

Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell, Co-Founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. By H. L. Mitchell. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. 384 pp. \$19.95 paper.
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In a new release of an underused classic, Mitchell provides a powerful first-person account of his effort to overcome Southern poverty in the 1930s and '40s and the organizing of Mexican Americans in California in the late 1940s and early '50s.

In light of the labor movement's increasingly multicultural membership, the book's depiction of the workers' steadfast commitment to black and white solidarity in the Jim Crow South is inspirational, and the use of preachers as organizers was very effective. At times, the faith community also served to validate unionism and to provide financial and moral support.

Why did these Southern workers seek strength through collective bargaining? According to Mitchell, they were driven by life experiences and an engagement with prior social movements; leaders often had ties to the old Populist Party or to the Socialist Party of Eugene Debs. Mitchell likewise demonstrates how indigenous community relationships needed to be backed up with outside support (attorneys, strike support, and political influence) to overcome ingrained power structures.

The chapters on the post-World War II organizing of farm workers in California deserve attention in light of the subsequent challenges faced by Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers (UFW) and the current debate over federal immigration policy. For those unaware of pre-Chavez efforts to unionize agricultural laborers, this book will be helpful. It provides needed recognition of Ernesto Galarza, the pioneering organizer who did more than anyone to end the bracero program that had long impeded successful union drives.

Readers might be surprised to learn of Walter Reuther's role in supporting farm labor organizing by the AFL-CIO. This helps explain the UAW's eagerness to back the Delano grape strikers and to provide a financial lifeline to the UFW.

Finally, with the nation edging toward a new New Deal, Mitchell provides a cautionary tale. Agricultural policies designed to stabilize a vital industry too often resulted in making a few businessmen wealthy while hurting sharecroppers and other farm workers. Even when the federal government sought to share federal resources with these workers, the growers often stole the limited aid because of lax federal enforcement.

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