrong, when we called a wildcat. He was takin' the side of the company. I used a stick to help tar 'im. And it wasn't the first time."

The Ku Klux was formed on behalf of people that wanted a decent living, both black and white. Half the coal camp was colored. It wasn't anti-colored. The black people had the same responsibilities as the white. Their lawn was just as green as the white man's. They got the same rate of pay. There was two colored who belonged to it. I remember those two niggers comin' around my father and askin' questions about it. They joined. The pastor of our community church was a colored man. He was Ku Klux. It was the only protection the workin' man had."

Sure, the company tried to play one agin' the other. But it didn't work. The colored and the whites lived side by side. It was somethin' like a checkerboard. There'd be a white family and a colored family. No sir, there was no racial problem. Yeah, they had a certain feelin' about the colored. They sure did. And they had a certain feelin' about the white, too. Anyone come into the community had unsatisfactory dealin's, if it was colored or white, he didn't stay."⁶¹

Why have the few, standard accounts of the Klan been seemingly so far off? Principally because they have failed to look at the Klan phenomenon "from the bottom up," to see KKK participants as historical subjects. One result of this is to have overlooked much material altogether. As most labor attention focuses on the unions at the expense of the individual workers, so has the Klan been ignored as a movement relevant to the history of working people. *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920–1933*, by Irving Bernstein, is widely regarded as the best treatment of labor in the 1920s. It does not mention the Ku Klux Klan. Similarly, the Lynds' *Middletown*, that premier sociological study of Muncie, Indiana in the '20s, barely mentions the Klan⁶² and then only in terms of a most marginal area, religious preference.⁶³

⁶¹ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times* (New York, 1970), pp. 229–230.

⁶² Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown* (New York, 1929), pp. 333, 364–366, 479.

⁶³ George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South* (Baton Rouge, 1967), p. 196: "careful historians have found that neither the major church bodies and periodicals nor fundamentalist leaders ever worked closely with the Klan." There seems to have been even less of a connection between the churches and the Klan in the North.

Certainly no one would seriously maintain that the KKK of the '20s was free from bigotry or injustice. There is truth in the characterization of the Klan as a moment of soured populism, fermented of post-war disillusion. But it is also true that when large numbers of people, feeling “a sense of defeat”⁶⁴ in an increasingly urban South, or their northern counterparts, “conscious of their growing inferiority,”⁶⁵ turned to the Klan, they did not necessarily enact some kind of sick, racist savagery. On occasion, they even turned, as we have seen, to a fairly radical activism – to the chagrin of their corrupt and conservative leadership.

In fact, it was internal dissension – plus, to a lesser extent, the return of relative prosperity in 1925⁶⁶ – that brought about the precipitous decline of the Klan. Donald Crownover’s study of the KKK in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania discussed some of the abortive efforts to form state and even national organizations alternative to the vice and autocracy prevailing at the top of the Invisible Empire.⁶⁷ “Revolt from within, not criticism from without, broke the Klan.”⁶⁸ More fundamentally, the mid-1920s, against the background of a decisive deformation provided by World War I,⁶⁹ saw the real arrival of the consumer society and the cultural displacement of militancy it represented.⁷⁰

The above research, limited and unsystematic as it is, would seem to raise more questions than it answers. Nonetheless, it may be possible to discern here something of relevance concerning racism, spontaneity and popular values in the context of a very important social movement.⁷¹

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 191.

⁶⁵ George E. Mowry, *The Urban Nation* (New York, 1965), p. 34.

⁶⁶ Degler, op.cit., p. 441.

⁶⁷ Crownover, op. cit., pp. 69–70.

⁶⁸ Loucks, op.cit., p. 165.

⁶⁹ Zerzan, “Origins and Meaning of World War I,” *Telos* 49, esp. pp. 107–108.

⁷⁰ Stewart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Roots of the Consumer Society* (New York, 1977). For example, pp. 189–190, 201.

⁷¹ Special thanks to Neill Herring of Atlanta, Susan Thrasher of New Market, Tennessee, and Bob Hall of chapel Hill, North Carolina.

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