

*Grassroots at the Gateway**Class Politics & Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75*

By Clarence Lang

(Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009. Pp. x, 253. Illustrations, notes, index. Paperbound, \$29.95.)

In the last decade a number of books have challenged our traditional understanding of twentieth-century African American life and politics. Clarence Lang's *Grassroots at the Gateway* joins that body of work. Lang not only compels us to consider African American urban history and the modern African American freedom struggle in a new light, but also offers prescient insights for the study of African American urban communities and black politics more generally.

Grassroots at the Gateway chronicles the twentieth-century struggle of St. Louis's African American community for equality, justice, and self-respect. Eschewing a top-down approach to reform and not assuming African American racial unity, Lang contends that "the growth and development of a black working-class community...propelled, and shaped the goals of the major African American social movements between the 1930s and 1970s, including the modern civil rights (1955-66) and Black Power (1966-75) phases of the Black Freedom Movement" (p. 3). His book's eight chapters unearth a rich vein of African American blue-collar activism in St. Louis that brought widespread protests against discrimination in employment, public facilities, and housing; supported separatist black orga-

nizational initiatives; and participated in black nationalist movements such as Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) as well as militant strikes by African American female workers in the 1930s that led to increased African American membership in mainstream labor unions. Although briefly checked by McCarthyism, African American workers and their leaders constituted the vital core of a historic bloc of forces that reshaped the politics of a city previously dominated by white and African American elites. The late 1950s and the turbulent 1960s, according to Lang, represented the high point of working-class influence on American reform as its grassroots tactics and social-political agendas became the centerpiece of the civil rights and black power movements.

However, post-World War II demographic changes shifted political power from the city to its surrounding suburbs. Ever-present class divisions in the African American community, conflict over political strategy, tactics, and goals among African American working- and middle-class leadership, a white conservative backlash, and Nixon-inspired efforts to reorient federal support from a broad-based community focus to a narrower emphasis on black capitalism, according

to Lang, eventually undermined the movement's fragile political consensus in St. Louis, hastening the demise of African American working-class influence on social reform.

Lang's book challenges much of our conventional wisdom about twentieth-century African American politics and gender and provides an alternative to the interpretation of American reform and labor in other midwestern cities offered by Richard Pierce's *Polite Protest* (2005). What is most striking to this reviewer, however, is the similarity between the racial politics Lang and Pierce describe in both cities, where white and black political elites historically maintained a tenuous interracial civility at the expense of racial justice. To Lang's credit, however, he finds more

evidence of grassroots labor activism, even in Indianapolis, where he identifies African American participation in the National Negro Labor Council's 1953 boycott of Sears, Roebuck and Company to obtain "clerical positions, mainly for black women" (p. 90).

Lang's monograph is a tour-de-force, richly deserving of the praise heaped upon it by scholars such as Peniel Joseph and Vincent Franklin. It is a must read for any scholar of modern African American urban history, the civil rights and black power movements, and African American political activism.

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God-Fearing and Free
A Spiritual History of America's Cold War
 By Jason W. Stevens

(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010. Pp. xiii, 434. Notes, index. \$39.95.)

Recent years have revealed a growing interest in the religious and spiritual culture of the United States in the early Cold War years. In *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety* (2009), Andrew Finstuen approached the decade from a predominantly theological perspective; Steve Miller, in *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (2009), shifted the focus more into the realm of southern

realpolitik; and now Jason Stevens links the intellectual, the religious, and the cultural realms in the shaping of what he calls the "spiritual history of America's Cold War."

Two related arguments frame *God-Fearing and Free*: that Americans' self-perception as God's chosen people gave way to the more pessimistic assumption that they were also subject to his judgment; and that a new focus on original sin, fear, and mortality replaced the theological