**Black Firefighters and the FDNY: The Struggle for Jobs, Justice, and Equity in New York City**, by

David Goldberg, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2017, 424 pp.,

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The present weighs heavily on this study of the past. From the opening scene detailing the victory of black firefighters and their governmental allies in a lawsuit challenging the discriminatory hiring practices of the city of New York in 2012, David Goldberg’s *Black Firefighters and the FDNY* identifies numerous interwoven strands that connect problems old and new. The choice of case study is, therefore, an intriguing and important one. Although questions of typicality can (and should) be raised in relation to any single-industry or city case study, the author states reasonably that the FDNY’s long history of excluding black workers make it a useful site to examine the ‘contradictory and warring tensions and ideals that are the at the core of racism’ (5). In addition, New York City’s increasingly well-established reputation as a centre of black political protest add to the sense of this as a timely moment for a long-range survey.

Two themes emerge especially clearly from the over one hundred years covered: first, the varied efforts of black protestors to break down discriminatory barriers, chiefly through a focus on the under-studied Vulcan Society formed by black firefighters at the end of the Depression and, second, the actions of white officials, unionists and rank-and-filers to defend the colour line in different ways. Despite the (undoubtedly worthy) stated intention to focus on black activism, it is arguably in the second of the two themes where the most innovative material is to be found.

Goldberg makes a persuasive argument that this history does not conform to neat narratives of racial progress or declension. In line with others scholars starting to reassess civil rights in the ‘post-civil rights’ era, the late 1960s and 1970s are presented not just as a time of gradual progress through the assistance of affirmative action programmes but as a time when the FDNY, in contrast to many departments in other cities, defied legal and political trends to become a ‘last bastion of white male privilege’ (243). As municipal jobs opened up for black workers in large numbers elsewhere, the FDNY deployed a range of tactics to stymie change, including re-introducing overtly discriminatory testing procedures and defying court orders mandating equalization. Meanwhile, between 1973 and 1989 the powerful International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) launched the largest number of reverse-discrimination lawsuits of any union in the country as part of a larger political backlash against count-mandated affirmative action – an irony not lost on Goldberg who points out these cases were part-funded by the dues of minority workers themselves. Institutional racism can be a slippery and vague term but here, using the legal and personal files and oral testimony of key protagonists, Goldberg lays one manifestation of it out in all its gory overarching structure and personal detail. Similarly, the observation that the FDNY’s obfuscatory tactics in the 1940s and 1950s constituted an early manifestation of ‘color blind’ racism (6) is another novel and valuable contribution.

Black responses and challenges to the shifting contours of white racism are also central to the story, as well they should be. As might be expected in a long-range survey of this nature, however, there are some moments when the connection, or indeed disconnection, to wider currents in the black protest struggle could be interrogated more closely. Goldberg is certainly aware of the part played by black firefighters in larger histories of civil rights and Black Power and promises at the start to intervene in these ongoing debates, but often when we get down to it the case-study locates itself within established historiographical frameworks rather than redirecting or challenging them. A bolder approach would have been welcome and, in some places, could have helped resolve some slightly contradictory judgements.

Take, for instance, the survey of the war years which lines up with the standard revisionist view that the 1930s and 1940s witnessed the creation of a ‘militant, effective, and highly active Black united front’ (77). The actual story told, however, is more interesting and complex than that: leaders of the newly formed Vulcan Society confronted a moving array of obstacles, worked hard to bring other protest groups into the fray, while challenging the union, fire chiefs and the LaGuardia administration to make good on promises of equality. Under this mounting pressure, however, the FDNY introduced a new set of ‘backdoor methods’ to block black workers in collaboration with certain officials in the Uniformed Firefighters’ Association (106). The eventual conclusion that ‘by the end of World War II, the Vulcan Society had not defeated discrimination, and its members could not claim many clear, decisive victories (… but had) survived a war of attrition’ (108) rings true, but it makes one think Goldberg could have considered more deeply how more positive readings of wartime activism need to be reconsidered. Similarly, the title of Chapter Four lines up with many others by suggesting the period between 1946 and 1963 constituted a ‘golden age’ for the Vulcan Society’s brand of ‘civil rights unionism’ but, later on, reaches the more cautious verdict that ‘despite its growing influence, the organization remained a relatively small, minor player within the FDNY’ (142). These apparent contradictions between progress and defeat suggest a more critical approach to current historiographical readings is in order.

In places, therefore, *Black Firefighters and the FDNY* actually threatens to do a bit more than it says on the tin. It offers a detailed case-study of the shifting contours of white racism and the different means by which it was challenged and wisely brings the story up to the present-day. At a time when historians are still thinking carefully about how to account for geographical, temporal and political differences in the long-range sweep of the black historical experience, there is evidence here that tackling a single city and a single industry across a large span of time remains a method worth pursuing.

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