Beyond the 'Proletarian Turn'

Black Workers, the Rise of Organized Labour and the Fragile Foundations of Civil Rights Protest in the Urban North During the New Deal

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Abstract

This dissertation offers a fresh interpretation of the impact of the rise of organized labour on black working communities during the New Deal. Labour historians have detailed the racial practices of the numerous unions who grew in size and strength during the 1930s, while studies of black civil rights have probed the experiences of black leadership groups who advocated support for black participation in industrial unionism. A new overarching paradigm of civil rights struggle has emerged which praises the emergence of a powerful left-oriented, union-based rights movement. This dissertation argues that this interpretation is flawed for failing to place the constituency who supposedly benefitted from the rise of labour in a central role: black workers.

This dissertation builds its analysis of the rise of unionism upon the experiences of black workers. It is in this context that assessments of the achievements of leadership groups should be conducted. A comparative methodology focusing on Detroit and New York City is employed. Chapters 1 and 2 recreate the local experiences of black workers in the foundational period of biracial unionization between 1933 and 1941. Two key themes emerge. First, the distribution of black workers in specific local settings offered the potential for concentrated groups of workers to use organized labour as a vehicle to advance black rights. In addition, existing constraints on black employment were often reinforced by unions' increased power. Similarly, the interconnected control of employment by unions, government and management groups opened up new avenues of protest, but could also make identifying and tackling the sources of workers' discrimination more difficult. Both of these issues highlight the contradictory impact of unionization on black workers' lives while also demonstrating the demand for coordinated activism placed upon protest leaders.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 assess the extent to which opponents of organized labour, local supporters of organized labour and national civil rights groups were able to take up the agenda called for by workers. The recurrent failure to establish effective and coordinated protest coalitions lay not necessarily in the ideological or political failings of protest leaders. The unique demands for multifaceted and coordinated activism ultimately proved beyond the capacity of protest leaders. As a result, appraisals of the rise of labour need to be removed from value-laden conceptions that celebrate the 'opportunities found' for working rights protest. Instead, by emphasizing the fragile foundations of labour-based protest, it is suggested that the renewed focus on workers' lives allows for an altogether new way of examining the influence of the New Deal on the black freedom struggle.

Contents

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List of Abbreviations

AFL	American Federation of Labor
ALP	American Labor Party
ANG	American Newspaper Guild
APL	African Patriotic League
AWU	Auto Workers Union
BSCP	Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters
BSEU	Building Service Employees Union
CDE	New York State War Council Committee on Discrimination in Employment
CRF	Civil Rights Federation (Originally known as the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights, CFPCR)
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations (Known as the Committee for Industrial Organizations between 1935 and 1937)
CPUSA	Communist Party of the USA
CRC	Civil Rights Committee
FEPC	Fair Employment Practices Committee
FOC	Ford Organizing Committee
FWP	Federal Writers' Project
HLC	Harlem Labor Committee
HLU	Harlem Labor Union
HSEU	Hotel Service Employees Union
ILA	International Longshoremen's Association
ILGWU	International Ladies Garment Workers' Union
IRT	Interborough Rapid Transit Company
JNCR	Joint Negro Committee on Recovery
LWU	Laundry Workers' Union
MOWM	March on Washington Movement

NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NAAW	National Association of American Workers
NICA	Negro Industrial Clerical Alliance
NIRA	National Industrial Recovery Act
NLC	Negro Labor Committee
NLRA	National Labor Relations Act
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
NMU	National Maritime Union
NNC	National Negro Congress
NRA	National Recovery Administration
PWOC	Packinghouse Workers' Organizing Committee
SWOC	Steelworkers' Organizing Committee
TWU	Transport Workers' Union
UAW	United Auto Workers
UFW	United Furniture Workers
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
WPA	Works Progress Administration
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

Introduction: Beyond the 'Proletarian Turn:' Black Workers, the Rise of Organized Labour and the Fragile Foundations of Civil Rights Protest in the Urban North During the New Deal.

> [...] in 1937 we had strike and I and most all the negros was for the Company and we win. The C.I.O. are still trying to make the co. sign a contract with them. Some of the colored men have gained about 85% of the men working here belong to the C.I.O. I believe you as a helper of our race could give me some helpful advice of my problem. Should I join? [...] The copany refuses to sign yet the C.I.O. members keep aggitating by passing out Bills and having meetings. I am in earnest about this matter, for I have a family of 4, and I am buying a home. I joined the N.A.A.C.P. but we will have to reorganize the head of the urban League have ended our organization by telling mayor and members of the other race that we are fighting them, in short a news carrier, a peace Breaker [...] Answer Soon Please, and can you give me the program of the C.I.O?[1]

Letter from Emcy Hightower, a worker at the Republic Steel Company in Warren, Ohio, to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 31 May 1940.

Emcy Hightower was one of several hundred thousand black workers affected by the rise of organized labour during the New Deal. In 1944, the Congress of Industrial Organizations claimed to have 500,000 black members in its affiliated unions, while the American Federation of Labor claimed to have 650,000.[2] This dissertation offers a fresh interpretation of the nature of the relationships formed between black workers and organized labour. For too long, understandings of these developments have been limited by concentrating on categorizing the racial practices of unions and by focusing on the political activities of black leaders and the supposed 'proletarian turn' within civil rights protest. Labour and civil rights historians alike have, as a result, neglected the very constituency whose interests had supposedly become paramount: black

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[1] This letter was originally handwritten and is reprinted here in as exact form as possible, errors included. Letter from Emcy Hightower to NAACP, 31 May 1940, Box II: A335;1, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

[2] *Negro Year Book* (Tuskegee: Tuskegee Institute, 1947), pp. 8-9.

workers. Thus study contends that the rise of organized labour should be understood by prioritizing the lived experiences of those black workers whose lives were impacted by unionization. This dissertation advocates an approach that recasts the role of black leadership groups against the backdrop of issues illuminated by a renewed spotlight on workers' lives. A comparative methodology is employed in order to help move beyond case-studies of unions and cities which have categorized racial practices without reaching meaningful agreement on the implications of the diversity uncovered. For workers like Hightower, the process of unionization was marked by contradictions, dilemmas and uncertainties. As a result of adopting an interpretive framework which places the experiences of men like Hightower in a central role, developments which have been seen as offering substantial promise for the cause of black rights instead appear more complex, contradictory and fragile.

The interpretation challenges the dominant narrative that has emerged from the combined efforts of scholars of civil rights and labour history. No longer seen as an early side-show to the better known movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the 'civil rights era began,' we have been told, 'dramatically and decisively, in the early 1940s when the social structure of black America took on an increasingly urban, proletarian character.' In this enduringly influential statement, Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein compared case-studies of the rise of industrial unionism in Winston-Salem and Detroit to label the period between the late 1930s and mid 1950s one of 'civil rights unionism,' whereby left-led unions interested in furthering racial equality formed productive alliances with black trade unionists in order to extend equality in the workplace and the community. According to this reading, had it not been for the deleterious impacts of the Cold War, which repressed the activities of radical left-wing union locals and forced mainstream civil rights leaders to adopt non-economic reformist goals, the church-led reformist Civil Rights Movement that took root in the South in the mid-1950s may have taken a different course.[3]

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[3] Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement', *Journal of American History,* 75 (1988), 786-811 (p. 786.); Korstad and Lichtenstein were not the first historians to argue the civil rights movement began before the 1950s, however. See Richard M. Dalfiume, 'The "Forgotten Years" of the Negro Revolution', *Journal of American*

Korstad and Lichtenstein's interpretation has been bolstered by other work. This has included Michael Honey's study of unionism in Memphis and Rick Halpern and Roger Horowitz's examination of packinghouse workers in Chicago, all of whom sought to counter more negative assessments of pre-1950s racial protest. Earlier works which examined black experiences in the 1930s tended to focus their analyses on the interactions between black leaders and the New Deal state, analyzing intellectual debates in the case of John Kirby, discussing the relationships of black leaders and white politicians in the work of Harvard Sitkoff, or assessing the economic impact of New Deal measures in Raymond Wolters' account.[4] Scholarship on the history of the New Deal has also concentrated on the impact of various governmental initiatives on black America. Remaining sensitive to the failures of many initiatives to ensure equality, many studies conclude that, set against previous periods, the 1930s represented a productive step forward in the relationship between black America and the federal government.[5]

History, 55 (1968), 90-106; Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984).

[4] Raymond Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression: The Problem of Economic Recovery* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1970); Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue, Volume I: The Depression Decade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); With a focus on a relatively small number of black and white leaders and spokespeople including W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Bunche and A. Phillip Randolph, John Kirby argues 'the theme of interdependence, common interest and mutual endeavor, especially of an economic and class nature, [...] established the dominant tone' of protest in the 1930s. John Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980); James S. Olson, 'Organized Black Leadership and Industrial Unionism: The Racial Response, 1936-1945', *Labor History,* 10 (1969), 475-486; Rick Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Michael Honey has also attempted to show how the union movement remained a continuing part of black civil rights in Memphis from the 1930s through to Martin Luther King's assassination during a strike by sanitation workers in the city in 1968. Michael Honey, *Going down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007); Michael Honey, 'Industrial Unionism and Racial Justice in Memphis', chapter in *Organized Labor in the Twentieth Century South,* Robert H. Zieger, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991); Roger Horowitz, *"Negro and White Unite and Fight!" A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930-90* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

[5] David Kennedy suggested that despite the fact the federal government did not directly challenge Jim Crow, the social experiments of the New Deal were valuable to African-Americans because 'all shared the common purpose of building a country from whose basic privileges no one was excluded.' David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 378; Anthony Badger argued that despite the frequent discrimination of agencies and the failure to act on civil rights, the New Deal 'provided blacks with greater assistance than they had ever received before.' Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-40* (New York: MacMillan, 1989), p. 253; William Leuchtenberg concludes in his classic study that through the

Historians of organized labour and the black left have reached an even more dramatic set of conclusions. The crucial outcome of the 1930s has come to be seen as the close and productive relationship formed between civil rights, labour and the radical left. Several historians have emphasized the strength of these alliances, including in Robin Kelley's study of the Communist Party in 1930s Alabama. Eschen in her study of black foreign affairs has highlighted the strength of the alliances formed between the left, labour and liberal groups in the 1940s and post-war years.[6] Local studies of the post-war period in the north have strengthened these claims, for instance in Martha Biondi's work on New York City which argues that a 'Black Popular Front' emerged in the 1940s which brought liberal, labour and leftist groups together to work on behalf of working class protest issues.[7] Once seen as a pernicious and insidious force, the role of the Communist Party has undergone a substantial, though controversial, revision by historians who have sought to rehabilitate its reputation from Cold War-era condemnation by emphasizing Communist support for black rights within the labour movement.[8]

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black cabinet and the influence of liberal New Dealers, 'Franklin Roosevelt [...] quietly brought the Negro into the New Deal coalition.' William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal 1932-1940* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), p. 186, p. 332; Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore have recently argued that the New Deal's liberal policies, including the accommodation of systems of collective bargaining, were an aberration in the long-term history of the USA. Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore, 'The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History', *International Labor and Working-Class History,* 74 (2008), 3-32 (p. 5.); For a firm rebuttal of this interpretation, see Nancy Maclean, 'Getting New Deal History Wrong', *International Labor and Working-Class History,* 74 (2008), 49-55.

[6] Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Robin Kelley charts the role played by predominantly black Communist organizers in facilitating the rise of black unionism, particularly through the steel and mining unions affiliated with the CIO. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights 1919–1950* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008); Robert Korstad argues the key locations for civil rights unionism were Detroit's auto industry, Memphis cotton workers, steel workers in Birmingham and Pittsburgh, the Chicago and Louisville stockyards, Baltimore and Oakland's shipyards, and Richmond, Charleston and Winston-Salem tobacco industries, which taken together meant the early 1940s witnessed the formation of a 'rights consciousness that gave working-class militancy a moral justification similar to that evoked by Afro-Christianity a generation later.' Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), p. 4; Robert Korstad, 'Civil Rights Unionism and the Black Freedom Struggle', *American Communist History,* 7 (2008), 255-258.

[7] Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[8] As Eric Arnesen recently correctly observed, 'the revisionist project seems most alive and well in the field of civil rights studies, [and for...] scholars of the "long civil rights movement," the Party and those in

The cumulative effect of this work has led to a new paradigmatic reading of twentieth century civil rights struggle to become dominant: the notion of the 'long civil rights movement,' the most explicit statement of which was given by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall in her 2004 address to the Organization of American Historians.[9] Resting upon the above-mentioned body of secondary literature rather than primary research, Dowd Hall's essay provided the most visible indication of the extent to which narratives which positioned the interracial industrial unionism of the 1930s and 1940s as a relatively successful stage of working-class civil rights struggle had become accepted as a new orthodoxy. In the process, Dowd Hall emphasized the importance of northern protest and challenged accounts that continued to privilege the Southern-led, legalistic, reformist movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Dowd Hall agreed with Korstad and Lichtenstein that the late 1930s and 1940s was a 'decisive first phase' of rights struggle, which she described as, 'a powerful social movement sparked by the alchemy of labourites, civil rights activists, progressive New Dealers, and black and white radicals, some of whom were associated with the Communist party'.[10] The political implications of this new paradigm were not only implicitly inferred, but explicitly laid out: rather than lamenting the limitations and failures of the supposed high-point of civil rights activity in the 1960s, scholars had a duty to point to the historical continuities of racial

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its orbit offered the nation its best opportunity of mounting an effective challenge to Jim Crow, economic inequality, and Cold War militarism.' Eric Arnesen, 'The Final Conflict? On the Scholarship of Civil Rights, the Left and the Cold War', *American Communist History,* 11 (2012), 63-80 (p. 63); Arnesen also argues scholars have subsequently focused too much on the role of the Communist Party in Korstad and Lichtenstein's work, even though they accept a wider range of characters were actually involved in 1940s activism. Eric Arnesen, 'Civil Rights and the Cold War at Home: Postwar Activism, Anticommunism, and the Decline of the Left', *American Communist History,* 11 (2012), 5-44 (fn 11, pp. 7-8); Philip Rubio argues that anticommunism was a potent negative force in the post-war period, but argues it drew upon notions of white supremacy that had a much more deep rooted role in dividing labour coalitions. Philip F. Rubio, '"Who Divided the Church?": African-American Postal Workers Fight Segregation in the Postal Unions, 1939-1962', *Journal of African American History,* 94 (2009), 172-199 (p. 175).

[9] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,' *Journal of American History*, 91 (2005), 1233-1263; Another key work emphasizing northern civil rights protests is Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[10] Dowd Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,' 1245: Dowd Hall also references Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996); Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era (*Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); John Egerton, *Speak Now against the Day: The Generation before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

discrimination and protest.[11] The notion of a 'long' civil rights movement thus not only attempts to provide a neat and seductive narrative to explain the past failures of movements to achieve racial equality, but also points towards some potential solutions for present social inequalities.

It is a central contention of this dissertation that the scholarly interpretation of the relationship formed between organized labour and civil rights in the 1930s and 1940s based on the long civil rights movement is flawed. Not only is this interpretation predominantly built upon a narrow range of case studies – notably Detroit and Chicago in the North and Memphis, Birmingham and Winston-Salem in the South – but within these case-studies, the focus has often been on a relatively small cast of characters, drawn from the left of black politics and from within the orbit of organized labour. While some problems in terms of antagonism between white unions and management and members of the black community are acknowledged, the overriding impression is one in which militant working-class oriented labour activism appeared to sweep all in its path in the heady days of possibility of the early 1940s. As Korstad and Lichtenstein put it, despite opposition, 'black militants held the political initiative, so that powerful white elites - the top office holders in the UAW, company personnel officers, and the government officials who staffed the War Labor Board and War Manpower Commission - had to yield before this new wave of civil rights militancy.' Unfortunately, however, afterwards 'a decade-long decline in working-class black activism destroyed the organizational coherence and ideological elan of the labor-based civil rights movement'.[12] To be clear, the increased importance of organized labour to black protest is not in question here; instead, this dissertation seeks to question whether these developments were productive enough to justify such a triumphant interpretation of the period. It is suggested that there are three connected problems with the findings and methodological approach of the dominant historiographical readings of this era.

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[11] Dowd Hall concluded that the victories and reversals of civil rights 'call us to action, as citizens and as historians with powerful stories to tell. Both are part of a long and ongoing civil rights movement'. p. 1263.; Nelson Lichtenstein has recently argued the long civil rights movement is now 'increasingly conventional wisdom,' Nelson Lichtenstein, 'Recasting the Movement and Reframing the Law in Risa Goluboff's *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*', *Law and Social Inquiry*, 35 (2010), 243-260 (pp. 244-245).
[12] Korstad and Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost', 797, 800.

The first problem with civil rights unionism narratives relates to their treatment of the impact of the Cold War. Many works stress the damaging impact that anti-radical repression had on the left of the civil rights protest movement. Rumblings of discontent have started to emerge among scholars including Eric Arnesen, Manfred Berg, Kevin Boyle, Sundiata Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang. Cha-Jua and Lang argue that the 'long' civil rights movement displays a tendency to act as a 'vampire' that operates beyond the confines of time and space, flattening or erasing important temporal and spatial distinctions between specific phases of black protest.[13] With a specific focus on the role of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, meanwhile, Manfred Berg has questioned the impact of the Cold War on black protest. Berg has persuasively highlighted the fact that there is very little evidence that the NAACP moved to expel Communists from its local branches, thus challenging narratives which emphasize the debilitating impact of McCarthy-era purges on the left-liberal-labour civil rights coalition.[14] Like this dissertation, the criticisms advanced by scholars such as Berg do not imply a desire to return to a narrow periodization of civil rights focused solely on the 1950s and 1960s. Nor, as is evident in the work of labour historian Eric Arnesen, do challenges represent an attempt to deny the importance and occasional successes achieved by black protest through labour organization in occasional concert with the left. Arnesen, however, suggests numerous problems with accounts which emphasize the power and effectiveness of Popular Front civil rights coalitions in the post-war years, in particular by calling into question the influence and power of the Communist Party, noting how its shifts in policy and internal factionalism hindered it from taking an effective part in broader civil rights coalitions.[15]

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[13] Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, 'The "Long Movement" as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies', *Journal of African American History*, 92 (2007), 265-288 (p. 265).

[14] Manfred Berg argued much of the criticism of the NAACP's retreat from tackling social issues in favour of narrow goals is 'misleading and inconsistent,' because critics 'grossly exaggerate the association's participation in the anticommunist crusade' and also plays 'down the ideological cleavages between the NAACP and Communists.' Manfred Berg, 'Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War', *Journal of American History*, 94 (2007), 75-96 (p. 77); Manfred Berg, *"The Ticket to Freedom": The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005); Kevin Boyle has also warned that, despite the importance of its subject matter, long civil rights narratives run the risk of over-simplifying the complexities of labour-left civil rights protest. Kevin Boyle, 'Labor, the Left, and the Long Civil Rights Movement', *Social History,* 30 (2005), 366-372.

[15] Arnesen argues that the left-liberal-labour coalition was 'never as strong as its historians claim; that the Party contributed substantially to its own decline as well as to that of the coalition; and that the ideas that were extinguished were far less persuasive and unique than the new conventional wisdom maintains.' Eric Arnesen, 'Civil Rights and the Cold War at Home,' 8-9.

Part of the reason the debate on the impact of the Cold War has become muddied relates to a tendency within the long civil rights narrative to exaggerate the potential of the alliances built between black civil rights, organized labour and the left. As a result, historians have had to look to the Cold War era to find explanations for the limitations and failures of economic civil rights protests. It is suggested here, in contrast, that a much more cautious and limited set of expectations needs to be placed on understandings of the relationship between organized labour and civil rights. This dissertation places renewed attention on the foundational period of the 1930s and early 1940s in order to cultivate an understanding of the limitations that were frequently inherent in opportunities afforded to black workers by the rise of organized labour. In that regard, a second major problem arises from the many detailed studies of organized labour in the 1930s and 1940s. Though labour historians have produced many finely grained studies of unions' varying racial practices, official racial policies have been given more attention than impacts upon black workers. Among those unions that have received the most positive treatment in terms of equality are the Packinghouse Workers' Organizing Committee, the United Auto Workers, the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee, and the Transport Workers' Union. For all this attention, attempts to synthesize experiences regarding race, such as that offered by Michael Goldfield who gave a generally positive reading of several CIO-affiliated unions' commitment to egalitarian principles, have quickly been met by attempts to challenge claims of interracial cooperation.[16]

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[16] Michael Goldfield, 'Race and the CIO: The Possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism in the 1930s and 1940s', 1-32, Gary Gerstel, 'Working-Class Racism: Broaden the Focus', 33-40, Marshall F. Stevenson, 'Beyond Theoretical Models: The Limited Possibilites of Racial Egalitarianism', 45-52, all contained in *International Labor and Working-Class History,* 44 (1993); See also Michael Goldfield, 'Race and the CIO: Reply to Critics', *International Labor and Working-Class History,* 46 (1994), 142-160; Horowitz, *"Negro and White Unite and Fight!"*; Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Herbert Northrup, 'Organized Labor and the Negro', *Journal of Political Economy,* 51 (1943), 206-221; A good historiographical introduction to black workers and labour history is provided in Joe William Trotter, 'African American Workers: New Directions in Labor Historiography', *Labor History,* 35 (1994), 495-523; A sociological endorsement of the CIO's egalitarian racial record, based upon a survey of secondary literature, has been offered by Maurice Zeitlin and L. Frank Weyher, who argued that the for most of the CIO's career it was a 'potent, organized expression of interracial working class solidarity.' Maurice Zeitlin and L. Frank Weyher, '"Black and White, Unite and Fight": Interracial Working-Class Solidarity and Racial Employment Equality', *American Journal of Sociology,* 107 (2001), 430-461 (p. 432).

Equally, attempts to emphasize the enduring and persistent problems of racial inequality with organized labour also present a deeply unsatisfactory and simplistic interpretation. A high profile example of this tendency can be found in the work of Herbert Hill, a former labour secretary of the NAACP who in the 1980s, having entered academia, launched into an attack on the scholarship of Herbert Gutman. Gutman's work on the United Mine Workers, according to Hill, represented part of a wider tendency among left-leaning labour historians to exaggerate the successes of interracial unionism and ignore awkward truths about organized labour's murky racial record. Hill's accusations actually caricatured labour historians' attempts to recount various unions' divergent racial records, but his intervention nonetheless provided an indication of the propensity of questions surrounding interracial unionism to lead to highly politicized, even ahistorical, and often unconstructive debates.[17]

Labour historians seeking to eschew the more overly politicized readings of race relations in labour history have had, therefore, good reason to be wary of attempting to synthesize the racial practices of the CIO. Many works have fallen prey to the accusation that they exaggerate the possibilities of interracial unionism by overemphasizing the common 'class' characteristics of union members, or alternatively, that they sought to ignore interracial cooperation by over-emphasizing instances of racial discrimination. Partly for this as well as for practical reasons, there has been a preponderance of detailed case-studies which tackle issues of race and labour with sensitivity and subtlety, but fewer attempts to synthesize this diverse and diffuse

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[17] As Arnesen puts it, 'When characterized as a 'race versus class' debate, the Hill versus Gutman controversy was actually itself, so characterized, a myth.' Eric Arnesen, 'Passion and Politics: Race and the Writing of Working-Class History', *Journal of the Historical Society,* VI: 3 (2006), 323-356 (p. 337); See also Herbert Hill, 'Lichtenstein's Fictions: Meany, Reuther and the 1964 Civil Rights Act', *New Politics,* 7 (1998); Nelson Lichtenstein, 'Walter Reuther in Black and White: A Rejoinder to Herbert Hill', *New Politics,* 7 (1999); Attempts from the right to outline organized labour's apparently enduringly negative impact on racial equality, such as that recently put forward by Paul Moreno, have also been met with justifiable criticism. See Paul D. Moreno, *Black Americans and Organized Labor: A New History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Moreno's work was met with generally critical responses: Craig Phelan, Warren Whatley, Robert H. Zieger, Clarence Walker, Sakhela Buhlungu, Gavin Wright, Paul Moreno, 'Labor History Symposium', *Labor History,* 48 (2007), 209-247. From the opposite of the political spectrum, other historians, often taking their lead from David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness,* have attempted to reconstruct the pervasive constructions of white identities and the role these self-conceptions have played in shaping various attempts to form interracial working-class movements in US history. David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, Revised Edition* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), p. 8.

scholarship.[18] The diversity of unions' racial practices uncovered by historians suggests real complexities and problems that do not fit into the overly neat paradigm of long civil rights, however. As Judith Stein pointed out in her response to Michael Goldfield, aside from the big four unions in the South, many continued to organize on a separate and segregated basis, while the American Federation of Labor continued to have more black members than the CIO throughout the organizational period and during the Second World War.[19] A more complex picture has also started to emerge relating to experiences in the North as well, for instance in Bruce Nelson's work which noted the violent conflicts between rival longshore unions in both New Orleans and in New York City and the difficulties encountered in sustaining truly integrated union locals.[20]

Proponents of civil rights unionism do not ignore the diversity of racial practice in organized labour and the continuing problems of discrimination, but they tend to incorporate failures of equality as either exceptions or caveats (holding the AFL-affiliated unions chiefly responsible) to readings which stress the opportunities presented to black workers. Nelson Lichtenstein, in his defence of civil rights unionism, argues that this diversity of interpretations constitutes evidence that the long civil

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[18] Several symposia discussing workers of black labour history exemplify the tendency for questions surrounding interracialism, race and class, to stir debate and defy consensus. See 'Symposium on Daniel Letwin: The Challenge of Interracial Unionism', *Labor History,* 41 (2000): Alex Lichtenstein, 'Exploring the Local World of Interracialism', 63-67, John Higginson, 'Digging a Little Deeper', 67-71, Jacqueline Jones, 'Interracialism Above Ground, Jim Crow Below', 71-73, Nancy Mclean, 'Race-ing Class, Historicizing Categories', 73-77; On the tendency of labour history's engagements with race to cast its actors in terms of heroes and villains and employ a 'morality tale framework,' see Arnesen, 'Passion and Politics', 339.

[19] The four big CIO unions were steel, coal, iron ore, and rubber. In 1945 AFL had 450,000 black members in the south compared to 200,000 in the CIO. As Stein puts it, '[i]f racial egalitarianism was a prerequisite for success, or even attracting blacks, these figures are puzzling. One could argue that the AFL became more egalitarian or that it always included a range of racial practices; either conclusion would trouble [Herbert] Hill and [Michael] Goldfield.' Judith Stein, 'The Ins and Outs of the CIO', *International Labor and Working-Class History,* 44 (1993), 53 – 63 (p 56).

[20] Bruce Nelson, 'Class and Race in the Crescent City: The ILWU, from San Francisco to New Orleans', chapter in *The CIO's Left-Led Unions,* Steve Rosswurm ed., (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); 'As Robert Zieger observes, these groups operated in "outposts of militant biracial unionism" which had organized "only a small number of workers, black or white." In Alan Draper's words, southern labor historians have built their case for "missed opportunities" on "marginal unions" and the "significance of their examples is dwarfed by the size of the organized and unorganized work force to which they do not apply."' Eric Arnesen, 'Civil Rights and the Cold War at Home, 37, quoting Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), p. 157, p. 162; Alan Draper, *Conflict of Interests: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, 1954– 1968* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1994), pp. 10–11.

rights movement has actually taken good account of the charges levelled by Cha-Jua and Lang.[21] Yet the work Lichtenstein refers to has often been centred on the experiences of union officials and black community leaders. These leader-centric accounts describe a close relationship between black protest groups and labour. Black workers are not invisible, but operate mainly in the background as part of a wider community which, we are told, was undergoing a process of 'proletarianization' during the interwar period as a result of rural to urban migrations, the adoption of industrial waged labour and the formation of industrial unions. Thus the third problem of civil rights unionism narratives is that the experiences of workers have tended to have been lumped into accounts which focus predominantly on the interactions between supportive local pro-union groups and new industrial unions.

The concept of 'proletarianization' has attempted to explain how South to North migrations and the transformation of rural blacks into industrial workers impacted upon northern community development and patterns of racial and class identity. The work of Joe Trotter has been particularly influential. Trotter's case-study of the black community in Milwaukee in the interwar period not only sought to provide a model example of a detailed community case-study but also advanced the concept that black workers underwent a process of 'proletarianization' in the interwar period. This process, argued Trotter, was, 'characterized by substantial geographical mobility, intraracial working-class solidarity, multiclass alliances, gender consciousness, and interracial unionism'.[22] Although this attempt to explain black workers' experiences via a model identifies key issues of migration, industrial work and community settlement,

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[21] Nelson Lichtenstein, 'Recasting the Movement and Reframing the Law in Risa Goluboff's *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights,*' 244; Goluboff studies the legal dimensions of workers' protest, and agrees with the proposition that the activism between the 1930s and 1950s constituted the 'lost promise of civil rights,' echoing Korstad and Lichtenstein's longstanding argument that an opportunity was 'found' in the late 1930s only to be 'lost' in the mid-1950s. Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights,* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 9, 107.

[22] Trotter, 'African American Workers', 522; Joe William Trotter Jr., *Coal, Class and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), p. 263; A large overlapping literature straddling urban and labour history has developed which has attempted to make sense of the development of black urban areas in the twentieth century, allowing us to see, in the words of Joe Trotter and Patricia Cooper, 'how specific urban locations affect working-class life and how class, in its gendered, racialized, and sexualized forms, shaped the urban landscape.' Joe W. Trotter and Patricia Cooper, 'Introduction: Urban and Labor History: Old and New Connections', *Journal of Urban History,* 30 (2004), 327-338 (p. 335.); Joe W. Trotter, Earl Lewis, Tera Hunter, eds., *The African American Urban Experience* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

studies of black communities in the North in the interwar period have continued to focus on a relatively small range of case-studies. Much focus has been placed on the conflicts between 'new crowd' urban blacks and traditional 'old guard' leadership groups. At the same time, the concept of proletarianization is often deployed, without detailed exploration, to explain how and why black identities were transformed along class lines during the 1930s.[23]

Thus 'proletarianization' has found its way into the footnotes of long civil rights as a catch-all explanation for black workers' experiences. Korstad and Lichtenstein, though they do not analyze the process in detail, assert that the black workforce in Detroit became 'proletarianized' in the 1930s as part of a main focus on the relationship between black trade union officers and the United Auto Workers. Recent long-range surveys of civil rights protest also deploy the term. Thomas Sugrue, in a work which has provided the most fluent, if problematic, case for the 'long' civil rights movement in the North to date, argues the changes of the 1930s represented a 'proletarian turn.' Sugrue suggests that the general trajectory of black urban life, working patterns, union organization and political affiliations in the 1930s had a shared trajectory: leftward.[24]

Taking all three problems together – the privileging of the impact of the Cold War in derailing an otherwise promising liberal-labour-left civil rights alliance, labour history's emphasis on categorizing unions' diverse racial practices and the lack of consensus that has resulted, and the catch-all treatment of black responses to the rise of labour into

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[23] Chicago has proved an enduringly attractive case-study. Lizabeth's Cohen case-study of interwar Chicago, *Making a New Deal,* argues that emphasizing the emergence of working-class identity and the great potential of the industrial unions built across ethnic and racial lines is, 'not an idealization but a necessary corrective to reading a more troubled racial future back too much into our understanding of this unique historical moment.' Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939, 2nd edn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. xxx; Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Horace R. Cayton and St. Clair Drake, *Black Metropolis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946); Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor.*

[24] Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2009), p. 36; Stephen Tuck also agrees black protest experienced a 'proletarian turn' in the 1930s towards the left, even though he rightly cautions against drawing direct lines from 1940s to the post-war Civil Rights Movement. Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 186, p. 207.

'proletarian turn' narratives – academic interpretations of the impact of the rise of organized labour on black civil rights remain deeply unsatisfactory. The different approach advocated by this dissertation has four key elements in order to address these historiographical problems. The periodization will examine the formative years between the beginning of the New Deal in 1933 and the USA's entry into the Second World War in 1941, a worker-centric approach will analyze the impacts of the rise of organized labour on black communities, a re-assessment of political leadership will seek to base its critique on the extent to which tangible successes were made on behalf of black workers, all of which will be conducted using a comparative approach that will contrast experiences across two important locations in the urban North, New York City and Detroit. These four elements, when combined, highlight problems which challenge the dominant view of the era as one that offered great promise to advance the economic rights of black workers in harness with organized labour. It is suggested that this worker-centric approach can help move beyond the limitations imposed by leader-centric accounts of this era of the black freedom struggle and the value-laden dichotomized concepts of 'opportunities' and 'problems,' and 'egalitarianism' and 'exclusion' that have resulted.

Regarding periodization, between 1933 and 1941 organized labour ascended to power with the legislative backing of the New Deal. Arrangements of routinized collective bargaining were put in place, government economic regulation massively increased and black urban areas underwent profound transformations as the nation galvanized to fight the Second World War. All these factors profoundly shaped post-war rights movements.[25] Protests conducted in the post-war period were crucial in determining

[25] While an earlier study by Dalfiume argued the war stimulated 'race consciousness' and was an important precursor to postwar civil rights struggles, later interpretations by scholars following the lead of Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein have gone even further to argue the war years witnessed the arrival of a decisive first phase of labour-oriented civil rights struggle. In the work of Martha Biondi on New York, the war constituted a 'watershed' in black protest that saw the emergence of an emboldened left-led civil rights alliance, while Korstad and Lichtenstein found the war generated a 'powerful rights consciousness' in Detroit. Richard M. Dalfiume, 'The "Forgotten Years" of the Negro Revolution'; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 3; Joseph Abel, 'African Americans, Labor Unions, and the Struggle for Fair Employment in the Aircraft Manufacturing Industry of Texas, 1941-1945', *Journal of Southern History,* 77 (2001) 595-638; Andrew Edmund Kersten, *Race, Jobs, and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-46,* (Urbana, 2000); Darlene Clark Hine argues that the Second World War constituted a 'watershed' moment in the black professional classes' shift towards a 'determination to end Jim Crow.'

the extent of the successes made on behalf of black advancement, but many of these protests were conducted within the frameworks of labour relations put in place during the New Deal and war years. Some scholars have recently expressed scepticism regarding positive readings of New Deal-era developments, however. Tuck and Kruse comment that 'closer inspection shows that evidence of a widespread mobilization of the civil rights struggle during the war years is thinner than it may initially appear [...] much of the "watershed" argument rest[s] to a great extent on vague estimates of black attitudes and aspirations rather than concrete accomplishments.'[26] Building upon this insight through re-examining the successes and failures of what was formed between the beginning of the New Deal in 1933 and the 'civil rights unionism' period of the early 1940s, this dissertation seeks to improve our understanding not of what was 'lost,' to borrow the terminology of Korstad and Lichtenstein, but of what in actuality was 'found.'

Second, the study will be built upon an examination of the actions, experiences and, where possible, the attitudes of black workers attempting to respond to the momentous changes associated with the rise of organized labour. It is a deeply problematic omission within the existing literature – literature that has produced a narrative where we are told the concerns of workers became central to civil rights agendas - that so much focus is placed on a few case-studies and on a relatively small group of leaders. This dissertation will, instead, place the priorities and concerns of workers centre stage in order to provide a fresh perspective on some well-worn academic ground. Recovering evidence of workers' actions, and the motivations that underpinned these responses, is a far from straightforward methodological task. There is a dominance of black organizations and union groups in the historical record, a skew compounded by comparatively greater interest in radical black activists in subsequently created oral histories. Yet this same evidence can also be employed in a different way. Such was the high profile nature of many labour disputes, and the increased interest among various observers of the problems affecting black workers, the dissertation attempts to

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Darlene Clark Hine, 'Black Professionals and Race Consciousness: Origins of the Civil Rights Movement', *Journal of American History,* 89 (2003), 1279-1294 (p. 1293); George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

[26] Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, eds., *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 5.

reinterpret institutional evidence to uncover the experiences of black workers. Extant primary sources can be read against the grain of the dominant paradigm which has reflected the dominance of official sources to create leadership-centric narratives. Black newspaper accounts, the oral testimony of black unionists, the observations of race advancement organizations like the NAACP and Urban League, references made by white union officers in published and unpublished material, and written complaints made by black workers to political leaders, can help to build up a picture of black workers' experiences.

Placing workers' experiences in a central role is necessarily a patchy, problematic and limited exercise. At the same time, it is suggested that this reordering, though incomplete, allows for a subtle but crucially different interpretation to emerge which emphasises ambiguity and contradictions rather than a neat narrative of leftward political change. A focus on black workers' experiences not only shows how groups of workers occasionally made decisive interventions in shaping the outcome of the process of unionization, but also provides a grass-roots view of the wider transformative forces at work as organized labour rose to power during the New Deal. Placing workers in a central role is not intended to elevate or exaggerate black workers' power and agency. On the contrary, building a study upon workers' experiences reveals the immense complexities, dilemmas and contradictions that attended the rise of organized labour. It is argued that recovering fragmentary local experiences in as much detail as possible constitutes an improved foundation upon which assessments of local and national political leadership groups from black political circles and the labour movement should be conducted.

As a result, the third part of this dissertation's methodological approach is an assessment of the responses of local and national civil rights groups set against the backdrop of workers' experiences and their demands for supportive action. In contrast to some existing studies which imply that support for black participation was, in itself, evidence of a successful reorientation in strategy, the assessment of leadership groups will concentrate not just on shifting political views and strategies, but upon the extent to

which tangible successes on workers' behalves were achieved.[27] One important development of the period well noted in the secondary literature is that the rise of organized labour itself afforded an opportunity for black workers themselves to become 'leaders' through office holding in trades unions. The categories of 'worker' and 'leaders' overlapped during the 1930s, an issue this dissertation is mindful of. Nevertheless, these black trade unionists, through their wider links with the black workforce, need to be discussed not only in terms of their support for the principle of black union participation but the extent to which the strategies and activities they undertook were able to translate into producing meaningful extensions of black economic opportunity.

Fourth, in an attempt to move beyond the 'tit for tat' debates which have characterized some of labour history's case-study debates on the potential of interracial unionism, this dissertation will compare two case-studies of northern cities which have become central to long civil rights narratives: Detroit and New York City.[28] These two cities have distinct stories to tell, but both make excellent choices for a reinterpretation of the impact of the rise of organized labour on black workers. Both cities play important roles in the same long civil rights narrative, while their individual historiographies have also developed along some similar paths of enquiry.[29]

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[27] Indeed, as Arnesen has written, that a 'coalition [of black political leaders] and its left-led unions believed in "grassroots mobilization," exhibited "militancy," and pursued "strategies of protest and confrontation" is not in question; whether those approaches could "eliminate racism," as some imply, is another matter.' Eric Arnesen, 'Civil Rights and the Cold War at Home, p. 37, quoting David M. Lewis-Coleman, "From Fellow Traveler to Friendly Witness: Shelton Tappes, Liberal Anticommunism, and Working-Class Civil Rights in the United Auto Workers," in *Labor's Cold War: Local Politics in a Global Context,* Shelton Stromquist, ed., (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 113; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty,* p. 110.

[28] Arnesen's observation in 1998 that scholarship had been 'dominated by variants of the "how racist/racially egalitarian were they?" question,' still holds much truth. 'Up From Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History', *Reviews in American History*, 26 (1998), 146-174 (p. 156).

[29] The need for studies of civil rights that include both case-studies and a wider synthesis is put forward in Steven F. Lawson, 'Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement', *American Historical Review,* 96 (1991), 456-471 (p. 471); Megan Taylor Shockley's work on Detroit and Richmond is one of the few studies to compare working class experiences, and positions class as a key explanatory tool to compare women's experiences in both locations, and the relationship of these women to the US state. Does attempt to focus on workers' experiences as distinctive, but still conforms to 'opportunities' reading. Megan Taylor Shockley, *'We, Too, Are Americans:' African American Women in Detroit and Richmond, 1940-54* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

Detroit has been uniquely central to scholarship on the relationship between labour and civil rights. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick's *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* was the first work to provide a detailed study of the important relationship formed between black workers and the USA's largest trade union, the United Auto Workers. Meier and Rudwick's definition of 'black Detroit' was somewhat limited, however, and paid most attention to the changing opinions of black organizations such as the national and local NAACP and the black church, while placing emphasis on the relationship between black union leaders and UAW officials. Still an excellent source on the internal political workings of the UAW and its policies toward black workers and regularly cited in civil rights unionism narratives, *Black Detroit* also made some brief direct comments regarding the reluctance of many black workers to join the UAW.[30] Yet many of Meier and Rudwick's relatively cautious judgements have been overtaken by the more assertive interpretation offered by Korstad and Lichtenstein.[31] Korstad and Lichtenstein argued that the unionization of Ford in 1941 'transformed the consciousness' of the black workforce ushering in a period of civil rights unionism. Yet in somewhat similar fashion to Meier and Rudwick, the primary focus is on black trade unionists and the UAW, while radical leftists are also prominent. Other work has detailed the roles of other, non-union, leaders who also came to support the UAW and forged pro-union protest networks who engaged in labour and other community protests, such as in the work of Beth Bates on the NAACP and Angela Dillard on leaders in the black church.[32] Rather than being exhausted as an area for historical enquiry, this intense historiographical interest in unionism and the black community means Detroit constitutes an ideal location to recast the relationship between organized labour and

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[30] August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 107; In an attempt to expand upon Joe Trotter's 'proletarianization' thesis, Richard Thomas puts forward his concept of the 'community building process.' Yet Thomas's account of the process of black unionization is largely based upon the work of Meier and Rudwick. Richard Thomas, *Life for us is what we make it: Building Black community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 277-279.

[31] Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* p. 78, p. 107, p. 221.

[32] See Bates, *Pullman Porters*; Beth T. Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941', *American Historical Review,* 102 (1997), 340-377; Angela Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007); Studies of postwar Detroit have included Thomas J. Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Detroit has also featured in 'ghetto formation' literature. David M. Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973); Some efforts have been made to challenge male-dominated union accounts, for instance by Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

civil rights from the perspective and experiences of black workers. While we know much about the gradual realignment of local leadership to support the principle of unionism, it is a deeply problematic omission that comparatively little attention has been placed on whether this pro-union leadership was actually in tune with the opinions of the wider working community, beyond assertions that the workforce had become 'proletarianized.'

Although the labour movement has been less central to its historiographical coverage, New York City has also been positioned as a key case-study in long civil rights narratives. In particular, it has drawn attention for playing host to national civil rights groups like the NAACP who supposedly underwent a 'shift to the left' in the 1930s, and for being a centre of radical protest led by the Communist Party. Mark Naison's extensive primary documentation of Party activity in the Depression continues to stand as one of the most detailed community studies of Party activity across any period. Naison detailed how support for interracial trade unionism played an important part in Party strategy, especially during the first Popular Front phase between 1936 and 1939. Attention has been paid by several scholars to the influence achieved by the Party through its role in the leadership of several CIO unions which achieved success organizing black New Yorkers, in particular the National Maritime Union and the Transport Workers Union.[33] In similar fashion to Detroit, however, we know much less about how black workers viewed the momentous changes that accompanied the rise of labour, beyond an intriguing but brief assessment by Naison who assesses the wider impact on the black community, concluding there was no sustained black commitment to the ideas or practices of the radical left.[34]

More broadly, questions continue to surround the experiences and attitudes of black workers to labour and the left in New York. In Cheryl Lynn Greenberg's otherwise detailed work on black Harlem in the Depression, the story of unionism is primarily told

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[33]Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, 1984) pp. xvii-xix; See also Joshua B. Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966* [Second Edition], (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).
[34] Naison, *Communists in Harlem,* pp. 279-283.

by juxtaposing a statistical increase in black union membership alongside a recognition of the severe discrimination that continued to bedevil black experiences in unions, while focusing on the role of a handful of community leaders who came to advocate support for union participation.[35] Despite the relatively cautious verdicts of Greenberg and Naison of the benefits brought to blacks by labour and the left in the 1930s, Martha Biondi has latterly put forward an extremely positive and deeply problematic reading of the period immediately following the 1930s. Biondi suggests that between the war years and the mid-1950s, a second, powerful and re-energized Popular Front emerged in New York. Yet much of Biondi's evidence for the successes of the left-labour-liberal alliance in the 1940s is based upon the verdicts of Communist Party members themselves, rather than upon a reasoned measurement of actual impact.[36] In both case-studies, much attention has been placed on the rise of labour and the left, but examinations of left-wing groups and individual unions have not been matched with sustained attention on the outlooks and experiences of black workers, the group who were supposedly the main beneficiaries of the changes of the era.

Comparing the experiences of black communities to unionization offers a way to move beyond the limitations imposed by case-study approaches. The choice of Detroit and New York City, both of which have been central to long civil rights interpretations, means that the problematic relationships uncovered in this study not only have a bearing on the urban histories of both locations, but also on broader surveys of black protest. The thesis compares experiences in Detroit and New York City adopting three approaches to the issue of black relations with unionism: the return to the foundational era of the New Deal, the emphasis on the day-to-day experiences of black workers, and the reframing of local and national civil protests set against this framework of working life. Taken together, it is argued that these four elements help advance a new stage in the historiographical debate; one which seeks to move beyond the overly triumphant and seductive readings of the revisionist long civil rights movement paradigm by

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[35] Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?' Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 113, p. 201.

[36] Biondi argues that the war years constituted a 'watershed,' where 'the Communist left in New York City played a significant role in the burgeoning civil rights struggle, especially in the fight for jobs.' Biondi, *To Stand and Fight,* pp. 3-4.

assessing the success of responses offered by protest leaders to the rise of organized labour in the context of the lived experience of black working communities.

This dissertation is comprised of five chapters which, when combined, underscore the complex, contradictory and ultimately fragile nature of relationships being built between trade unions and black communities. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the experiences of black workers during the rise of organized labour in Detroit and New York City. The issues raised by these surveys then form the basis upon which the discussion of black political responses at local and national levels in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are conducted. Three discernible themes arise from this study that serve to interweave and connect the broad spectrum of activities involving union activity analyzed. The first relates to the importance of proportionate concentrations of black workers in specific workplace and community settings, the second to the interrelated control of labour markets by government, management and union organizations, and third to the resultant requirement for coordinated protest activity placed upon local and national black protest organizations.

The first of these issues, given coverage in Chapter 1, concerns the importance of pre-existing patterns of workplace demographics in shaping the experiences of black workers. Rather than being driven by changes in political priorities or identities, it is argued that workers' experiences can be more productively understood by paying close attention to the importance of contextual factors relating to workplace and community demographics. For instance, on the one hand the confinement of black workers by occupation and habitation in Harlem in New York City meant that the rise of labour offered black workers an opportunity to use unions to their benefit. In Harlem, unions provided political space to address on the job concerns as well as wider political issues of the black community. At the same time, however, these same concentrations allowed existing restrictive patterns of employment to be reinforced, either as a result of conscious labour union policies or more subtly, but no less detrimentally, where local unions were built in correspondence with existing discriminatory employment arrangements that confined black workers to unskilled service sector jobs in Harlem.

Concentrations of black workers played a similarly contradictory role in Detroit. With black workers most often in a minority in parts of the motor industry first unionized in 1937, a consistent majority remained wary of joining the UAW. As a result of their comparatively high representation at Ford Motor Company, some black workers opposed the union outright by strike breaking. The unionization of Ford in 1941 was crucial, therefore, in creating a large concentrated bloc of unionized black workers in UAW Local 600 which represented a source of unionized black political power. Yet equally, Local 600 was also a high profile symbol of the limits of black economic opportunity, representing the ongoing confinement of black workers to lower paid occupations in a limited number of companies and plants. Chapter 1 shows that in both New York City and Detroit, concentrations of black workers by occupation and settlement not only help to make sense of black workers' diverse experiences and stances as organized labour rose to power, but also show these contexts played crucial dual roles in setting the potential that unions held in affording opportunities for black workers to address their economic grievances.

Chapter 2 focuses on the experiences of black workers in efforts to extend employment opportunities. The racial practices of unions, many of which have been well-documented by earlier studies, played important roles in extending or limiting black employment. Yet rather than understanding this role by racial practices alone and categorizing 'good' and 'bad' unions, Chapter 2 suggests that centring studies on black workers' experiences necessitates closer attention being paid to the interconnected roles of government and management alongside organized labour. As the USA geared up for entry into the Second World War, black workers in both Detroit and New York City attempted to negotiate improved employment opportunities from the interconnected parties of organized labour, company management and government branches. In one sense, that black workers could make appeals to both state and federal fair employment offices and through the procedures of CIO unions like the UAW, meant that new opportunities for economic advancement were created by the newly powerful position of organized labour. Yet although these opportunities have been central to civil rights unionism narratives, Chapter 2 also pays attention to some problematic side effects. In both Detroit and New York City, the complex arrangements of joint labour

market control created opportunities for obfuscation as well as advancement. Studying the complaints made by black workers reveals frustrations at the propensity for union, management and government officials to shift the blame for the continuation of discriminatory employment practices. Chapter 2 also highlights the difficulties involved in navigating complex bureaucratic machinery to accurately identify and successfully challenge the individuals and groups responsible for black employment.

The oftentimes contradictory importance of demographic concentrations and labour market control form the basis for assessing the role played by the numerous organizations who sought to offer leadership for black working constituencies. This reinterpretation of the successes of black civil rights leaders during the foundational period of the New Deal goes beyond existing studies which have noted the increased numbers who became supportive of the principles of labour organization. Instead, an assessment is made of the extent to which leadership was offered which achieved tangible successes that addressed the inherently connected opportunities and problems relating to concentrations of black workers and interconnected sources of labour market control. These related developments, it will be argued, placed a fresh demand on coordinated protest activities among coalitions, the frequent failures of which help illuminate the fragile potential of labour-based civil rights protest.

Chapter 3 advances this assessment by examining the role played by local opponents of interracial unionism. Opponents of unionism concentrated predominantly in parts of the black church in Detroit and among street-level nationalist activists in New York City, have often been marginalized in accounts which narrate the alliances formed between black civil rights and organized labour. In contrast, it will be suggested that opponents are worth examining in detail. In their vocal denunciations of instances of racial discrimination in unions and through some attempts to adapt their strategies, opponents of labour actually sought to provide leadership which responded to the changes of the decade. Yet all too often, opponents of labour were unable to go beyond their often justifiable criticisms to provide meaningful and workable alternative strategies; strategies which not only criticized interracial unionism but which also

accommodated the newly powerful position of labour and its growing interrelationships with management and government groups. The relative failure of opponents of interracial organized labour in local black politics to offer a meaningful and workable platform for their would-be constituents is not, in itself, a radically new observation. Divisions among black community leaders from across the political spectrum abounded both before and long after the New Deal era. Instead, the significance of the failure of church-based supporters of Ford in Detroit and nationalist activists in Harlem lay in the fact the price paid for these divisions had become higher as a result of the changes associated with the rise of organized labour.

Chapter 4 assesses the careers of pro-union leaders in Detroit and New York City. As union organization brought with it opportunities for protest via concentrations of black workers and through new mechanisms of joint labour market control, it was imperative that workers were aided by leaders who could adequately respond to these developments. Some effective instances of protest involved the coordination of efforts of various groups in order to engage with the multitude of responsible parties. Existing accounts have noted the increasing number of pro-union groups – from the Communist and Socialist Parties, local branches of the National Negro Congress and NAACP, the Negro Labor Committee, leaders from the black church and black trade unionists – to assert that the 1930s witnessed the successful reorientation of civil rights protest to an agenda geared to the concerns of black workers.[37] Yet it will be argued that support for organized labour did not on its own constitute an agenda which matched the concerns of the majority of the rest of the black workforce. Some successful coordinated protest efforts were undertaken though the formation of coalitions of pro-union leaders. The efforts of the Citizens Committees formed in 1934 and 1938 and in relation to the Bus Strike protests in 1941 in New York all managed to increase black employment opportunities by bringing groups of community leaders and workers together to apply direct and concerted pressure on management, government and union groups. In similar fashion in Detroit, the constituents of the UAW's Ford Organizing Committee built upon the union's victory in organizing Ford in 1941 to form the Citizens Committee for Jobs in War Industry in 1942. This group briefly allowed pro-union

[37] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty,* pp. 30-39.

leaders to coordinate their protest efforts to challenge company management, the UAW and federal and state governments to allocate employment on a more equitable basis. Yet although these coalitions have been positioned as central to the success of 'new crowd protest politics,' Chapter 4 will argue that these coordinated efforts, when measured by tangible successes rather than political outlook alone, achieved only transitory and limited gains. In similar fashion to the careers of opponents of organized labour, the inability of pro-union groups to work together in a consistent, concerted and constructive fashion was not, on its own, particularly unusual. What was of most significance was the fact that failures to sustain coordinated protest efforts had become particularly costly in a context where the rise of organized labour presented interconnected opportunities and potential pitfalls.

Chapter 5 develops this theme by analyzing the responses to the rise of organized labour of the three most significant national civil rights organizations of the period; the National Negro Congress (NNC), the National Urban League (NUL), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NNC was a noisy advocate for the cause of interracial trade unionism but was short on tangible successes, in part because beneath the surface agreement of its conferences it had a weak organizational structure at its national level. Divisions among its members remained. The Urban League, for instance, shifted tack during the New Deal to support black participation in labour and set up some local Workers' Councils to achieve this. These Councils, however, proved more successful at recognizing workers' dilemmas than serving as a means through which to address these issues. The NAACP remained the most nationally powerful civil rights group, but rather than undergoing a 'proletarian turn,' the changes in the NAACP's platform to offer clear rhetorical support for unionism are better understood as attempts among its leaders to tactically reposition the organization to counter challenges from other organizations. The NAACP's longstanding principles of interracial cooperation continued to be applied to the changing US political status quo. Although the NAACP's leadership demonstrated an awareness of the need to tackle all parties to address the growing number of complaints of black workers they were receiving, the strategies they adopted, which continued to be based on personal lobbying and case-by-case litigation, proved of only limited impact

in terms of decisively shaping the key legislative and labour developments of the organizational period.

In 1941 the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) managed to combine local and national protest groups to apply coordinated and concerted pressure on the federal government to tackle discrimination against black workers in the defence industries. By forcing President Roosevelt to issue an order forbidding racial discrimination in employment in defence industries, the MOWM achieved a significant success. Rather than ushering in a new era of coordinated protests on behalf of black workers, however, the MOWM actually represented a belated victory and endpoint, produced by a temporary moment of effective coordinated protest. As the 1940s continued, the vast majority of arrangements erected during the organizational period remained largely in place. Protests by, and on behalf of, black workers continued, but they did so mainly within structural arrangements that were in place by the early 1940s, with both the opportunities and problems this entailed.[38] The positives and negatives of the three key facets of the black experiences outlined here – the demographic concentrations of black workers in specific local settings, the joint-responsibility among management, government and union groups for allowing access to employment, and the resultant urgency placed on coordinated political activism – were closely intertwined. From this awareness emerges a new awareness that even in positions of relative strength like Detroit, the alliances formed between organized labour and black civil rights constituted a more fragile edifice than existing accounts allow.

This more limited and contradictory set of answers can only be arrived at when adopting the new approach advocated by this project. In that sense, the new methodology is as much a part of this dissertation's contribution as its conclusions. In the process of emphasizing the contradictions, inconstancies and paradoxes that characterized workers' experiences regarding the rise of organized labour, this

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[38] As Kevin Boyle has written, 'the racial conflict within the UAW was in the main a structural conflict [... and this] structure largely determined who won.' Kevin Boyle, 'There are no union sorrows that the union can't heal': The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Auto Workers, 1940-1960', *Labor History*, 36 (1995), 5-23 (p. 17.)

dissertation demonstrates that the very task of categorizing the era in value-laden terms – such as an era when 'opportunities were found,' or as one of 'promise' that was subsequently eroded - requires rethinking. The findings of the project suggest that the ideas that have characterized leader-centric accounts of the New Deal era movement, particularly the proposition that 'race' and 'class' problems became interlinked, need to be grounded by, and built upon, the day-to-day experiences of working black communities which played crucial, but often underemphasized, roles in driving the agenda of the civil rights movement. This methodological approach requires an emphasis on local detail and creativity in interpreting sources produced by officials in order to recreate a sense of 'on the ground' experiences. These efforts will always be constrained by the nature of the evidence, but nevertheless, this dissertation seeks to provide a demonstration of the benefits of this approach. The result is an account which does not deny the gains brought by unionization altogether, but which ultimately emphasizes the fragile foundations of labour-oriented civil rights protest. While not as neat or ideologically seductive as revisionist accounts, the result is a richer, more complex, and, it is suggested, an ultimately more satisfying portrayal of the upheavals associated with the rise of organized labour at a crucial juncture in the black freedom struggle.

Part I: The Responses of Black Workers to the Rise of Organized Labour in New York and Detroit During the New Deal.

Part I applies a new interpretive framework to understand the impact of the rise of organized labour on black working communities. The first two chapters will analyze the actions, experiences and, as far as possible, attitudes exhibited by black workers to the rise of organized labour in New York City and Detroit during the New Deal until the USA's entry into the Second World War. In the process, a challenge will be made to the civil rights unionism and long civil rights narratives produced by scholars such as Robert Korstad, Nelson Lichtenstein, Jacqueline Dowd Hall and Thomas Sugrue. These scholars, along with labour historians who have studied comparatively accepting racial practices of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in contrast to the American Federation of Labor (AFL), have contributed to a revisionist narrative which argues the rise of industrial unionism and the left in the mid-1930s heralded the start of a uniquely productive relationship between the cause of working class civil rights and organized labour, before this movement's great potential was eroded in the anti-radical climate of the Cold War.[1] Combinations of new and extant sources are deployed to recreate an account of the local day-to-day experiences of black working communities' experiences with organized labour. Chapter 1 alights upon the central, but contradictory, importance of pre-existing employment concentrations of black workers in shaping the potential or problems brought by unionization. Chapter 2 takes a similar methodological approach to analyze the efforts undertaken by black workers to break out of existing employment distributions. Rather than being an experience determined solely by the racial policies of union groups, the vagaries of which have dominated the attention of labour historians, it is argued that workers' experiences are best explained by probing the operations of labour market control erected by the transformations associated with the New Deal and war. The shift towards joint-responsibility among union, government and management officials for control of employment created openings for advancement, yet at the same time, created new burdens for black workers. It is in these dual impacts, and the corresponding demands for coordinated

[1] Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement', *Journal of American History,* 75 (1988), 786-811; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past', *Journal of American History*, 91 (2005), 1233-1263; Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2009).

and direct protest being placed upon black political leaders, that Part I contributes to the dissertation's wider advancement of a more fragile and limited conception of the potential benefits brought by the rise of labour to black civil rights.

Existing accounts of the rise of labour in Detroit have reflected the tendency to concentrate on leadership groups. The assertive pro-union leaders in black community politics who emerged from the growth of the United Auto Workers after 1937 have been central to many accounts, while labour historians have given relatively sympathetic coverage of the racial policies of the comparatively inclusive industrial unionism practiced by the UAW.[2] Some works have mentioned the role of the wider black workforce, but in unsatisfactory ways that beg many unanswered questions. Irving Howe and B.J. Widick, for instance, argued that the reluctance of Ford's black employees to join the UAW was a result of their dependency on middle class community leaders who were engaged in paternalistic relationships with Ford. Similarly, Richard Thomas argued that Ford's provision of jobs had resulted in corresponding feelings of loyalty and respect among black workers for the company which created opposition to unionism.[3] Korstad and Lichtenstein downplayed the existence of ambivalent attitudes

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[2] Accounts which concentrate on the growth in support among Detroit's black leadership groups include Angela Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007); Beth T. Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941', *American Historical Review,* 102 (1997), 340-377; Attention to the UAW's relatively inclusive policies on race is paid in Kevin Boyle, 'There are no union sorrows that the union can't heal': The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Auto Workers, 1940-1960', *Labor History,* 36 (1995), 5-23; Nelson Lichtenstein, *Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

[3] Irving Howe and B.J. Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther* (New York: Random House, 1949); Richard Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick argued that workers' 'skepticism' resulted from the ambiguities created by the influence of anti-union pro-Ford leaders and gratitude for jobs, compounded by a lingering mistrust of white-led unions. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 77-78; Neglecting the variety of positions adopted by black workers throughout the organizational period, Harvard Sitkoff argued most black workers were 'passive' during the 1937 sit-down strikes. Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue, Volume I: The Depression Decade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 184; The deployment of class-based explanations for attitudes to unionism sprung from contemporary currents in intellectual thought. See, for instance, Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), pp. 376-382; For a survey of black participation in strike breaking in the early twentieth century, see Warren C. Whatley, 'African-American Strikebreaking from the Civil War to the New Deal', *Social Science History,* 17 (1993), 525-558; Eric Arnesen, 'Spectre of the Black Strikebreaker: Race, Employment and Labor Activism in the Industrial Era', *Labor History,* 44 (2003), 319-335.

among workers. Korstad and Lichtenstein argue that after the unionization of Ford Motor Company in 1941, the 'consciousness' of the black workforce was 'transformed,' ushering in an era where the proletarianized workforce became stalwart supporters of successful labour-based civil rights strategies. Rather than providing a detailed examination of the responses to organized labour among the working community in its widest sense, opposition to unionism in Detroit has been explained as a result of relatively unthinking dependence on bourgeois leaders, while those in support of unionism have been praised for their militant 'rights consciousness.'[4] These explanations for workers' behaviour and attitudes are unsatisfactory, therefore, tending to rely on overly simplistic class-based explanations while positioning militant leaders as proxies for diverse groups of workers.

In New York City, existing treatments of workers' experiences as organized labour rose to power have placed less emphasis on shifts in identity and political outlook, but have also been dominated by the actions of trade unions and black labour leaders. Cheryl Lynn Greenberg describes a statistical increase in black union membership, but concentrates on the work of Frank Crosswaith's Negro Labor Committee and the racial practices of unions. Greenberg's treatment on labour concludes that although some progress was made towards integration during the 1930s, 'much more time would pass before union leaders cared enough about racism to institute movement-wide reforms.'[5] In terms of the political affiliations of the community, Greenberg argues that a majority desired an integrationist approach, and though communism and black nationalism received a hearing, 'the community simply did not support either position in a deep and sustained way.'[6] Mark Naison's study of Communist Party activities, meanwhile, noted that the Party's influence remained most noticeable among Harlem's professional groups, while nationalist ideas continued to have a strong resonance 'on the street.' Despite the hints at a mismatch between the standpoints of community leaders and

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[4] Korstad and Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost'; Victoria Wolcott gives the misleading impression that all black workers walked out at Ford in a move which she argues represented a final break with 'old guard' protest politics. Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 216.

[5] Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode?' Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 108-113.

[6] Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?'*, p. 221.

their working class constituents in the work of both Greenberg and Naison, suggesting a more complex picture than a growing and inevitable commitment of workers to interracial unionism, these accounts are still predominately focused on the actions and attitudes of a relatively small cluster of community leaders from the far left and trade union community.

In contrast, when studies of the relationship between black America and organized labour are built upon the experiences, actions and, despite the limitations in evidence, the attitudes of black workers at the sharp end of the developments of the decade, the problems inherent in these relationships stand out in sharp relief. Centring a study on the experiences of black workers is not a straightforward methodological task, given the preponderance of evidence produced by black leadership groups, white trade union leaders and the skew towards the most committed black union supporters in the fragmentary oral accounts of the era. Yet drawing upon some of this same evidence, such as reports in the black press, the oral testimony of union activists produced mainly in the 1960s and the letters of complaint sent by black workers to advancement groups like the NAACP, this chapter will attempt to recreate the experiences of black workers in as much detail as the fragmentary historical record will allow. Such was the high profile and divisive nature of many of the events of the period, in particular the numerous strike activities where black workers undertook various roles in the organizational period, it is possible to build up a coherent account of black workers' experiences. Black workers occasionally played decisive roles in determining outcomes of local events, at the same time as their experiences often revealed a sense of frustration with their inability to influence the tumultuous and divisive events that characterized the organizational period of the New Deal.[7]

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[7] James Wolfinger advocates a similar approach in his study of 1930s protest over housing, advocating a 'bottom up' approach while seeking to temper a 'zealous pursuit of policy history from the bottom up by highlighting the limits of black agency.' James Wolfinger, 'The Limits of Black Activism: Philadelphia's Public Housing in the Depression and WWII', *Journal of Urban History,* 35 (2009), 787-814 (p. 789); A forceful case for the benefits of conducting policy history 'from below' in studies of affirmative action in employment discrimination is provided in Thomas Sugrue, 'Affirmative Action from Below: Civil Rights, the Building Trades, and the Politics of Racial Equality in the Urban North, 1945-1969', *Journal of American History,* 91 (2004), 145-173; For an analysis of Sugrue's idea that combinations of structures and black agency drove black urban experiences, see Arnold R. Hirsch, 'The Race Space Race', *Journal of Urban History,* 26 (2000), 519-529.

In the first part of Part I, Chapter 1 provides a detailed comparative account of black workers' involvement as organized rose to power after 1933. This approach seeks to move beyond the temptation to characterize workers' experiences as an adjunct to the experiences of leadership groups. Renewed attention is placed on pre-existing employment concentrations of groups of black workers and their wider distribution in the labour markets of both cities. These concentrations played influential dual roles, whether geographically dictated in Harlem or by employment at Ford Motor Company in Detroit. In the first case-study of this chapter on New York, the legacy of occupational confinement in Harlem is shown to have offered a source of strength that allowed groups of workers to unite around common goals and use unions as vehicles to fight for improved employment opportunities and conditions. At the same time, these concentrations, inherited in large part from before the Depression decade, served to constrain and contain black activism, sometimes as part of a deliberate strategy on the part of white-led organized labour.[8]

In Detroit, the second case-study of Chapter 1, pre-existing concentrations in employment also provided workers with both a partial opportunity to use unions to make economic advances at the same time as it demonstrated the difficulties inherent in using organized labour to challenge barriers in employment. During the first successful unionization campaigns in 1937, pre-existing existing employment patterns had often left black workers in minority groups at a company and plants level. As a result, most took consistent and understandable decisions during the sit-down strikes to avoid siding outright with either management or labour. Black workers' comparative concentration at Ford (usually estimated to have been around 10,000, making Ford's River Rouge plant the largest group of black workers in the country) made it clear that unionization there was of crucial importance, a fact seized upon by accounts which position its successful unionization in 1941 as the triumphal start of the civil rights

[8] Mark Naison correctly notes that despite increases in the overall numbers of black union members in the 1930s a large majority remained 'structurally incapable' of enjoying the benefits of unionism, but neglects the corresponding fact that these same structural factors had created instances where groups of workers applied concerted pressure within labour groups to challenge both unions, management and city officials to treat them on a more equitable economic basis. Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 256.

unionism period. Yet though the unionization of Ford led to the creation of Local 600, which provided a base from which a variety of rights campaigns were launched, accounts which herald blacks' growing 'rights consciousness' (itself a slippery and imprecise historical categorization), neglect the extent to which Local 600 reflected the substantial problems that confined black workers in employment. Black workers' activism was contained as much as liberated by the routinized bargaining structures implemented after unionization. This was partly the result of wartime union policy which sought to control local activism. The majority of the black workforce in Detroit remained in minority groups in most locals and, despite engaging in visible wartime work stoppages to protest, required leadership in order to wrest concessions from those responsible for ongoing discriminatory hiring practices.

Chapter 2 discusses the experiences of black workers seeking to extend employment opportunities via means of protest. Employing a comparative analysis of workers' experiences, Chapter 2 shows how black workers attempted to break out of existing concentrations of employment to challenge the connected parties of management, labour and government. At the same time as these relationships furnished an opportunity for workers to extend opportunities by making appeals to one or more responsible parties, these complex arrangements often made it difficult for workers to precisely identify which group was responsible for their grievances. As demonstrated by the complaints which started to pour into offices of race advancement groups, black Americans justifiably blamed the discriminatory treatment they experienced on an interrelated network of unions, city officials and public and private management. The comments made by those upon whose desks the complaints and issues of black workers were piling up, provide an instructive window onto the issues at stake. In 1941, Gloster Current of the Detroit NAACP discussed the problems faced by black workers seeking employment in defence industry jobs, remarking bitterly that black workers were 'getting a grand runaround by management, government and the union.'[9] Granger thus captured the sense of frustration that went hand-in-hand with the promise of new

[9] Letter from Gloster Current to Walter White, 25 September 1941, [labor 1941 file] NAACP Papers, quoted in Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, p. 121.

opportunities for economic advancement as organized labour rose to assume a joint position of power during the 1930s.

The central theme of Part I is the extent to which some of the very developments heralded as central to the opportunities created by the rise of industrial unionism – the energetic activism of large concentrations of unionized black workers and the interrelated control of labour by unions, management and government – were also symptomatic of, or in some cases directly caused, discriminatory barriers which continued to retard black economic progress. Part I underlines the challenges facing black leaders attempting to take up the issues of black workers, in particular the need for coordinated coalitions which employed direct protest methods to resolve the ambivalent experiences of black workers for the better. The relative failures in this regard are the subject of Chapters 3, 4 and 5. In this sense, the experiences of black workers are not only important in their own right but also provide a new framework with which to assess the groups of political leaders who have been central to existing portrayals of the period. Part I demonstrates the benefits of moving away from ideas-led and leader-centric interpretations of the period, approaches embodied by scholars who employ a 'proletarian turn' interpretive framework. It is from a renewed focus on the contradictory impacts of the rise of labour on diverse groups of black workers that this dissertation's new, more limited, conception of the promise held by the developments of the period emerges.

Chapter 1: The Demographic Distributions of Black Workers and the Contradictory Consequences of the Rise of Organized Labour

The Case of New York

Existing demographic concentrations in terms of employment and geographical settlement profoundly influenced the experiences of black New Yorkers during the rise of organized labour after 1933. Before the New Deal, like in other urban districts in the North with substantial black populations, workers' experiences had been marked by exclusion and restriction even though black union membership had steadily increased. In 1940, New York City remained the nation's largest urban concentration of blacks with 458,444 residents.[10] Ira De A. Reid estimated in 1930, meanwhile, that because of an increase in subway construction, building and longshore work, black union membership in New York had grown steadily since the First World War, peaking at around 12,000 in 1926. Reid grimly noted that, '[t]he locals of those internationals denying membership to Negro workers follow those policies as rigidly in New York as elsewhere.' In the 1920s, some concerted but often unsuccessful attempts had been made to unionize an estimated 12,000 black laundry workers. Progress was also reported to have been made by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) as a result of its policy of forming mixed locals.[11] Some black leaders based in Harlem, particularly those associated with the Socialist Party such as A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen and Frank Crosswaith, had been advocating unionism in the black community since the 1910s; the growth of black union members reflected their efforts, tied to black New York's demographic increase during the 1920s.[12]

The arrival of the New Deal in 1933 dramatically sped up the urgency of issues surrounding black union participation. Writing some six years after Reid in 1936,

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[10] *Negro Year Book,* (Tuskegee: Tuskegee Institute, 1947), pp. 8-9.
[11] Department of Research and Investigation of the National Urban League (Ira De A. Reid, Director), Negro Membership in American Labor Unions, (1930), pp. 131-132.
[12] Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph: Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 6-12.

Charles Franklin assessed the impact of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933. Noting an increase in black membership, Franklin observed an apparent paradox, suggesting workers had 'suffered most' as a result of unions' discriminatory practices which had increased during the economically competitive 1930s, yet at the same time, the growth of labour had also allowed black workers to make their 'greatest strides and [begin their] most successful movements'.[13] Franklin reflected that, in this diversity of practice Manhattan echoed the practices of organized labour nationally, even though '[i]n Manhattan conditions [were...] not quite so serious as in the United States as a whole'.[14] Even before the full impact was clear, Franklin accurately observed that unionization during the New Deal had contradictory impacts on black workers in New York.

As the 1930s progressed, the contradictory impacts of rise of organized labour on black workers became clearer. In particular, the social-geography of Harlem's heavily segregated political, economic and cultural life, played a dual role in defining the relationship between workers and the powerful unions of the period. Existing arrangements served both to deliberately and more subtly reinforce patterns of discrimination, yet at the same time created conditions for black workers to use this concentration to make concerted efforts to redress their grievances. Problems associated with unions' refusal to admit black members, resulting in their removal from employment, created a wave of complaints which occurred with increased frequency during the Depression decade. Some white-led unions, particularly those affiliated to the AFL such as the Motion Picture Operators union and the Building Service Employees Union, responded to questions of black participation by forming separate local unions of black employees.

The actions of the Motion Picture Operators Union demonstrated how the concentration of black workers in Harlem could function as a barrier that prevented black workers

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[13] Charles Lionel Franklin, *The Negro Labor Unionist of New York: Problems and Conditions among Negroes in the Labor Unions in Manhattan with Special Reference to the N.R.A. and Post-N.R.A. Situations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), p. 121.
[14] Franklin, *The Negro Labor Unionist of New York*, pp. 266-267.

enjoying the benefits promised by unionization. The workers of Harlem's movie theatres became a high profile example of black workers being 'accepted' into a white-dominated AFL union but contained in a separate black local. Local 306 of the AFL-affiliated Motion Picture Operators was initially reluctant to admit any black members. Partly as a result of the organizational efforts of Frank Crosswaith, black operators in Harlem were granted admittance in 1934, but Local 306 maintained strict rules that these union members would only be allowed to work in theatres in the Harlem district. Black members of Local 306 had to pay dues but could not attend meetings, while their wages were substantially lower, averaging $18 a week compared to the rate of $51 a week for white operators. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP was quick to use this example to rebut claims being made in the early years of the New Deal by some union leaders, reportedly including AFL president William Green, that black workers were themselves to blame for being left out of unions because of their own reluctance.[15] What was understandably viewed by Wilkins as an unsatisfactory arrangement continued for many years, however. The Mayor's Commission on Conditions in Harlem, commissioned to investigate that year's riot, reported in 1935 that black workers' membership of Local 306 'proved simply a means of controlling the Negro worker.'[16] In 1939, an editorial in the *New York Age* argued, '[i]t's only small comfort to organize Negro motion picture operators [...] and then limit them to work only in neighborhoods where there are Negro movie houses'.[17] The concentration of black workers in Harlem allowed the white-led Motion Picture Union to solve potential conflicts between their growing white and black members by organizing locals confined to certain sections of the city, reinforcing existing and highly discriminatory employment arrangements.

Efforts to use unionization to confine and contain black workers to Harlem and other black majority areas and occupations were not passively accepted, however. For instance, New York's Building Service Employees Union (BSEU) attempted to form separate locals to house black members. Local 32 B of the BSEU had approximately 9,000 black members in its total of 31,800, but while in theory all members were

[15] Letter from William Paster to Roy Wilkins, 3 November 1934, Letter from Roy Wilkins to Harland Holmden, 31 October 1934, Box I: C-414;6, NAACP Papers.
[16] 'Report of 'Mayor's Commission on Conditions in Harlem,' Reel 76, pp. 33-34, LaGuardia Papers, New York Municipal Archives, New York City.
[17] *New York Age*, 9 September 1939.

supposed to have equal rights, a separate council was formed for its almost exclusively black members in Harlem.[18] The resistance to this organizational structure was revealed in 1937 when the leader of Harlem's Local 32 B, Christopher Sweeney, was dismissed by an employer and the union refused his requests for help. Frustrated, Sweeney complained that the union's reluctance to help was a result of his earlier protests over the practice of maintaining racially separate locals. This had led to him being branded by white union leaders, in Sweeney's words, as 'too aggressive as a Negro'.[19] Three years later in 1940, complaints also emanated from Local 32 E, the BSEU's branch in the Bronx, where five local members, four of whom were black, accused local officials there of '[g]ross discrimination, cruelty and incompetency' in complaints made to the officers of the international union and the NAACP.[20] Although the Negro Labor Committee trumpeted the organization of 4,000 black workers into the BSEU as one of their great success stories, the fact that this organization was seen to reinforce pre-existing patterns of racial employment led to a series of lasting frustrations among black union members.[21]

The source of workers' frustrations – the confinement to existing areas of employment - could also provide an opportunity through which to challenge these arrangements. The formation of separate locals led to almost exclusively black memberships who could harness the power that accompanied this concentration of numbers to challenge discrimination from within. Such was the case at the Hotel Service Employees Union (HSEU), a subsidiary of the BSEU. Of 20,000 members, Local 32 of the HSEU had 90% black membership, several of whom attempted to use this concentration of membership to lobby within the union on behalf of black interests. Jack Dolensky and Edward Ross were two leaders in these efforts, while Harlem's members were represented by Ross as well as Pride Mills and Lulu Fields. In September 1940 these workers attempted to undo discriminatory wage differentials which had been written into contracts made

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[18] Franklin, *Negro Unionist of New York,* p. 206.
[19] *New York Age,* 28 August 1937.
[20] *New York Age,* 20 January 1940.
[21] Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?'*, p. 111; In New York City, 'At one time, several hundred domestic workers were enrolled in Local 149 of the Building Service Employees Union (AFL), but membership in this local steadily declined in the early days of the war, and it was subsequently disbanded.' Negro Year Book: A Review of Events Affecting Negro Life, 1941-1946, Jessie Parkhurst Guzman, Director of Records and Research, Tuskegee Insitute, Editor (Tuskegee: Tuskegee Institute, 1947).

between the HSEU and employers. According to Ross, the cumulative amount owed to black workers as a result of these arrangements was $15,000, but attempts to seek a resolution from the local AFL representative were met with a 'cold reception'.[22] About seven months later, six black workers were elected as representatives of a new union grouping that broke away from Local 32A, likely because of the continuation of these discriminatory provisions in the union contract. Calling itself the Hotel Front Service Employees Union, the local remained affiliated to the larger grouping of the BSEU and, correspondingly, remained within the AFL.[23] The attempts of the HSEU to constrain its black members in separate locals had dual impacts, by allowing for separate and unequal contractual arrangements to be made, while also creating an opportunity for workers within these unions to form independent pressure groups that challenged both management and the union itself.

Union groupings formed in line with New York's racial patterns of settlement and employment could also create a source of empowerment, contributing to the wider life of the community. Amy Terry, who along with her sister became a member and organizer for District 65 of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Workers Union during the 1930s and 1940s, described their activities in New York's garment centre and in downtown Manhattan in the following way:

> There was opposition, of course, from the bosses, but we never tangled with any of the other unions like the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. They had their membership [...] ours was a kind of catch-all union. Department stores plus all of these other little shops.[24]

Terry described how a combination of her membership at Adam Clayton Powell Jr.'s Abyssinian Baptist Church and her own experiences in the workplace had led her to join a union. Terry described District 65 as a 'fairly active union' that not only tackled store owners but also played an active role in the social life of the community, organizing

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[22] These arrangements also, apparently, largely confined black workers to work in boarding houses instead of better paying hotels at the comparatively low wages of $11.42 per week for women and $14.85 the men. *New York Age,* 21 September 1940.
[23] *New York Age,* 3 May 1941.
[24] Interview with Amy Terry, 24July 1992, pp. 15-18., Box 2;9, Abyssinian Baptist Oral History Project, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City.

dances and other events. Not everyone shared her enthusiasm, however, with her recollecting that some unorganized 'factions' within the community could show dissatisfaction with the union and the lack of progress that had been made.[25] It is important to point out that District 65 achieved success not because it was an interracial union, but because it corresponded to existing racial divides in New York's labour market. These concentrations were a sign of the limitations of efforts to equalize economic disparities on racial grounds at the very same time as they allowed organized labour groups to become a base of social empowerment for the black community.

The unionized musicians, writers and theatre workers on the WPA projects in Harlem also drew strength and power from their numerical concentration in Harlem. The Negro Writers Guild was formed in 1937 by the group of writers tasked with writing the section on black life for the larger New York Federal Writers' Project. Later published as *The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History*, this project was edited by Roi Ottley, who had previously been one of the ANG members in the *Amsterdam News* dispute, alongside William J. Weatherby. Other contributors, most of whom also became members of the Writers Guild, included Wilbur Young, a Mr. Nugent, Sidney H. French and Benjamin Gross.[26] In June 1937, after conducting a four-day sit-down strike, the FWP workers achieved a guarantee from city officials that there would be no WPA dismissals for at least six weeks; part of its larger demand that the WPA be expanded further to employ many more of New York's unemployed. The Negro Writers' Guild participated in this city-wide action, but as a 'separate entity in support of the main group,' with its own separate headquarters on 136th Street in Harlem.[27] A similar sub-group was set up by black workers in the theatre section of the WPA. The Negro Actors' Guild operated as a largely autonomous force, as demonstrated through their efforts to challenge government officials over the cuts made to the WPA at the beginning of 1938. Actress Noble Sissie sent telegrams on the Guild Unit's behalf to several leading political figures including President Roosevelt and Senator Robert Wagner.[28] Union organization thus provided willing Harlem participants in federal works initiatives with a means

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Roi Ottley and William J Weatherby, eds, Federal Writers Project, *Negroes in New York,* Reels 1-5, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
[27] *New York Age,* 5 June 1937.
[28] *New York Age,* 14 January 1938.

through which to challenge their 'employer,' in this case the government, to avoid dismissals or cuts to their programmes.

Harlem's pre-existing preponderance of black businesses meant that the issue of unionism could also divide the black community. The 1935 labour dispute at the *Amsterdam News*, one of Harlem's two broadsheet newspapers, demonstrated the opportunities for black workers offered by unionization, as well as various less positive side-effects. Reportedly the first time in US history that black workers went on strike against black ownership and won, the dispute was caused by the decision on 7 October of the newspaper's black owner, Sadie Warren Davis, to dismiss nine members of her editorial staff who were members of a recently formed (all-black) unit of the white-led American Newspaper Guild (ANG). Davis claimed she was the victim of a strike, protesting that the original dismissals had been motivated solely by financial considerations. The editorial staff, meanwhile, claimed rather convincingly that they had been locked out for union activity, and picketed the paper in the centre of Harlem on 135th Street in order to win reinstatement.[29]

The concentration of a willing workforce at the newspaper allowed the dispute to serve as a larger rallying point for debates surrounding unionism in black New York. The staff had become enthusiastic about organizing after one reporter, Ted Poston, invited an ANG organizer to talk to the staff.[30] Another writer, Marvel Cooke, recollected how when it came to trade unionism, before 1935 most of them 'had never thought about it before'.[31] Cooke attributed the enthusiasm for union membership to a general dissatisfaction with their working conditions and salaries, and a dislike of the owner's propensity to bypass the editorial department when making decisions.[32] The ANG had been formed the previous year by white liberal newspaperman Heywood Broun, and had a relatively accepting attitude towards admitting black members, and several white

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[29] *New York Age,* 12 and 19 October 1935.
[30] Marvel Cooke Oral History, Marvel Cooke, Washington Press Club Foundation Oral History Project. http://wpcf.org/oralhistory/cook.html , pp. 58-59; The seven editorial staff initially dismissed were Guild members Thelma Berlack-Boozer, Henry Lee Moon, Marie King-Barr, Ida Mae Ryan, Sadie Hall, Charles Grutzner, and Stephen Hall. *New York Age*, October 12 1935.
[31] Cooke, p. 68.
[32] Cooke, p. 71.

members, including Broun himself, participated in picketing the *Amsterdam News*.[33] The committed support provided by the ANG to its black members during the strike, in terms of financial as well as moral support, meant their policies were distinct from the deliberate attempts made by the Motion Picture Operators and BSEU and HSEU to use black-only locals as a means of containing and constraining black workers. Nevertheless, as opponents of the editorial staff were quick to point out, the ANG's commitment was not severely put to the test in this dispute. Sadie Warren Davis, described the ANG as an 'outlaw dues collecting organization [...which stood] as a racket which has not dared to attack the big white newspapers.' Street-level nationalist groups, whose activities will be the focus of Chapter 3, also condemned the unionized workers, demanding to know what the ANG had done to extend opportunities for black workers on the many white-owned newspapers in New York.[34]

The dispute at the *Amsterdam News* also threw light upon the potential crossover between union activity and the radical left that characterized some of Harlem's artistic and professional groups. Davis argued that her editorial staff had been infiltrated by the Communist Party in order to 'wreck a great Negro commercial enterprise,' and it was true that several of the early union leaders had links with political parties of the left. Once picketing began, Benjamin Davis, Abner Berry and several other CPUSA members appeared on the picket lines.[35] Yet membership of the Party was more a consequence than a cause of the dispute. Cooke reported how she was approached by Benjamin Davis while picketing together, where he convinced her to join. Cooke said she joined the Party because 'of the Depression and some of the problems that I had met in reporting conditions of people, [meant] that I was ready, emotionally, for it,' and though

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[33] Daniel Leab, *A Union of Individuals: the Formation of the American Newspaper Guild 1933-1936* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 234.

[34] *New York Amsterdam News*, 19 October 1935; Allen Chase, 'The *Amsterdam News* is Winning,' *The Nation,* 13 November 1935; Melville J. Weiss, 'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work: An Analysis of Consumer Action Against Employment Discrimination in Harlem, 1934-1940' (Unpublished master's thesis, Columbia University, 1941), p. 86; Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression,* p. 176.

[35] Ted Poston and Henry Lee Moon, were known in Harlem for their links with the Communist party from their participation in a group of African Americans who visited the Soviet Union as part of a film project in 1932. David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 290; See also Kathleen A. Hauke, ed., *A First Draft of History: Ted Poston* (Athens, GA.: University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 52; Naison, *Black Communists in Harlem,* p. 68. Moon went on to advocate black union participation in a chapter entitled 'Labor as an Ally' in, Henry Lee Moon, *Balance of Power: The Negro Vote* (New York: Double Day, 1948).

not all became members, a 'number of them did join the party' after the strike.[36] During the *Amsterdam News* dispute there was an unusually direct relationship between support for trade unionism and support for the radical left, but crucially, for most editorial staff it appeared that Communist Party membership was more of a consequence than motivating cause of their union participation.

The concentration of an all-black workforce was a clear benefit to the editorial workers to win reinstatement. The management's accusations of white Communistic influence failed to prevent a selection of community leaders from rallying to the workers' defence taking the view that, given the intra-racial nature of the dispute, the issues at stake were of relevance for the community-at-large. Those found speaking in favour of the workers at meetings and on the picket lines included churchmen like Adam Clayton Powell Jr., trade unionists Frank Crosswaith and A. Philip Randolph, Walter White of the NAACP, Elmer Carter of the Urban League, as well as ANG and CPUSA members.[37] In an apparent demonstration of support from the wider community, the newspaper's sales and advertising revenue declined sharply during October and November, to the point where Davis was forced to sell the newspaper on 24 December to stave off bankruptcy. The terms of the sale to Harlem physicians and entrepreneurs C. B. Powell and P. M. H. Savory included the provision to reinstate all the locked-out workers and grant them union recognition.[38] The agreement signed between the ANG and the new owners contained a number of provisions, including a maximum 45 hour week, a week of paid holiday, reinstatement of the striking workers, and crucially, a collective bargaining contract.[39] This victory was won, in large part, because Harlem's racial community was

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[36] Cooke, pp. 73-74; As Mark Naison observed, particularly during the Communist Party's Popular Front era of participation in mainstream community politics which included offering support for organized labour, 'the boundaries separating Communists from Party sympathizers became increasingly vague,' with branches among educated groups 'such as those in the WPA Negro Theatre and the staff of the *Amsterdam News* – [coming] to resemble discussion groups more than units of a revolutionary army.' Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, p. 187, p. 205, p. 207.

[37] R. Ottley and W. J. Weatherby, eds., *The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History,* (New York: NYPL, 1967), pp. 283-285; *New Masses*, 17 (22 October 1935).

[38] *New York Amsterdam News*, 28 December 1935.

[39] The reinstated workers were listed in the strike agreement as Obie McCollum, Thelma Berlack-Boozer, Ted R. Poston, Henry L. Moon, William Chase, Marvel Cooke, Marie King Barr, Ida Mae Ryan and Roi Ottley, Federal Writers Project,., 'Negroes in New York.' Roi Ottley ed, Microfilm version, Reel 4, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

successfully mobilized to act in support of the editorial workers seeking the benefits of unionization.

Yet the legacies of the event proved to be much more ambivalent. In May 1936, the NLC reported that both Henry Lee Moon and Ted Poston had been dismissed by the paper as a result of their continued union activity and through a combination of personal circumstances and Powell and Savory's apparent desire to root out unionists, only three of the strike participants were still with the newspaper in 1940.[40] The dispute at the *Amsterdam News* was one of the most high-profile of the decade and demonstrated the willingness of certain groups of black workers to fight on behalf of organized labour. At the same time, the dispute demonstrated the potential conflicts that could arise over questions of inter-racial and intra-racial labour disputes, as well as the willingness of various leaders to form coalitions which occasionally acted very successfully on behalf of black workers' interests.

The concentrations of black businesses and employment in Harlem meant that the problematic issue of how unions would determine black employment prospects in other parts of New York became central as organization continued. When organizing campaigns swept across New York with renewed impetus at the end of 1936 as part of a national trend which followed the National Labor Relations Act in 1935, white union organizers from outside of Harlem, with the support of the NLC, attempted to organize many of Harlem's pharmacists into the Pharmacists' Union of Greater New York. A meeting held at the Harlem Labor Center, in an attempt to win the support of potential black members, adopted a resolution which stipulated that where contracts were signed in 'Negro sections' of the city, at least one black pharmacist would be employed. The attempts at unionization were met with a response by a group of drug store owners, the majority of whom (like the owners of other businesses in Harlem) were white, to launch a company-endorsed union alternative. A statement by the union condemned this

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[40] Poston went on to find work as the first black writer at the *New York Post*. Marvel Cooke, meanwhile, was subsequently called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities for her membership of the Communist Party. NLC Minutes 14 May 1936, NLC Papers, Reel 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; Ottley, ed., *Negroes in New York,* p. 285; Cooke, p. 77, p. 90.

attempt to form a company alternative. Though many at the meeting were reportedly reluctant to join, attempts to deter unionization were unsuccessful and most were brought into the union.[41] The campaign of the Pharmacists' Union demonstrated the increased power held by organized labour to control employment arrangements. Many were wary of the imposition of union obligations on workers in Harlem, illustrated by the apparent reluctance of many to join the white-led union,

Black workers and others in the community in Harlem came to question what measures would be taken by unions to extend opportunity to new areas. These tensions were aroused by the efforts of another white-led union which sought to organize black undertakers in Harlem. The Funeral Chauffeurs Local 643 of the United Motor Hearse and Car Owners Association attempted in April 1937 to organize a 'colored branch' of Harlem members to include the owners and renters of the rolling stock used for funerals. As part of these efforts, a strike was called and picketing was conducted, apparently even while funerals were taking place. The strikers demanded that undertakers in Harlem only use 'union' cars and that their rates of pay be increased to match those of white undertakers. Some in Harlem resented the imposition by a white-led union of rules that forced black businesses to the same standards as white. As one undertaker, C. Franklin Carr, complained:

> Instead of picketing colored undertakers the union should picket white establishments in order to force them to hire colored chauffeurs in cases where they have colored funerals. To join the union each chauffeur has to pay $34. This money, running into four figures, is taken down town by the white organizer and the colored chauffeurs will find themselves holding the bag.[42]

Undertakers refusing to join with Local 643 formed their own competing organization, the Harlem Funeral Car Chauffeurs Association and rival groups made the news later on in May 1937 when physical clashes between them broke out outside St. James Presbyterian Church.[43] As in the case of pharmacists, the unionization of black undertakers by a white-led union opened up internal community tensions between

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[41] *New York Age,* 5 December 1936.
[42] *New York Age,* 8 May 1937.
[43] *New York Age,* 22 May 1937.

workers and owners. The tensions led many opponents from nationalistic and more conservative business sections to argue that this activity detracted from the more crucial issue of black treatment in white-led unions outside of Harlem.

As the 1930s progressed, black union membership in Harlem did increase, but the key question revolved around how labour organization could be employed to extend economic opportunities beyond existing demographic concentrations. To this end, the political strength created by the relative segregation of black Harlem occasionally allowed leaders and workers to use it as a base from which to begin to address these larger concerns. One year after the formation of the temporary Citizens' Committee during the *Amsterdam News* dispute, another community committee was formed in order to aid black workers involved in the coast-wide seamen's strike. The Committee was led by Benjamin McLaurin, an organizer for the BSCP, and also featured Communist Party member James Ford, former *Amsterdam News* journalist Henry Lee Moon, churchman William Lloyd Imes, Frank Crosswaith of the NLC and Lester Granger of the Urban League alongside union participant Joe Curran.[44] The rationale for the formation of a separate black committee based in Harlem was explained in a statement issued by the committee to the wider community:

> The existing strike among the seamen in New York Districts brings out a demand for concerted action by intelligent and progressive citizens of Harlem, for reasons of particular interest to Negroes. For three weeks 10,000 men have been on strike against intolerable wages and working conditions on marine ships, and nearly 2,000 of these are Negroes.

The statement also castigated the attempt of ship owners to engage other black workers as strike breakers, complaining that, '[i]t is such unfair tactics as these that have brought Negro labor into disrepute, [and] have given Negro workers the unwarranted reputation of "Americas [sic] scabs"'.[45] Just as would prove to be the case in the disputes at Chrysler in 1939 and at Ford in 1941 in Detroit, the presence of black strike breakers, even though relatively slight in occurrence, proved a rallying point for

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[44] *New York Age,* 14 and 23 January 1937.
[45] *New York Age,* 28 November 1936.

community leaders of various political stripes who had a shared interest in countering the perception that black workers were antagonistic towards the powerful unions of the period. The concentration of political groups in Harlem allowed it to perform a useful role as an organizational base in cases such as the seamen's strike.

The strike at Spring Products between August 1938 and May 1939 also demonstrated the potential benefits that could be won where large concentrations of unionized black workers were found. Constituting the largest numerical example of black workers going on strike on behalf of organized labour in New York during the 1930s, the strike took place at Spring Products Corporation, a furniture manufacturer located across the East River from Manhattan in Long Island City. The unusually high proportion of black workers at Spring Products, reported to have constituted 95% of the approximately 400 workers on strike, and its unusual length meant the strike mobilized a committee of Harlem-based community leaders to act in support of the workers. In turn, this coalition's actions provided visible proof of the potential of activism that engaged with the interconnected bodies of management, state labour executives and city officials, and organized labour.[46]

The strike began after an earlier one-year union contract between Spring Products Corporation and Local 91 of the United Furniture Workers (UFW-CIO) expired in July 1938. The president of the company, Samuel Marcus, was reported to have abruptly terminated negotiations for a new union contract, after also having attempted to reintroduce an open shop arrangement and impose wage cuts. Harlem resident Thomas Sinclair, the secretary treasurer of local 91 and general strike chairman, said the workers decided to strike on 4 August 1938 after Marcus 'locked out some 120 of the workers on the final day of negotiations'. The company reportedly then recruited strike breakers from Harlem and South Jamaica, and set up a house in Corona as a recruiting agency and as a 'hotel' where strike breakers stayed.[47] The introduction of strike breakers also led to violent clashes on the picket lines, a deliberate ploy on the part of

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[46] Memo from William Pickens to Roy Wilkins, 26 Jan 1939, Box I: C-414;14, NAACP Papers; *New York Age,* 25 March 1939.
[47] Statement of Thomas Sinclair, 18 January 1939, Box I: C-414;14, NAACP Papers.

the company according to black unionists. Several union pickets were arrested and put in prison as a result.[48]

The majority black workforce appeared resolved in their desire to refuse wage cuts and demand a bargaining contract, however, eventually forcing Spring Products to agree a settlement in May 1939 after a nine month dispute. The leaders of the union were keen to celebrate the unity and determination shown by the striking workers. As strike chairman Sinclair put it:

> I believe that this is the first time in the history of the labor movement that such a large number of colored people remained out on strike for a period in excess of six months, and have weatherd [sic] the fight with such determination and in the face of such terrific odds.[49]

Sinclair was right to observe that the Spring Products strike was an unusual occurrence, not only for its longevity but also for the fact that part of the cause being fought for was the right for a collective bargaining contract; meaning the very principles of union organization, as well as specific terms of employment, were of importance to the participating workers.[50] Having already had a contract in place for one year, the majority black workforce at Spring Products clearly saw organization as an indispensable tool through which to protect their rights as workers.

The concentration of so many black workers at the strike at Spring Products was responsible for the formation of a coalition of community groups that engaged with both organized labour and government bodies in support of the striking workers. In January 1939, a Citizens Committee was formed, led by Charles Collier, the Executive Secretary of the New York Urban League. The NAACP also became involved, primarily through the activities of George Murphy of the publicity department, after William Pickens had brought the matter to the attention of the national branch. National

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[48] Ibid.; Memo from William Pickens to Roy Wilkins, 26 Jan 1939, Box I: C-414;14, NAACP Papers.
[49] Statement of Thomas Sinclair, 18 January 1939, Box I: C-414;14, NAACP Papers.
[50] Ellinore Herrick of the State Department of Labor stated that '[t]hroughout the entire controversy the issues of a closed shop was the principal issue.' Elinore Herrick to Walter White, 2 February 1939, Box I: C-414;14, NAACP Papers.

Executive Secretary Walter White attended one of the early meetings of the Committee and reported that those present included representatives from the Urban League, Negro Labor Committee, the United Furniture Workers Joint Council, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and the New York NAACP branch.[51] White personally sent a telegram to Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia urging him to intercede to mediate the dispute, adding the situation 'is becoming daily more desperate'.[52] The actions undertaken by the Citizens Committee demonstrated that successful protest actions needed to engage with a wide variety of groups in order to aid the black striking workforce. Even before the formation of the Committee at the beginning of the strike, Local 91 had filed a protest with the National Labor Relations Board against the refusal of Spring Products' management to agree to a collective bargaining contract. They were apparently unsuccessful in this referral, however, with Ellinore Herrick reporting that since negotiations on a new contract broke down over an issue to do with wages, there had been no violation of the law and thus the NLRB could not intervene.[53] Following the formation of the Citizens Committee in January 1939, renewed efforts were made to persuade New York's political leaders to intervene on behalf of the workers. As well as deciding to send a personal delegation to see LaGuardia, a letter was sent to his labour advisor, Nathan Frankel, by strike chairman Sinclair, Paul Green of the UFW's Metropolitan Joint Council and Charles Collier, which declared that:

> [...] it has become imperative from a social as well as an economic point of view, to call upon your good offices, for assistance [...] for things of this nature sponsor increased crime delinquency in the Harlem area of the City, and swell the Emergency Relief Rolls.[54]

Black unionists received support from other elements of the majority white labour movement. The *New York Age* reported in April 1939 that leaders representing 5,000 CIO members in New York were set to participate in a demonstration at Spring Products, including Michael Quill of the Transport Workers' Union, Heywood Broun, president of the American Newspaper Guild and labour leader Joseph A. Gavagan and Congressman Vito Marcantonia. This action had been prompted by the CIO's regional

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[51] Memo from Walter White to George Murphy, 2 February 1939, Box I: C-414;14, NAACP Papers.
[52] Telegram from Walter White to LaGuardia, 15 February 1939, Memo from George Murphy to Walter White, 2 March 1939, Box I: C-414;14, NAACP Papers.
[53] Elinore Herrick to Walter White, 2 February 1939, Box I: C-414;14, NAACP Papers.
[54] T. Sinclair, C. Collier, P. Green to Nathan Frankel, 23 February 1939, Box I: C-414;14, NAACP Papers.

director, Alan Haywood.[55] The support among white labour leaders also eventually extended to other local union affiliates, with a branch of the United Bedding Company in Passadie, New Jersey, staging a sixteen week sympathy strike after workers refused to handle products produced by strike breaking workers at Spring Products. Three union delegates, white UFW members Sol Silverman and Dominick Tripodi, and John Smith, also, according to a report in the *New York Age,* 'visited more than sixty manufacturers in New Haven, Hartford, Springfield and Boston in an effort to push the boycott of Spring Products'.[56] The strike was also responsible for, temporarily at least, eroding the divisions between the AFL and CIO branches of labour, with Sinclair reporting that although the NLRB meetings had been 'fruitless,' towards the end of the dispute they had received some support from AFL pickets from Local 814 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters who had 'recognized that Spring Products was unfair'.[57]

The coordinated efforts of labour and civic groups eventually resulted in a victory for the striking workforce. George Murphy of the NAACP's publicity department said that, after the strike, the workers involved 'understand now the real meaning of labor struggle, and they will be heard from on a national scale'.[58] In a press release, Sol Silverman was quoted as saying that the strike, 'would never have been won [...] without the remarkable display of courage and determination on the part of the Negro strikers, or without the wholehearted support of the entire Negro community of Harlem'.[59] Silverman was correct to recognize the bearing that the unified workers and wide cross-section of community support had had on the outcome of the strike: in many ways, therefore, the strike at Spring Products actually reinforced the reasons why activity of this sort on the part of black workers was a relatively rare occurrence during the Depression decade. Black workers were most often not employed in the relatively high proportions found at Spring Products. The workplace demographics of the factory in Long Island City seemingly helped foster a sense of unity and purpose among the striking workforce, while the visibility of black workers was responsible for the dispute becoming a high profile case in the activities of local community leaders. Under the

[55] *New York Age,* 25 March and 8 April 1939.
[56] *New York Age,* 8 April 1939.
[57] Statement of Thomas Sinclair, 18 January 1939, Box I: C-414;14, NAACP Papers.
[58] Letter from George Murphy to Louis Cohen, 10 July 1939, Box I: C-414;14, NAACP Papers.
[59] Local 91, UFW Press Release, 20 May 1939, Box I: C-414;14, NAACP Papers.

right conditions – a unionized workforce with a high percentage of black workers – unionism had the potential to touch upon the wider concerns of black workers on a community-wide level.

Yet the strike also highlighted that for black workers to achieve gains through organized labour on a group basis, coordinated action that engaged with government bodies and other branches of organized labour as well as management was crucial. Three years after the conclusion of the strike at Spring Products, representatives of the National Urban League and the NAACP again became involved with the company, but this time in efforts to prevent the loss of black jobs as a result of the curtailment of government defence contracts. In a letter to James Hubert of the Urban League, company president Samuel Marcus said the War Production Board had limited production to such an extent that the company would have to close their plants in Everett and Baltimore, which also employed mainly black workers. Marcus encouraged Hubert to take this matter up with the government, who in turn, wrote to Walter White of the NAACP saying that, '[t]he fact that this plant has given consideration to Negroes when many other plants refused them employment makes me especially interested in doing whatever may be possible to safeguard their jobs'.[60] Three years after the successful labour action at Spring Products' plant in New York City, the position of its predominantly black employees remained precarious and black leaders faced the challenge of having to engage with a combination of management, labour and government in efforts to safeguard their position.

Viewed from the perspective of the experiences of black workers, the rise of labour in New York represented both a constraint and a spur to efforts to improve employment conditions. On the one hand, the heavy concentration of workers in Harlem, by occupation and settlement, meant that unionization could reinforce these discriminatory arrangements. Such was the case in the experiences of black workers in the Motion Picture Operators Union, the Building Service Employees Union, and the

[60] Samuel Marcus to James Hubert, 11 February 1942; James Hubert to Walter White, 18 February 1942, Box II: A335;4, NAACP Papers.

Hotel Service Employees Union. At the same time, as demonstrated by disputes at the *Amsterdam News* and the Spring Products Corporation, instances of majority black workforces could allow unionism to become a source of power and strength by concentrating groups of black workers willing to protest and galvanizing the wider community behind these goals. As these ambivalent experiences continued in the years leading up to the USA's entry into the Second World War, the central challenge became how employment for black workers could be extended beyond these existing concentrations.

The Case of Detroit

Existing accounts provide inadequate coverage and explanations for the experiences of black workers in Detroit's motor industry as the UAW rose to power between 1937 and 1941. Rather than being dictated by changes in loyalty, identity, or the political vagaries of different protest strategies, it will be argued that the distribution of workers in various workplace settings holds the key to understanding the impact of the rise of unionism.[61] In an era when all workers' positions were fragile, black workers largely held the most marginal positions of all. With black workers in the minority at the factories and plants organized first in 1937, most sought to avoid siding outright with either union or management. At Ford Motor Company, black workers' proportionately higher concentration created a more extreme spectrum of responses, with more black workers becoming committed to organizing on the UAW's behalf and more opposing unionism through strike breaking. Rather than praising the militancy and 'rights consciousness' of union supporters while dismissing strike breaking as a purely mercenary activity, it is important to apply a more even set of standards to workers' responses to the dilemmas associated with unionism. As a result, the unionization of Ford in 1941 should still be seen as a crucial event, though one best explained not by the changes in identity, loyalty or political allegiance, but by a shift in power with much more contradictory and uneven consequences. Understanding these consequences requires placing the experiences of black workers - including the importance of understanding the workplace contexts and employment distributions within which they operated - at the heart of the analysis.

The employment patterns of black workers in various parts of the automobile industry were crucially important in shaping the experiences and responses of black workers during the organizational period between 1936 and 1941.[62] In the process of the United Auto Workers' rise to power, Detroit's black community also rapidly expanded. In 1940,

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[61] Regarding loyalty, Richard Thomas characterizes the decisions as a choice between industrial unionism and corporate paternalism and asks rhetorically, 'can there be any wonder that blacks in Detroit and Inkster greatly admired and even loved Henry Ford and his company?" Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It,* pp. 274-276.

[62] On the origins of black employment in the auto industry, see Joyce Shaw Peterson, 'Black Automobile Workers in Detroit, 1910-1930', *Journal of Negro History,* 64 (1979), pp. 177-190.

Detroit had the sixth largest black population across the nation, estimated at 149,119, before increasing by another 82,938 by 1944.[63] When organizing began in earnest in late 1936, some black workers came to see the United Auto Workers (UAW) as the vehicle best equipped to resolve their work-related problems. Some early black members, who will be discussed in Chapter 4, not only joined, but where allowed, became officers of some of the new local unions formed as the UAW won collective bargaining contracts first at General Motors and then Chrysler, as well as in a host of smaller manufacturers and parts firms.[64]

Most observers agreed, however, that most black workers remained distinctly reticent to participate in union activities. Some argued that the reluctance of black workers was a result of ignorance of the principles of trade unionism. This was explained as a legacy of the fact that many were recent migrants of southern origin who had little experience with any form of organized labour, let alone in interracial union locals. Commenting on the ignorance of unionism which had hindered the efforts of the UAW's predecessor, the Auto Workers' Union (AWU) in 1934, black unionist Joseph Billups argued that most black workers were 'right off the farm – they didn't know [about unionism...]. They were just farmers'.[65] Regarding the sit-down strikes of 1937, meanwhile, others suggested workers' stances in the plants of General Motors and Chrysler were instead dictated by pre-existing negative knowledge of the practices of organized labour. Describing black workers' disproportionately low representation, an observer in the *Pittsburgh Courier* wrote in February 1937 that few had been able to overcome their scepticism of unions and participate wholeheartedly in the sit-down strikes.[66] Both of these explanations for

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[63] *Negro Year Book* (Tuskegee: Tuskegee Institute, 1947), pp. 8-9.

[64] Black workers did not determine the outcome of the wave of sit-down strikes which spread through the Detroit-area motor industry in the first months of 1937, but the positions they adopted highlighted the importance of local workplace dynamics. For a discussion that includes a peripheral account of black workers, see Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 29.

[65] Joseph Billups Oral History, Interview by Herbert Hill, Shelton Tappes and Roberta McBride, 27 October 1967.

[66] *Pittsburgh Courier,* 13 February 1937; On the strike at General Motors see Sidney Fine who estimates it affected 140,000 employees and 50 GM plants. Sidney Fine 'The General Motors Sit-Down Strike: A Re-examination', *American Historical Review,* 70 (1965) 691-713 (p. 692.); Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970); According to Daniel Nelson, unionization was shaped by 'general stimuli' including labour legislation and economic trends, coupled with locally built locals: Daniel Nelson, 'How the UAW Grew', *Labor History,* 35 (1994), 5-24 (p.

the reticence of black workers - ignorance of unions or knowledge of discriminatory practices – seem contradictory.

In contrast to outright ignorance or pervasive opposition, a better way of explaining the general reluctance of so many black workers to join the UAW can be found by examining the fragile and marginal position of black workers in Detroit's labour market. Many commented that black workers were afraid that the outcome of the fierce battles being fought for unionization would be detrimental to their employment prospects. The same article in the *Courier* that observed a general scepticism also argued that, 'Negro workers are, for the most part, affiliated with the third wing which has not put across its message to the general public,' suggesting a reluctance to affiliate too closely with either union or management.[67] Some detailed local examples reveal that black workers had reasonable cause to fear management reprisals by affiliating with organized labour. Shelton Tappes, for instance, recollected he had had trouble as a union organizer in Flint trying to convince workers of different racial backgrounds to overcome their fear of losing their jobs to join the union, saying that those who did not join were 'afraid for their jobs.'[68] Writing on the role of black workers in the strikes at General Motors in Flint, another black organizer, Henry H. Clark's account suggests that these fears had not been without foundation, writing that, 'Negroes have been made to walk the streets in Flint for the parts they played in the Union until we crawled back to our masters on our bellies and promised them we'd get off the Executive Boards and quit the Union before they would take us back in the shops'.[69] In an article written to promote the UAW, Clark's agenda to castigate management was clear, yet workers' fear of being singled out for recriminations from management ran throughout accounts of the early organizational period. Robert Crump, for instance, observed in March 1937 that 'very few' black workers had joined with the UAW, speculating that part of this may have been down to the fact 'that they will not admit it or are ashamed to wear their buttons,'

10.); Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 170-176.
[67] *Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 February, 1937.
[68] Shelton Tappes Oral History, 'Talking Union' Interview, September 1983, ALUA.
[69] *Pittsburgh Courier,* 25 September, 1937.

an observation suggestive of the sense of danger associated with affiliating with the union in this early uncertain stage of unionization.[70]

Nevertheless, some black workers not only participated in the sit-down strikes at General Motors but were seemingly happy to be seen to do so, as demonstrated by pictures taken during the event of members including Roscoe van Zandt who proudly displayed their union badges.

Roscoe van Zandt and black UAW members, Flint, Michigan, January 1937. Online image collection, ALUA.

For many other black workers, particularly those concentrated in small minorities in numerous factories and plants, the fear of reprisals for non-cooperation from both labour and management was particularly acute. Outside of Flint at Bohn Aluminum in

[70] *Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 March 1937.

Detroit, another black unionist's testimony reveals that some managers attempted to deliberately exacerbate the specific fears of marginal groups to deter unionism. After overcoming his own initial reluctance to join in January 1937, Hodges Mason described how before a union vote, 'some of the Negroes told me that if you vote in there, they're gonna kick all the Negroes out. Management, they brainwashed them to a great extent'.[71] Mason also charged that the management at Bohn:

> talked to the Negro workers, telling them that the white workers were using them, and talking to the white workers telling the white workers that the Negroes were going to get just as much as they, and it was not right, and they went to the women workers and told them that if they had to increase rates that they could hire men, and the men would replace the women.[72]

Mason's account provides a specific and detailed example of how company officials attempted to exacerbate the fears and dilemmas faced by black workers, and other minority employees like women.

Thus particular opposition to unionization was found in workforces where black workers were in minority groups. In Flint, meanwhile, some black workers held antagonistic attitudes to their white co-workers who were now engaged in forming the new locals of the UAW. A history of poor relations with the majority white workforce led to sporadic reports of clashes between anti-union black workers and pro-union white workers. Lloyd Bailer's investigations recorded evidence of 'violent outbreaks' at Flint's Chevrolet and Fisher plants where, in his opinion, because of a history of problematic racial relations, 'the colored employees felt little solidarity with the white majority'.[73] Black workers constituted only 2.5% of the GM workforce, numbering 2,500 in total across all the company's plants in Michigan and Indiana.[74] Most black workers avoided directly opposing the increasing numbers of other workers fighting for union recognition, but the clashes in Flint were not isolated occurrences. During the

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[71] Elaine Latzman-Moon, *Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes: An Oral History of Detroit's African American Community, 1918-1967* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 133.
[72] Hodges Mason Oral History, Interview by Roberta McBride, 6 February 1968, ALUA.
[73] Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p. 198.
[74] These statistics are taken from figures compiled by the Office of Production Management in 1941. Bailer, 'Negro Automobile Worker', 416.

strike at the Chevrolet Gear and Axle plant in February 1937 in Detroit, many black workers in the plant apparently chose to side with a number of white workers who also opposed the union's strike action, in a protest against the 'enforced idleness' which had occurred as a result of the sit-down strikes.[75] A key motivation for black workers engaged in this oppositional activity was to preserve their own hard-fought position in the workforce.

The necessity of maintaining employment and securing the money required to live was, of course, crucial to the black workers heavily constrained in the lower echelons of employment of Michigan's motor industry. This fact was apparently well-recognized by union organizers at the Olds Motor Works foundry in Lansing. In Lansing, as part of the attempts to counter black workers' reticence, union organizers offered foundry workers twenty-five dollars as part of an unsuccessful effort to convince them to break with the company and join the union.[76] The following month in Detroit, a group of black workers tried to break the picket line during the strike at Chrysler's Dodge factory in March 1937, with the Baltimore *Afro-American* reporting that 'approximately thirty colored workers stormed the Chrysler plant [...] in an effort to get their pay from the paymaster'.[77] Throughout its factories in Michigan Chrysler employed around 2,000 black workers during the period between 1937 and 1941, but this represented only 4% of its whole workforce.[78] Rather than being dictated by widespread ignorance of trade unionism or universally fixed scepticism of all organized labour, these early instances of black workers operating in opposition to labour are better explained by the dynamics of plant-specific race relations built by blacks' minority status.

Black workers in minority groups in plants like Packard had good reason to fear that the outcomes of unionization would have a negative impact on their employment prospects.

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[75] Meier & Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* p. 36; Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p. 200.
[76] *Pittsburgh Courier,* 13 February 1937.
[77] *Baltimore Afro-American,* 20 March 1937; Iriving Howe and B.J. Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther,* p. 211.
[78] These statistics are taken from figures compiled by the Office of Production Management in 1941. Bailer, 'Negro Automobile Worker', 416.

Following the unionization of the Packard plant in Detroit, for example, one worker described the following situation in a plea for help to the national branch of the NAACP:

> They are gradually getting rid of all the "Niggers" to quote them, and are giving their jobs to white men, some of the colored men have been on these jobs as long as 18 years. Several white foremen have told colored help that if they don't do something for themselves they would all be out. One white foreman sent to the employment office for five colored men and they told him they were not using any more colored.[79]

This unsigned account is difficult to verify, but its plausible claims echoed the widespread fears of many black workers that the rise of the UAW would serve as an excuse to erode the already fragile position in Detroit's labour market. Packard employed around 600 black workers between 1937 and 1941 and as a result of representing only 3.75% of its workforce, race relations remained fraught with tension.[80]

Summing up the attitudes of black workers to the early efforts of the UAW in Detroit in 1937, Lloyd Bailer stated that in the main, black '[w]orkers simply remained inside the plant until the dispute was concluded or substantial guarantees were given that work would not be resumed pending a settlement.' Yet though Bailer suggests this meant, 'their role was largely passive,' the examples discussed do not suggest passivity or neutrality, but a situation where many concluded, with some justification, that as both union and management engaged in an uncertain battle, it would be unwise to come out wholeheartedly in support of either group.[81] Rather than resting on shifts in loyalty or political principles, the inherited workplace demographics of Detroit's motor industry (where black workers often found themselves in minority groups) provide the best way of explaining the reluctant and oppositional stances taken by many during the first wave of unionization in 1937. From this realization stems an improved understanding of the fact that the benefits promised by unionization – a process driven by local

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[79] Unsigned letter to NAACP, 19 March 1937, Box I: C-322;8, NAACP Papers.
[80] Bailer, 'Negro Automobile Worker', 416.
[81] Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p. 197; Howe and Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther*, p. 209.

contexts of power and circumstance rather than changing loyalties, identities and political principles - were far from certain.

Unionization offered particular promise where black workers were found in large enough numbers to be able to demand an equal share of the benefits of union membership. At Midland Steel, for instance, a relatively small plant on Detroit's east side which made frames for cars, black workers represented about a third of the workforce. This was an unusually high concentration which helped black workers lobby in order to secure specific guarantees from the union before the workforce went on strike to win a bargaining contract with management in December 1936. White union organizer Frank Winn described how:

> By special invitation a committee of Negro workers attended the next meeting to discuss ways and means of getting the Negroes to join the union. Their spokesmen presented their case with dignity and intelligence. "We represent," he said, "most or all of the Negro workers in the plant. If we recommend that they join the union and participate in the strike, they will do so. We think we should be in the union and support the strike if one is necessary. We cannot recommend that unless we are guaranteed full membership privileges and equal consideration under the contract." The chairman of the meeting summed up the feeling of all those present: "Anything you want, brothers. Just get in here and help us win this strike!" And so the Negro workers came into the union and a few weeks later they struck, one of the first of Detroit's famous sit-down strikes [...] If any white member had reservations about the Negroes' attending the dance, he did not say them out loud.[82]

Given the problematic race relations in other plants in Detroit, clearly some caution needs to be applied when assessing Winn's rather cheerful depiction of how interracial unity prevailed at Midland Steel.[83] Nevertheless, his account of how black workers

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[82] Frank Winn writing in *Antioch Review,* 1943, quoted in Howe and Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther,* p. 212.

[83] According to the white union leader of the strike, John Anderson, a 'feature of the strike that won the praise of everyone was the strong unity shown between the white and colored Midland workers. This is all the more remarkable in that just a few weeks before the strike, there had been much opposition to taking Negroes into the union. Now, no one can doubt the wisdom of this move.' *United Automobile Worker,* 10 December 1936; A UAW Women's Auxiliary publication wrote, 'This was the first time we

attempted to secure guarantees of equal treatment as a condition of cooperation is suggestive of how higher numbers could lead to active attempts among workers to harness this power to demand equal treatment during unionization. High concentrations meant that white union leaders were more interested in securing their cooperation than elsewhere, but also that the dilemmas faced by workers elsewhere achieved clearer resolution by guarantees of equal treatment.[84] At least some of the demands for equality were seemingly acted upon, with a black unionist, Oscar Oden, elected along with four others to the Midland negotiating committee in June 1937.[85] The Midland Steel strike suggested that where black workers were constituted in large enough numbers, clearer resolutions could be made to the widely shared dilemmas of black workers.

By far the largest concentration of black workers in Detroit's motor industry was Ford Motor Company. Black workers were estimated to have occupied 11% of jobs at Ford's River Rouge plant, totalling 9,825, in October 1937.[86] This high proportionate representation had important but contradictory consequences, creating a more extreme spectrum of responses from black workers. A group of committed trade unionists emerged from the effort to organize Ford Motor Company between 1937 and 1941. Some, like Shelton Tappes, became influential community leaders in their own right in the years following unionization. Chapter 4 will trace the careers of these union supporters in more detail. Others, however, directly opposed the union, with black workers engaged in support for the company in the 'Battle of the Overpass' in November 1937 and at the Ford strike in April 1941. A consistent majority of the approximately 10,000 black Ford employees, meanwhile, attempted to maintain a course that avoided siding outright with either side. This spread of stances requires a shift away from explanations based on politicized motivations, either that many came to privilege interracial protest solutions, or that feelings of warmth and loyalty to Ford

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really came into contact with our colored Brothers and Sisters and it was astonishing how well we worked together. There was no feeling of dislike, or feeling better than them, just because we didn't happen to be born of the same color.' 'Women's Auxiliary #11. Events of 1937,' Box 1;7, Dorothy Kraus Collection, ALUA.

[84] On numbers employed see Bailer,, who gives figures of 1,250 black workers out of 4,100 (30.49%); Winn gives figures of 25% black. Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p.

[85] UAW Local 410 Records, Box 1, ALUA.

[86] Bailer, 'The Negro Automobile Worker', p. 418.

were gradually transferred to the UAW. Instead, the spectrum of responses speaks to the divisive dilemmas posed by unionism in a context where black workers were enjoying comparatively improved employment opportunities. That is not to suggest that the efforts of the UAW to improve the often deeply unsatisfactory working conditions at Ford were not needed. Instead, the divisive responses of black workers to the questions of unionization at Ford shed light on the influential, but potentially contradictory, importance of uneven workplace distributions of black employees.

When the UAW's organizational efforts switched to Ford in the second half of 1937, it became clear that some black workers did look upon Ford Motor Company with gratitude and respect. Some observers characterized the opinions of black workers in terms of personal 'reverence' for Henry Ford. White unionist Frank Marquart, for instance, argued this reverence corresponded to the antipathy felt towards the efforts of the UAW in 1937.[87] Feelings of this sort also reflected practical calculations of how black workers' employment interests would best be served. As Reverend Charles Hill recollected, the $5 a day promised by Ford was absolutely crucial in shaping the perception that Henry Ford was almost a 'god'.[88] The promise of the comparatively high wages paid by Ford in particular, even though pay differentials were not that large, continued to prove a particular draw for black workers to migrate to Detroit. As unionist Robert Battle put it, during the 1930s, 'Ford had just gone into the $5.00 a day so consequently a large number of Negroes came from the South up North looking for this'.[89] Although Detroit's black community expanded most rapidly in the periods surrounding the two world wars, in common with the wider South-North movement of the Great Migrations, black migrants continued to journey north throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Though some fragments of evidence produced by black workers did occasionally praise Ford, they did not express their support in terms of unswerving loyalty. One black worker was quoted in the *Detroit Tribune* in the summer of 1937 saying that:

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[87] Frank Marquart Oral History, Interview by Herbert Hill, 24 July 1968, ALUA.
[88] Charles Hill Oral History, ALUA.
[89] Robert Battle Oral History, Interview by Herbert Hill, 19 March 1969, ALUA.

> Mr. Ford is not a god, but he has been a savior to thousands of Negroes by giving them employment according to their ability when union shops were closed to them. He kept thousands off the relief bills, thereby saving their moral respect and the city and the state thousands of dollars.[90]

Another drew a comparison between Ford's employment of black workers in all departments and the limitations on employment opportunities in the plants of other factories now organized by the UAW.[91] Stated the worker:

> I do not deny I have been contaminated by Fordism. I have an opportunity to advance according to my ability. I do not have to pay Mr. Ford a fee for the privilege of working or be forced out of work on a strike at the will of the union whether I wanted to work or not, simply because the big union bosses in Washington or in the Hoffman Building in Detroit said so.[92]

The crucial yardstick by which both management and organized labour were to be judged was the provision of jobs. Both workers praised Ford for his provision of employment; it was this practical consideration and the belief that the concentration of opportunities at Ford Motor Company was worth preserving that led to opposition to unionism in the summer of 1937.

The provision of employment was not an abstract notion that led to feelings of warmth and gratitude towards Ford. Jobs were seen as a commodity, occasionally one that could be bought and sold and one that was certainly worth protecting. In the interwar period it was well understood that in order to secure a job at Ford, would-be workers would have to traverse a network of community links whereby jobs could be 'bought.' These networks extended to sections of the black church, car salesmen, restaurants and bars and Ford's two black employees in the personnel department, Donald Marshall and Willis Ward. According to Robert Battle, 'there was an old system of you had to know somebody. Ten or fifteen dollars in the minister's kitty or at that time you had the automobile salesmen like Mullian Mack Motor Sales and someone like that, you'd go out

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[90] *Detroit Tribune,* 12 June 1937; Also quoted in Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It,* pp. 284-285.
[91] *Detroit Tribune,* 17 July 1937; Also quoted in Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It,* p. 285.
[92] Ibid.

and put a down payment on a car and it was used as an entree into getting a job'.[93] Stanley Nowak, meanwhile, recollected that in many bars and restaurants jobs at Ford would be 'for sale.' In particular, according Nowak, one summer in the 1930s, 'I ran into a very elderly lady who had a restaurant at that time that closed, and she told me that she had sold probably five hundred jobs'.[94] John Dancy of the Detroit Urban League thus characterized how these systems worked, saying that:

> the personnel directors [at Ford] choose the individuals who are to work there. Many of these men are sent to the Ford plant by ministers, social workers and other interested people, who are personally known and in good standing with the personnel directors.[95]

The importance of maintaining employment at Ford was also based upon the corresponding status seemingly enjoyed by Ford employees in the wider community. James Boggs recollected that workers at Ford were seen as 'big shots,' because 'they was always the ones who had a paycheck, getting about twenty-five to twenty-six dollars a week,' and it was often reported that Ford workers used to wear their company badges with pride to church on Sundays.[96] Black workers' position at Ford remained tenuous, however. As the *Pittsburgh Courier* accurately summarized in April 1937, rather than being politically opposed to the principles of unionism, black workers at Ford were reluctant to join the union become they felt, 'that once the company is organized, there will be fewer jobs for Negroes'.[97]

Though some had pride in their employment at Ford, therefore, most often this did not translate into a willingness to directly challenge the attempts of union organization. The high concentration of black workers at Ford did, however, provide an opportunity for counter-organizational efforts at the same time as the campaigns of the UAW. The Ford Brotherhood, for instance, was a company-run group formed in the summer of 1937 which attempted to cement the 'loyalty' of its workforce to counteract the efforts

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[93] Robert Battle Oral History, ALUA.
[94] Latzman-Moon, *Untold Tales,* p. 128.
[95] Letter from John C. Dancy to T. Arnold Hill, 27 January 1939, Box 4;26, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
[96] Latzman-Moon, *Untold Tales,* p. 150.
[97] *Pittsburgh Courier*, 5 April 1937.

of the UAW. Supporters of the labour movement in the black community rightly identified that this grouping was an attempt by the management to deter unionism. A conference featuring representatives from the UAW, NNC and other sympathetic observers was held in Detroit in August 1937, where A. Philip Randolph argued the Ford Brotherhood was not a worker-controlled organization, but was, 'like the dummy sitting on the ventriloquist's knee. Its lips move, its eyes roll, but the voice is Ford's'.[98] The Brotherhood did seem, however, to enjoy support from at least some black workers. Some members of the Brotherhood, according to journalist George Schuyler, were vehemently against the UAW and believed 'that a large number of Negroes have been able because of the good wages to purchase homes and that more than 3000 own automobiles.' These men, according to Schuyler, were 'ready to almost fight any stranger who comes in town and says a good word for the U.A.W.A.'.[99] At the same time, however, Schuyler reported that 'many for safety sake belong to both the Ford Brotherhood and the U.A.W.A. until it is definitely settled who will represent the workers in collective bargaining under the provisions of the Wagner Labor Relations Act'.[100] This last observation was particularly pertinent and was reinforced by evidence taken from the admittedly partisan *United Automobile Worker,* where Richard Thomas recorded that at one meeting of the Ford Brotherhood, 'one observer noticed that the audience seemed unresponsive, concluding that the majority of black workers came out of fear of losing their jobs'.[101] In seeking to remain on good terms with both, many Ford workers were displaying a keen awareness that as the landscape of industrial relations was in upheaval in Detroit, the most sensible strategy was one which sought to avoid recriminations from either management or organized labour.

Yet the concentration of such a comparatively large black workforce at Ford enabled the company to recruit some members into the Service Department, the group responsible

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[98] *New York Age,* 21 August 1937.
[99] *Pittsburgh Courier,* 4 September 1937.
[100] Ibid.
[101] *United Auto Worker,* 25 September 1937; Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It,* p. 290; Robert Battle, a black union organizer who described the difficulties he encountered recruiting black members at Ford. In comparing the membership of the UAW to the Ford Brotherhood, Battle admitted that: 'The majority of the blacks refused to join anything at the time because the Negroes didn't have any knowledge of what unions were all about, and anything that came about that they didn't know, have some first hand information on, they just merely withdrew and a had a stand-off position against it.' Robert Battle Oral History.

for maintaining order and discipline in large plants like the River Rouge. During the Battle of the Overpass in November 1937, some black workers fought on the side of the company. These participants were engaged as a result of direct recruitment by the company; it was not a spontaneous instance of Ford workers fighting the union out of gratitude. In addition, black workers from the UAW's Negro Organizing Committee were also among those unionists handing out leaflets at the gates of Ford's River Rouge plant when members of Ford's Service Department attempted to stop them. Catherine Gelles, a member of the UAW's Women's Auxiliary, gave the following description of an attack on unionist William Merriweather in the fights which followed:

> A colored fellow was kneeling over him and pounding him. A tall man in a gray suit and a gray hat was kicking him. Another fellow, he was fat, also was kicking him...They kept hollering, "Kill him! Kill him."[102]

In reference to an attack on someone else, Merriweather himself said that:

> I saw two men kicking a union man who was lying on the ground. They were snarling at him, "Take off that union button." I tried again to get to the women and I saw Robert Sentman... being pursued by Oscar Jones... and Wilfred Comment. Sentman was running and they were hitting him from the rear. They knocked him down and dragged him on the ground like something that was not human.[103]

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[102] 'The Trial That Shocked a Nation,' published by National Citizens' Committee for the Protection of Civil Rights in the Automobile Industry, found in Box 1;10, Dorothy Kraus Collection, ALUA.
[103] Ibid.

Robert Sentman being chased by William Commett/Comment and Oscar Jones, African American man on left. [ALUA]

Black participation as temporary reinforcements for Ford's notorious Service Department during the Battle of the Overpass occurred partly because some black workers felt drawn to Ford, but was not a spontaneous display of group loyalty. Harry Bennett claimed that a black foundry worker was 'goaded and cursed so viciously by one organizer that he turned and struck him,' which started the brawl.[104] Bailer's research, conducted only a short while after, described how believing that black employees could be relied upon, 'large, strong men, preferably former athletes, were handpicked from various sections of the plant [and...] armed with blackjacks and similar weapons, these men worked on regular shifts, [and began] patrolling the plant in cars or standing guard at plant gates'.[105] This preference for the most athletic of black workers is evidenced by the presence of Oscar Jones, described by Merriweather

[104] *Time,* 7 June 1937.
[105] Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p. 201.

as a 'Negro prizefighter.'[106] Such was his impact, Jones may well have been the black individual lauded by the Baltimore *Afro-American* as the 'uncrowned hero of the pitched battle.'[107] The Battle of the Overpass was a rare instance of black workers offering direct support for Ford Motor Company in the uncertain days of late 1937. Its significance lay in the fact that it demonstrated the potentially conflicting impacts of the high proportion of black workers at Ford: the context of high concentrations of black workers was the crucial background which afforded opportunities to adopt more clear-cut and divisive positions either for or against unionism.

With black workers' experiences explained in the context of the distinct conditions at Ford, the contradictory impacts of the company's eventual unionization in 1941 become clearer. Rather than explaining workers' positioning during the strike in April 1941 which brought this about in terms of changing political allegiance, unionization is better understood as a shift in power. The proportionately high concentrations of black employees at the River Rouge plant provided an opportunity for labour-based protest at the same time as it constituted a symbol of the limitations of these strategies. Ford Motor Company managed to avoid unionization in 1937 as a result of successful countermeasures and the internal factionalism which beset the UAW in the years that followed. The strike at Ford in April 1941 which led to eventual unionization not only changed the course of the community's relationship with organized labour, but also visibly demonstrated the continuingly divisive impact of unionization on the black working community.

In particular, the presence of black strike breakers provides a valuable window into the motivations and aspirations that shaped attitudes to organized labour. As Eric Arnesen has written, black strike breaking in the first half of the twentieth century was organized by companies who sought to fight unionism, but was also 'a form of working-class activism designed to advance the interests of black workers and their families

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[106] 'The Trial That Shocked a Nation,' published by National Citizens' Committee for the Protection of Civil Rights in the Automobile Industry, found in Box 1;10, Dorothy Kraus Collection.
[107] *Baltimore Afro-American,* quoted in Meier & Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, p. 40.

[...which was in] many instances a collective strategy as much as trade unionism'.[108] This idea can be meaningfully applied to 1941 as well as to an earlier incident of predominantly black strike breaking at Chrysler. At Chrysler in November 1939, strike breakers crossed picket lines as a result of deliberate attempts by management to fight off the union using every means at their disposal. In addition, though pro-union observers downplayed this aspect, from the point of view of those engaged in strike breaking their actions represented a means through which some workers could attempt to gain or preserve a fragile foothold in employment.

During the strike at Chrysler in November 1939, some observers claimed that a majority of black strike breakers were recent migrants who had little familiarity with unionism because of their southern origin, and little to lose in the way of workplace or familial recriminations. As white unionist Nick DiGaetano subsequently recalled, 'they imported some Negroes from the South to break the strike. They started to operate the plant [...] I assume there were a couple of hundred, they brought them up in box-cars, and then they loaded them in the truck and took them to the plants'.[109] White unionists at the time were also keen to play down the extent of strikebreaking, with an official UAW publication describing how the 'handful' of scabs included '181 Negro strike breakers admitted into the plant and six whites,' while 50 more black workers were turned away at the watchman's gate.[110] The UAW accused black Ford employee Donald Marshall of instigating strike breaking, but there is no further direct evidence for this claim.[111] In an official leaflet, the union condemned Chrysler management's tactics of pressuring dealers and propagandizing in the press, and criticized Father Charles Coughlin's attempt to break the strike. In addition, the leaflet also describes how:

> Already in the Chrysler lockout Negroes are being used in a back to work movement. Is the corporation hoping to incite a race riot so that the militia will

[108] Arnesen, 'Spectre of the Black Strikebreaker', 322.
[109] Nick DiGaetano Oral History, Interview by Jim Keeney and Herbert Hill, 17 June 1968, ALUA.
[110] *United Automobile Worker,* 29 November 1939.
[111] *United Automobile Worker,* 29 November 1939; Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It,* p. 298.

> be brought in? If so, they won't be any more successful than they were with their other despicable tricks.[112]

The union publicly acknowledged the high proportion of black strike breakers, but blamed the management for strike breaking while denying the effectiveness of this divisive tactic. In their newspaper, the UAW blamed the company for this strategy of encouraging black strike breakers in the hope that tensions may erupt into a race riot, providing an excuse to send in troops. According to the UAW, 'two AFL goons, one a Negro, and several Ford servicemen were active in this dangerous game'.[113] Blaming the company in this way was a sensible tactic for a union who were understandably keen to avoid divisions that could hamper the strike effort.

Less publicly, however, in an unsigned unofficial leaflet apparently produced by pro-union whites, more responsibility and blame was placed upon black workers themselves. Headlined 'Attention Negro Workers,' the leaflet read:

> There are only 150,000 Negroes in Detroit's 1½ million population. You are outnumbered 10 to 1. WHY ISOLATE YOURSELF? WHY CREATE TROUBLE FOR YOUR OWN RACE?
>
> There are not more than 2500 Negroes among the 55,000 Chrysler workers. CAN YOU OPERATE THE PLANT ALONE? IF THE CORPORATION'S HENCHMEN TELL YOU THAT YOU CAN, HOW LONG DO YOU THINK IT WILL LAST? DO YOU THINK YOU CAN, HALF ORGANIZED, TAKE THE JOBS OF 55,000 ORGANIZED WHITE AND NEGRO WORKERS? WHAT DO YOU THINK THESE ORGANIZED WORKERS WILL DO?
>
> WHY TAKE OUR JOBS? We are workers just like you, both white and Negro. We are out because we were locked out. We have decided now to stay out until a fair and workable agreement is reached that will better the conditions of all.
>
> We know that your conditions at home are bad. So are ours. So why should you try to take bread out of our mouths [...]

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[112] 'Educational Committee, Dodge Local #3, UAW-CIO,' UAW Records, Local 3, Box 38, ALUA.
[113] *United Automobile Worker,* 6 December 1939.

> So join with us in the UAW-CIO. A victory for us is a victory for you.[114]

Containing thinly veiled threats a well as some attempts to emphasise common problems and solidarity, the leaflet suggests that its white authors believed that the problems evidenced by black strike breaking at Chrysler went well beyond the company-instigated actions of an isolated handful. The relative numerical weakness of black workers at Chrysler had led to many black workers seeking to avoid choosing sides during the sit-down strikes in 1937; their continuing minority status was noted by the authors of this leaflet who sought to play upon the fears that resulted from this position.

Other assessments of the motivations of strike breakers at Chrysler reflected the fact that both management and unions were holding joint power to determine or retard black employment prospects. Lloyd Bailer, who carried out personal interviews with those involved, recorded that:

> The foundry superintendent promised them better jobs if they would return to work. Perhaps they could advance by playing off the company against the union. They were not particularly interested either in advancing the union's cause or in upholding the company. They had little to lose if they were unsuccessful anyway. They were not afraid of being beaten by the strikers because, they said, there were many white workers who also wanted to go back to work.[115]

Bailer's evidence thus captures the sense that although black strike breakers engaged in actions which placed them at odds with other black workers who supported the union, they too recognized that both union and management had dual roles in shaping black employment. Both came to share power to dictate employment, which resulted in dilemmas facing black workers that, with the instigation of company officials, could result in instances of strikebreaking.

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[114] UAW Records, Local 3, Box 38, ALUA.
[115] Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p. 208.

Black strike breaking during the Ford strike in 1941 demonstrated the divisive potential of unionism. At a plant where black workers were employed in unusually large numbers, the chance for organized labour to benefit black workers during the crucial formative years before 1941 had been denied. Blacks' high concentrations at the River Rouge plants also meant the divisions displayed during the strike reflected the uneven nature of unionization itself. The presence of black strike breakers has been explained away by some as a mixture of the last remnants of black dependency and paternalism, allied to the nefarious influence of a company willing to pay any mercenaries in order to defeat unionization.[116] But those who sought to strike break, for their part, were not only self-interested mercenaries. Rather than explaining strike breaking purely in terms of company manipulation, we also need to assess the motivations of black strike breakers who were, in their own ways, engaged in efforts to advance their positions.

Contemporary estimates of the extent of black strike breaking at Ford's River Rouge plant varied after the work stoppage began on 1 April. According to Lloyd Bailer's personal interviews, approximately 1500 blacks were inside the River Rouge plant, while most of the whites inside were Service Men.[117] When violent clashes between union pickets and strike breakers broke out on the second day, the *New York Times* reported that 'scores were hurt as the heavy forged iron shafts were thrown at pickets by nearly 200 Negroes [...] Hand-to-hand encounters resulted in knifings and beatings to pickets and company supporters'. The union reported they had treated 150 people during the day.[118] A reference to this event was also contained in a union press release of the same day, which reported that, 'testimony of eye-witnesses, supported by published photographs in the daily press, reveal the fact that a crowd of several hundred Negro workers emerged from the Rouge plant, at Gate Four, Miller Road, yesterday and attacked a much smaller group of peaceful pickets, many of whom were

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[116] Meier and Rudwick argue that, 'since many of these men had only recently been hired loyalty to Ford probably played little part in their decision to work. Rather they were lured by promises of high pay, and by indifference, if not hostility, to the white unionists.' Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* pp. 87-88; Lloyd Bailer argued that 'the relatively superior occupational status, as well as aggregate employment, traditionally enjoyed by Negroes at the Rouge helps to explain their strikebreaking role during the April, 1941, strike.' Bailer, 'The Negro Automobile Worker', 419.

[117] Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p. 218.

[118] *New York Times*, 3 April 1941.

painfully and some seriously injured'.[119] In his personal interviews, Bailer quoted a witness who recalled a scab drawing a knife and declaring: 'I'm going in here to work or somebody is going to die'.[120] While exact numbers are impossible to determine, it is clear that a visible majority of strike breakers were black.[121]

The violent clashes that accompanied the predominance of black strike breakers made national news in the black press too. On 12 April, the *Baltimore Afro-American* carried three photos of 'scabs' throwing objects, of a strike breaker being beaten by pickets, and then the strike breakers being cornered by unionists. According to David L. Lewis, such was the inflammatory nature of these photos upon black public opinion, 'nothing indeed hurt the UAW's cause more'.[122] Writing at the time, Horace Cayton believed that these pictures of violence had 'revolted the senses of many Negroes throughout the country and again reinforced their hatred and fear of white workers and union organizations and their belief in the goodness of benevolent employers'.[123]

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[119] Statement of Thomas and Widman, FOC release, 3 April 1941, Records of the NAACP, Microfilm Edition, Series 13A, Reel 3.
[120] Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p. 218.
[121] Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* pp. 91-92.
[122] David L. Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford: An American Folk Hero and His Company* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), p. 265.
[123] *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 April 1941.

Striking auto workers beat a "scab" worker as he tries to cross the picket line and enter the Ford Rouge Plant, Dearborn, Michigan. "The Picket Line", by Milton Brooks, a photographer for the Detroit News, was the winner of the first Pulitzer Prize for Photography. [ALUA Online Visual Collection.]

The highly visible presence of black strike breakers was a cause for concern to black leaders too. An article in the *New York Daily News* on 6 April reported that:

> 1,500 crazed, drunken colored workers were running wild through the $800,000 Rouge plant and spurning the urgent plea of a federal mediator to go home. That Ford officials were not doing much to control the razor-toting club-carrying workers, as they commandeered new cars, raced through the service streets and occasionally stabbed one another- - was also apparent. Most come from the hillbilly country of the South, where lynchings are matter of course.[124]

The NAACP responded to this article with formal protests to the Associated Press, the United Press and the International News Service, against 'news which gives the

[124] 'Ford Strike File 1941', Reel 3, NAACP Papers Microfilm Edition.

impression that Negro Ford workers form the majority of non-strikers,' with their protest instead arguing that, 'The truth is [...] many Negroes have joined the union and are working shoulder to shoulder with their white fellow workers to win the strike'.[125] It was certainly true that some black workers actively supported the UAW in the strike, but in understandably seeking to downplay the racial elements of the strike in order to prevent racial violence, contemporary leaders missed the important point that many of those engaged in strike breaking, alongside being motivated by financial inducements, had also arrived at a thought-through conclusion after calculating the relative potential of both Ford management and the UAW to advance and retard their employment prospects.

Supporters of the union were keen to emphasize the financial motivations of those involved, and the variety of observers emphasized this aspect of reasoning. For instance, according to black unionist Horace Sheffield:

> the thing that had the greatest impact really was Ford shelling out the hard dollars. I mean really the tremendous amount of money that he gave these folks [...] by and large, Ford relied heavily on mercenaries. Black mercenaries and all these various groups to, you know, weld support for his movement.[126]

In similar fashion, a report in the *Afro-American* stated that 'CIO officials charge that Ford has been hiring young colored boxers' to be used as strike breakers.[127] Additionally, Bailer's interviews recorded strike breaking workers as saying that, 'just before the strike Marshall hired every one of the old men [laid-off-workers] he could get' and the word spread around that 'anyone can get a job at Ford's'.[128] Sources from Ford itself confirmed they had attempted to use force to fight off the union. Service Department chief Harry Bennett described how, 'Mr. Ford wanted to fight the thing out. He told me to arm everyone we had in the plant, and use tear gas if necessary'. Bennett went on to blame Edsel Ford's conciliatory influence for derailing this attempted

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[125] Ibid.
[126] Horace Sheffield Oral History, Interview by Roberta McBride and Herbert Hill, 24 July 1968, ALUA.
[127] *Baltimore Afro-American*, 12 April 1941.
[128] Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p. 215.

defence.[129] Although some strike breakers were former employees, it also appears that, just as at Chrysler, others were recent migrants of southern origin. Henry Sward reported that Ford's black personnel department employee Donald Marshall had been involved in importation of workers as well as re-employing existing workers, and that the imported workers were all wearing buttons that read '100% for Ford'.[130] John C. Dancy of the Detroit Urban League also emphasized financial explanations, saying in a letter that 'they are supposedly maintenance men but everybody knows they are simply there to keep the union men out and to earn big money for the time being [...] They are being paid about $12.00 per day to remain in the plant'.[131] Bailer recorded in his interviews that many had received over $100 for 10 day siege.[132]

Some leaders recognized the genuine dilemmas the Ford strike presented to black workers. The pro-union editor of the Michigan *Chronicle,* Louis Martin, arrived at a similar analysis of the reasons for black workers' hesitancy during the Ford strike, saying of the 'typical' black worker, that:

> He wanted to buy a home and have some assurance that he would be working long enough to pay for it. He wanted to live without eternal fear. Besides these things, he also wanted to be loyal to Henry Ford. Seizing upon this dilemma, both sides pressed for advantage.[133]

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[129] Harry Bennett, *We Never Called Him Henry* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1951), p. 136; On speculations on Henry Ford's reasoning, see Allen Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth, 1933-1962* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), pp. 166-167; Ford's lieutenant, Charles Sorensen, described the event as 'perhaps the greatest disappointment he had in all his business experience.' Charles E. Sorensen, *My Forty Years With Ford* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), p. 268.

[130] Keith Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1948), p. 410; Meanwhile, Phillip Bonosky reported that 'Harry Bennett had been able to bring in a few hundred scabs, whom he had recruited from miles away, and sneaked in from the river,' but makes the implausible claim that he got no response from blacks already in Detroit. Phillip Bonosky, *Brother Bill McKie: Building the Union at Ford* (New York: International Publishers, 1953), p. 172.

[131] Letter from Eugene Kinckle Jones to John C. Dancy, 9 April 1941, Box 4;30, Detroit Urban League Records, BHL Another contemporary observer, Robert Battle, also recollect that, 'in the foundries Ford Motor Company has gotten to some two or three guys who were acting as their agents as they had the Ford Brotherhood and Liberty League' who told workers, "All you do is stay in here and protect Ford's property and every hour you're in, you'll be paid a dollar an hour for." Robert Battle Oral History.

[132] Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p. 218.

[133] Martin also the made reference to the often overlooked fact that even in the subsequent union elections, a majority of black workers seemingly aligned themselves with the management inclined UAW-AFL rather than the UAW-CIO which had led the strike. Despite this fact, Martin concludes on the

Two pieces of testimony from workers help shed light on the personal motivations of those involved. Though Martin accurately diagnosed the dilemma at play, 'loyalty' to Ford does not provide the best way to characterize their stances. Coupled with financial inducements, despite the fact that many contemporaries failed to acknowledge it, was the fact that some strike breakers were also motivated by a calculation relating to how unions and management both served to hinder and help their employment prospects. For instance, black churchman Malcolm Dade recollected that not all were mercenaries:

> I remember one member, a nice fellow, but he just felt that it was a sin to go or do anything that would hurt Mr. Ford and he couldn't see the UAW. He would admit that life under the servicemen out there was intolerable and he would admit what this nosing into the business by the servicemen did to the employees and their families and most of the town. He could see all that, but he couldn't see doing this. So he stayed in.[134]

For some at least, this evidence suggests that strike breaking could be the result of a thoughtful calculation that acknowledged that though company management could also have a negative impact on the lives of workers and their families, organized labour had not yet proved itself to be a desirable alternative.

NAACP National Secretary Walter White reported similar sentiments from a conversation he had with another strike breaking worker on the picket line:

> In answer to my plea that he come out of the plant he told me in exceedingly profane and biological language what he thought of unions in general and me in particular. He said that Ford's was the only place in Detroit where he has been able to find a job to support himself and his family, and that the union had not

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optimistic note that as of September 1941, 'white and black workers are learning fast that they need each other if they are to achieve the ends for which they were organized, *The Crisis*, September 1941.

[134] Malcolm Dade Oral History, Interview by Jim Keeney and Roberta McBride, 17 September 1969; Lloyd Bailer characterized the positioning of black workers by saying that, '[l]ike Hamlet, they preferred the ills they had than to fly to others they knew not of.' Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry,' p. 228.

> done a blanket-blank thing to break down employment discrimination in other Detroit plants.[135]

Like the worker discussed by Dade, some strike breakers acted as a result of thought-through calculations which led them to reach what were in many senses understandable and nuanced judgements. Crucial to the calculations which weighed up the varying roles played by both union and management was Ford's track records in providing jobs. For the most part this did not translate into unthinking or unswerving loyalty, it seems, but related to the fact that the high distribution of jobs open to black workers at Ford was worth preserving. In this sense, though they may not have been fully aware, strike breakers' actions and motivations reflected the importance of the very factor that would continue to heavily define black experiences after unionization in 1941, when the high proportion of black workers at Ford would again lead to divisive and contradictory issues being associated with unionism.

Most black workers did not engage in strike breaking during the Ford strike in 1941. Part of the hesitancy of black workers at Ford, as the strike breaker so vividly explained to White, related to the failure of the UAW to convince workers at Ford of its promises of racial equality after the initial organizational successes of the UAW in the first half of 1937. Even for those black workers within unionized concerns between 1937 and 1941, echoes of the hesitancy displayed in participation in the sit-down strikes can be found in remarks made about the enduring reluctance of many black workers to fully commit to the union. For instance, at the Briggs plant in Detroit, racial problems occurred during the initial unionization in 1937 and a corresponding mistrust was noted among some years after. Although the UAW reported that there had been 'solidarity' shown by the workers in winning their strike, other reports suggested that black participation in the January 1937 strike was slight and was related to the racial prejudice of the white leaders of the UAW Local 212.[136] These initial racial tensions at

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[135] White, *A Man Called White*, p. 216.

[136] *United Automobile Worker*, 22 January 1937; Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p. 245; Stats 1,300 out of 14,000= 9.29% in Bailer, 'The Negro Automobile Worker', p. 416; Bailer also reported that, 'during the early days of Briggs Local 212 in Detroit [...] difficulties in signing up colored workers were at least partly due to the president, who happened to exhibit considerable prejudice. A more understanding individual later took office with the result that Negro membership and general participation immediately improved.'; Meier and Rudwick also reported that there was little black

Briggs also manifested themselves in union social events. In 1937, Briggs Local 212 had to cancel its first annual dance planned for Eastwood Park after protests from white unionists over black attendance and the discovery that the park's management refused black people entry to certain areas, including the dance hall. Further social events were also cancelled because of this racial tension.[137] One consequence of these racial problems, it seems, was to create a wider reluctance among black union members at Briggs to fully participate in its affairs. Writing as part of the drive to unionize black workers at Ford in 1940, the following document was written by Emil Mazey, the president of Briggs Local 212 at the time, and because it provides a rare insight into black workers' continuing apparent lack of enthusiasm, is worth quoting at length:

> Many Negro workers are looking for a solution of their problems on a silver platter [...] They are looking forward to obtaining improved conditions and a solution of their problems without the slightest effort on their part [...] there are those who feel that it is wise on their part to stay out of unions until the union can assure them that there will be absolutely no discrimination or prejudice against them in the shop where the union has contractual relations with the employer [...] there is a second class of Negro workers who, while they are willing to join labor unions, remain mechanical, indifferent and without interest or zeal in their relations with the union. They remain inactive, refuse to attend meetings, and pay their dues irregularly [...] Although many Negro workers do not attend their union meetings, and do not meet their union obligations, they are the loudest in the criticisms when something is done at union meetings that meet their disapproval. EVERY NEGRO WORKER SHOULD BE AN ACTIVE UNION MEMBER IF HE EXPECTS TO PROTECT AND ADVANCE HIS OWN INTERESTS [...] If the Negro workers would play an active part in the Union, they would greatly break down the prejudice that now exists towards the Negro workers from the white workers.[138]

This draft leaflet attempted to place responsibility for resolving racial problems within the union on black workers themselves, but also offered suggestions for the reasons

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support for the strike at the Mack Avenue plant because 'there was practically no interaction between them and the largely southern white workforce.' Meier & Rudwick, Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW, p. 37.

[137] Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p. 279.

[138] 'Negro Workers Need the C.I.O.' Box 5;1, Emil L. Mazey Collection, Local 212 Files, ALUA.

behind black workers' apparently stubbornly non-committal stance some three years after unionization. For those outside of the union, fear of discrimination is cited, while those within the union were reportedly 'mechanical, indifferent and without interest or zeal in their relations with the union'. Yet at the same time, the reported indifference of black workers did not imply passivity or a lack of interest in their workplace arrangements. Many of these same workers, much to the chagrin of Mazey, were not afraid to criticize the union for its failures. Black workers represented 9.29% of Briggs' overall workforce, large enough to be a concern to Mazey but small enough, it seems, to create some race related tensions in the workforce.[139]

When a closer spotlight was placed on black workers' position on the UAW during the battle to organize Ford in 1941, the apparent hesitancy of the majority of black employees did not imply passivity or a lack of interest in the outcome of the strike. A variety of contemporary observers agreed that black workers remained divided over the unionization of Ford. John C. Dancy of the Urban League, while recognizing pro-union black elements and strike breaking, wrote that, 'the mass of Negroes are all divided as to whether to go in with the unions or to stay out'.[140] Reflecting the dilemmas between unionism and Fordism that the strike presented, the *Afro-American* observed that the 18,000 black workers at Ford were 'at the crossroads and are finding it difficult to determine in which direction to proceed'.[141] However, black workers' apparent aloofness was actually a manifestation of a series of calculations made by numerous individuals who were attempting to assess the dual roles of both union and management in dictating the limits of their employment opportunities.[142]

A report written under the auspices of the Detroit Urban League, seemingly just after the Ford strike, observed that:

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[139] Bailer, 'Negro Automobile Worker', 416.
[140] Letter from Eugene Kinckle Jones to John C. Dancy, 9 April 1941, Box 4;30, Detroit Urban League Records.
[141] *Baltimore Afro-American,* 12 April 1941.
[142] Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* p. 84.

> The CIO feels that the major difficulty in organizing Negro labor rests in the fears of Negro workers, resulting from previous practices of organized labor. Negroes still do not trust labor leaders because of the inconsistencies between theory and practice which have been executed by union members. Even today plants in the local area, some of which have been organized by the UAW, still refuse employment to Negroes. The union claims it can do nothing about this. In other plants the union has promulgated democratic principles which have been accepted by all workers and which are working to the advantage of the Negro. Regarding the question of unionization, the Negro is in a quandary. [143]

This piece of evidence plausibly suggests that black workers continued to hold legitimate fears about the promises made by unions, yet even though unions were becoming influential in many Detroit plants, the policies of management and a corresponding fear that union activity could hinder their progress shaped black workers' positioning.

Attempting to uncover the detail behind workers' mixed stances in the period leading up to the organization of Ford provides indications of the direction of unionism in Detroit. As Reverend Charles Hill, a prominent pro-labour leader in the black community, stated some years later on the positions of black workers at Ford in 1941, '[b]ack there years ago, when you took a stand, it meant your job; so unless the person was truly consecrated to it, why, he would hold his peace'.[144] This consideration, it seems, underpinned workers' mixed responses to organized labour in a context where, as a result of their proportionately high representation at Ford, they stood more to lose as well as more to gain. This calculation was reflected in the wider spectrum of responses offered unionism. In addition, the eventual unionization of black workers at Ford had not been brought about as a result of substantial changes in the political priorities of its black workforce. For black workers, attempting to negotiate the complex network of labour market control between union and management was a

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[143] The report also stated that: 'The picture will no doubt change since the major industrial plant giving Negroes employment has now accepted the union as a bargaining agent for its workers.' 'Observations on Conditions Among Negroes in the Fields of Education, Recreation and Employment in the Selected Areas of the City of Detroit, Michigan', Box 74; Folder: 'Observations on Conditions Among Negroes', Detroit Urban League Records.

[144] Charles Hill Oral History, Interview by Roberta McBride, 8 May 1967, ALUA.

primary consideration. Such was the fragility of their position in the employment market, the finer principles of liberal, let alone radical politics, were most often secondary to these situational dilemmas. The collective bargaining arrangements agreed in the subsequent National Labor Relations Board elections in June 1941 drastically altered the methods and tactics, if not the priorities, with which workers' largely consistent goals would have to be pursued. The story taken up by Chapter 2 details the events immediately following the unionization at Ford. The factors shown to be of importance in Chapter 1, in particular the propensity for high concentrations of black workers to lead to increased dilemmas and greater potential problems and difficulties as well as opportunities regarding unionism, was reflected in the experiences of Local 600 formed in the River Rouge foundry.

Chapter 2: 'Getting a grand runaround by management, government and the union.' Black Workers and the Demand for Coordinated Protest Strategies

The Case of Detroit

The unionization of Ford in April 1941 finally meant a majority of black autoworkers in Detroit became union members. The formation of Local 600 at Ford's River Rouge plant subsequently became the largest concentration of black unionized workers in the country. Local 600's numerical strength and apparent militancy have meant it has been afforded a central role in civil rights unionism narratives. We have been told that after unionization reorganized social relations at the River Rouge, the 'consciousness' of black workers was 'transformed,' as Local 600 went on to become 'a center of civil rights militancy and a training ground for black leaders'.[145] Yet not only is the evidence for a change in 'consciousness,' problematic and based upon the actions of a handful of union leaders who had supported the UAW for some years, Local 600 also provided a visible symbol of the problems as well as the opportunities afforded by the rise of labour in Detroit. Local 600 operated primarily as an independent black caucus and was not an example of biracial unionism. This chapter traces some of the difficulties evidenced by workers' experiences in the very early days following unionization. A central issue, not captured by existing accounts which concentrate only on the opportunities created for protest and militancy, is the extent to which the newly powerful position occupied by the UAW's leaders alongside management and government officials, also brought with it potential for obfuscation and delays in settling workers' grievances.

Challenging the notion that unionism fostered a transformation in workers' 'consciousness' towards militant support for the UAW, it should first be pointed out that

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[145] Using the unionization at Ford as a starting point, Korstad and Lichtenstein argued the event was, 'particularly radical in its reorganization of shop floor social relations at the Rouge, [and] helped transform the consciousness of these industrial workers. With several hundred shop committeemen in the vanguard, workers intimidated many foremen, challenged top management, and broke the company spy system... For the next decade, Rouge Local 600 proved a center of civil rights militancy and a training ground for black leaders.' Korstad and Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost,' 795.

most black workers apparently voted for the company-endorsed UAW-AFL in the NLRB elections that followed the Ford strike in June 1941.[146] After the UAW-CIO won, as a result of white workers' votes, Lloyd Bailer carried out personal interviews with those involved in these events on the factory floor at River Rouge. Bailer quoted one participant who had initially been in favour of the UAW-AFL as reporting that:

> There wasn't any trouble [...] The AFL fellows shook hands with the CIO boys and they all said 'Let's let bygones be bygones.' I told the CIO boys I would be just as much for the CIO as I was for the AFL.

Bailer therefore adjudged that '[n]early all of the Negro workers were pleased by the turn of events. Their major grievance had been the lack of seniority, company spying, and the speedup. All this had changed'.[147] The key driver of this change was not a political shift on the part of black workers, but the impossibility of any alternative to unionism. Nor did all become enthusiastic members. In 1943 Bailer also reported that although black workers rarely disobeyed orders to strike, they were proportionally under-represented in union activities such as pickets and paying dues and were generally less willing 'to shoulder the numerous other responsibilities placed upon members in times of crisis'.[148] Indeed some black workers had been forced to join organized labour. Describing his role as a union organizer in the early 1940s at Chrysler, James Boggs described how he played a role in the union's 'good squads,' whose role was 'to make people join the union,' while during strikes they would, 'fone [sic] folks to join up to the union, threaten them and certain things. More people joined the union because we forced them in the union than joined automatic [because] they didn't want to pay no dues'.[149] Black workers had become union members in unprecedented numbers after 1941, but the crucial driver of this change was a shift in power towards organized labour, not a fundamental change in the identities or 'consciousness' of black workers.

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[146] Korstad and Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost', 795.
[147] Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry,' p. 237; Arnesen writes that, 'the historic 1941 face-off between the United Automobile Workers of America and the Ford Motor Company in Detroit wrote something of an obituary for the classic strikebreaker saga.' Arnesen, 'Spectre of the Black Strikebreaker', 333-334.
[148] Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry', p. 273.
[149] Latzman- Moon, *Untold Tales,* p. 152.

This crucial distinction allows the attempts made by black workers to take advantage of the new systems of collective bargaining to be seen in a clearer context. There was a clear realization, particularly among groups of black workers concentrated in locations like Local 600, that unionism brought with it the potential opportunity to address longstanding grievances that would previously have been too risky or impossible to challenge. The initial agreement at Ford between the UAW and the company agreed the provision to increase wages as well as an agreement to non-discriminatory hiring practices. Corresponding with a sudden end to the paternalistic provision of jobs provided by Ford, the first bargaining contract brought with it a marked shift in the balance of power regarding which group could extend or limit black employment.[150]

The formation of Local 600 offered new avenues for black employees to resolve their workplace grievances. Gwendolyn Ruth Edwards worked at Ford and recalled the benefits brought by new systems of complaints introduced by the UAW:

> I got very active in the union, and we started a women's committee out there because we felt the women were being discriminated against for the good jobs [...] I was one of the first black women they hired [...] I got involved in the labor movement because I was getting the runaround from a lot of people. And I went to the union and said, "They're not treating me fairly," and they started working on my case. If I wanted to apply for a different job, they would have some excuse to keep me from doing it if it was more money. So I got tired, so I got real active in the union.[151]

Edwards was not the first black worker to complain of getting the 'runaround' when seeking to advance in employment. In Edwards' case, union membership offered an attractive new avenue to redress grievances. Though wrong to assign weight to the nebulous concept of transformations in 'consciousness,' scholars such as Korstad and Licthtenstein correctly identified that black workers tried to take advantage of the new opportunities for protest actions within the newly instituted systems of the UAW. What has received insufficient attention, however, are the negative side effects and

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[150] Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* pp. 108-109.
[151] Latzman- Moon, *Untold Tales,* p. 129.

frustrations that frequently sat side-by-side with new procedures supposed to tackle discriminatory employment practices.

In its newly powerful role, the UAW channelled activism within established procedures and mechanisms that were controlled, in the main, by combinations of union and government officials. Thus at the same time as the arrival of the UAW brought about opportunities for workers like Edwards, activism and protests in the areas of jobs were, by necessity, contained by established and firm complaints procedures, over which black influence was often limited. Following the establishment of a federal Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) in 1941, black workers being drawn into Detroit's war industries in increasing numbers during the labour shortage of 1942 made complaints to the FEPC, constituting nearly 20% of the total complaints received by black workers in 1943.[152] The trend towards the bureaucratization of black protest occurred almost immediately after unionization in Detroit; a trend exacerbated by the creation of the UAW's own Fair Employment Practices Department that operated alongside a federal counterpart through the war years.[153]

The close relationships between labour, management and government created opportunities for protest; they also created opportunities for each group to attempt to control and constrain activism. Often the sources of discrimination were obscured and responsibility could be shifted. Many in Detroit were well aware of the increased power held by the UAW as part of the network of groups responsible for controlling black employment opportunities. As Cleo Taylor of the State Conference of Michigan NAACP branches noted:

> Michigan has an unusually large amount of defense contracts and we are not being employed in these factories as we should. The CIO is a powerful

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[152] Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* pp. 110-113; Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State During World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 113-115.

[153] Even Korstad and Lichtenstein argue that, eventually, '[r]ather than serving as an organizing center for UAW blacks, the FEPD bureaucratized the union's civil rights activities.' Korstad and Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost', 808.

> organization in these plants and if they are sincere in their efforts to end discrimination they can be of invaluable aid to us.[154]

But while the union's joint role could spur activism, it also meant the sources of discrimination facing black workers could be obscured. One worker, Eddie Kemp, complained of this treatment by various parties in an affidavit compiled by the local NAACP. Kemp reported that Dodge's Truck Plant on Mound and Eight-Mile Road had a history of excluding black workers since 1937, and that in his enquiries to the corresponding union, Local 140, union officials replied that they would be unable to secure him work because of opposition from their white members. A subsequent letter to the International UAW was met by a referral back to Local 140. Having eventually secured work trucking bodies, Kemp was then subsequently demoted to a sweeping job because of a decision made by a foreman.[155] Passed between groups without satisfactory resolution, the difficulties experiences by workers like Kemp were common as black workers attempted to secure employment in the growing defence industries in the early 1940s. Kemp's experiences also demonstrated another important development of 1941: workers increasingly needed and sought assistance from leadership groups like the NAACP to help them navigate the complex bureaucratic machinery that held the potential both to advance or retard their employment prospects.

The growing restlessness of many black workers, as evidenced in wildcat strikes and in UAW leaders' growing frustration regarding what they called their black members' 'march behaviour,' have been heralded as a positive development that demonstrated the spread of 'protest politics.' Looked at another way, these workers' actions actually constituted a visible sign that all was not well in employment in Detroit, and that the limited measures put in place to address black workers' grievances by the combined workings of federal, state, and union FEP procedures were proving unable to satisfactorily address the growing frustrations of black workers being refused an

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[154] Letter from Cleo Taylor,13 October 1941, Box II: A333;9, NAACP Papers.
[155] Affidavit of Eddie Kemp, 13 September 1941; Affidavit of James Phelps, 13 September 1941, NAACP Box II: A333;9, NAACP Papers.

adequate share of the economic opportunities brought by war.[156] Black unionists within the UAW soon became frustrated at their limited ability to decisively alter discriminatory practices. Shelton Tappes, who played a pivotal role in winning a non-discrimination clause in the UAW's contract with Ford in 1941, subsequently revealed the frustrations he felt in his efforts to wrest significant concessions on behalf of black workers from the interrelated parties of management, union and government. The federal FEPC, meanwhile, did undertake investigations but had little authority to challenge the discriminatory practices among unions and management it uncovered. The UAW's Interracial Committee, for its part, was disbanded by UAW leaders Richard Thomas and Walter Reuther as part of the effort to contain the growing restiveness of their newly acquired black constituents.[157]

The outbreaks of wildcat strikes conducted by black workers in plants such as Packard, Dodge and Chrysler were attempts to break out of routinized complaints procedures established by union and government groups as well as expressions of dissatisfaction with the failure of management to treat them on an equitable basis. As Boggs described, before wildcats were finally made illegal, 'the union was at its best, because there was pressure all the time [...] The negative side was once everybody was in the union, the union didn't have to be militant no more. Because they was going to get the dues whether they was doing anything or not'.[158] Rather than being an expression of the triumph of 'new crowd protest politics,' wildcat strikes also constituted a visible sign that the complex arrangements of labour control were frustrating black workers seeking a fair share of the employment opportunities produced by war production.

Thus a key impact of unionization in the summer of 1941 was for protests to be presented *to* groups like the UAW, rather than placed *upon* groups.[159] As Kevin Boyle has accurately written of this process across the 1940s and into the 1950s:

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[156] Kryder, *Divided Arsenal*, p. 127.
[157] Korstad and Lichtenstein, 787; Bates, *Pullman Porters,* pp.179-182.
[158] Latzman-Moon, *Untold Tales,* p. 153.
[159] Kryder, *Divided Arsenal,* pp. 88-89.

> the racial conflict within the UAW was in the main a structural conflict: African-American workers prodding the International to take action against the color line, white rank-and-filers using the power of the local and the region to defend the color line. The UAW's structure largely determined who won the conflict.[160]

Even though many black workers made gains through these arrangements, unionization brought with it many problems tied to these potential opportunities.[161] Louis Martin, editor of the consistently pro-union *Michigan Chronicle,* observed in September 1941 that new strategies of concerted pressure had become ever-more important, but he also understood black workers and their leaders had been presented with tremendous challenges:

> From our point of view, Negroes are being eliminated here in the auto industry and the new defense work. Labor, Government and Management regard the Negro issues as a hot potato. They issue nice press releases but the facts belie high pressure optimism.[162]

Although the unionization of Ford in 1941 had finally provided black workers in Detroit a partial opportunity with which to address their mounting grievances, the arrangements put in place also meant labour groups, management and government had assumed joint responsibility for controlling employment. Though it was common for each to provide rhetorical support for equality in employment, the frustrations felt by observers like Martin reflected the fact that these arrangements often meant the sources of discriminatory treatment were obscured.

Gloster Current, a member of the Detroit NAACP who had first-hand experience of the problems affecting black workers in employment, attempted to take up the frustrations felt over the failure to transfer jobs to the Chrysler Tank Arsenal to the FEPC and management and the UAW. These frustrations had led black workers to walk out at

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[160] Kevin Boyle, 'There are no union sorrows that the union can't heal': The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Auto Workers, 1940-1960', *Labor History*, 36 (1995), 5-23 (p. 17).
[161] Kevin Boyle argues that, '[d]uring World War II, many auto plants abandoned their most discriminatory practices; most Detroit-area plants, for instance, adopted plant-wide seniority plans for the duration. As a consequence, black workers made substantial gains.' Boyle, 'There are no union sorrows that the union can't heal', 10.
[162] Letter from Louis Martin to Walter White, 2 October 1941, Reel 3, NAACP Records Microfilm Edition.

Dodge Main in protest; they led Current to conclude in September 1941 that, despite the promises made by various groups, black workers were, in fact, 'getting a grand runaround by management, government and the union'.[163] Current accurately captured a key theme that came to define the relationships being formed by black workers and organized labour. The uneven distribution in employment created both opportunities and significant challenges for those seeking to use the union as a vehicle to improve employment conditions. The interrelated control of labour markets brought with it the promise of new avenues through which to address grievances, but at the same time, brought with it contradictory side effects that the various groups in charge of employment had new opportunities for obfuscation, delays and evasions. To address these contradictory impacts of the rise of labour, black workers turned to leadership groups who were, as a result, required to undertake more direct and coordinated protest strategies. The difficulty of combining these three factors – concentrations of workers, interrelated control of labour markets, and the demand for coordinated protest strategies – on a wide scale that meant the goal of advancing black rights through organized labour was a patchy and ultimately fragile endeavour.

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[163] Letter from Gloster Current to Walter White, 25 September 1941, [labor 1941 file] NAACP Papers, quoted in Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, p. 121.

The Case of New York

Though New York contained a more diverse range of industries and unions than Detroit, black workers there also began to complain in greater numbers regarding the negative side-effects of unionization. Yet rather than telling a story of union discrimination per se, the key message that arose from these complaints reflected the problems experienced through the intersection of union, management and government groups. Just as the concentration of black employment in Harlem constituted a platform for wider protests at the same time as it formed a barrier to the integration of black workers, efforts to extend employment opportunities were similarly dual-edged. In order for their rights as workers to be satisfactorily adjusted, the powerful labour movement needed to be engaged with in concert alongside management and government, as all three groups jointly held power to dictate employment prospects. In this sense, New York City exemplified a similar wide-scale development to Detroit. At the very moment new opportunities were being created to challenge discriminatory arrangements by appealing to the other powers who controlled employment, new problems were created as sources of discrimination became harder to identify and as new demands were placed on coordinated protest that had to undertake the difficult task of pinning down and wresting concessions from the various groups responsible for employment.

The increased number of jobs directly provided by the city government during Mayor LaGuardia's administration held the promise of providing much needed new employment for black workers. The pro-New Deal administration of LaGuardia had a policy of awarding city contracts to concerns which guaranteed the right of unions to collectively bargain. This comparatively liberal stance could have negative consequences for black workers, however, as they could be excluded from such arrangements. For instance, in April 1937, 170 black conductors on the subway system feared for the loss of their jobs after the discriminatory Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen and the Brotherhood of Firemen and Engineermen began to organize workers. In response, these workers complained and managed to garner support from black labour leaders and the NAACP. A delegation comprising Alderman Eustace Dench,

Charles Lynch and Ashley Totten of the BSCP attempted, unsuccessfully, to meet with LaGuardia to discuss these concerns. The NAACP, for its part, also wrote letters to the Mayor's office seeking reassurance. Instead, these groups merely received a verbal reiteration from LaGuardia's secretary, Stanley Howe, that the administration's policy was not to award public contracts to discriminatory unions but they supported the right of workers to choose their own union and were unwilling to intervene.[164] The result of these unsatisfactory arrangements, in this case, was for black workers to apparently take the pragmatic decision to fight for their jobs by fighting union recognition 'every inch of the way'.[165] The unsatisfactory response from Howe highlighted that a key issue for workers, and correspondingly for their would-be leaders, was successful protests needed to take account of the fact that government and labour were jointly responsible for the problems faced.

That unions had to answer to city and federal government officials meant there was some potential to challenge discriminatory practices. In 1937, the unionization of rail employees by the Transport Workers Union (TWU), demonstrated that black employment prospects were jointly dictated by an interrelated network of (all white-led) unions, management, and government. The Transport Workers' Union (TWU) attempted to elicit the support of black workers to introduce a collective bargaining contract with the management of the subway, the part public, part private, Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT). The TWU promised to fight against workplace discrimination and extend employment opportunities for black workers beyond their existing roles as porters and elevator operators. Yet no mention was made of these promises in writing, either in union promotional literature, or more crucially, in the contract that was eventually drawn up between the TWU and IRT. As a result, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP agreed to mediate on behalf of black workers. On the same day, 30 March 1937, Wilkins contacted Michael Quill of the TWU, Thomas Murray of the IRT, and Mayor LaGuardia on the same issue of protecting the rights of existing employees in any new collective bargaining agreement.[166] Wilkins correctly identified that various

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[164] *New York Age,* 10 April 1937.
[165] *New York Age,* 10 April 1937.
[166] Telegram from Roy Wilkins to Michael Quill, Letter from Roy Wilkins to Thomas Murray, Letter from Roy Wilkins to LaGuardia, 30 March 1937, Box I: C-322;9, NAACP Papers.

parties jointly set the parameters of black employment opportunity, but letter writing campaigns often proved inadequate for wresting concessions from these parties. In their written responses, some company managers hid behind labour law. In May 1938, for instance, General Manager George Keegan of the IRT conceded that black workers were restricted to certain types of work but in his view this did not 'constitute race discrimination against the New York law when properly construed,' and any statute that attempted to legislate otherwise would violate their right to select employees.[167] Leaders from the Urban League and NAACP attempted to turn to the leadership of the CIO, with which the TWU was affiliated, to bring pressure to bear on the TWU to amend its practices.[168]

Problems of racial discrimination often remained once union contracts were put in place. This was demonstrated in February 1939 when several black workers complained that the union was failing to uphold the seniority rights of their members on a racially equitable basis. On behalf of the workers, the NAACP described to Austin Hogan, the President of TWU Local 100, how white members of the discontinued Sixth Avenue Elevated Line had been transferred across to work for the Interborough Rapid Transit Company, in the process displacing the seniority rights of the IRT's black employees. Six had been demoted from platform men back down to porters and now stood behind over 100 of the new white union members in the seniority list. It was clear that the blame lay with an agreement signed by both the TWU and the Interborough Rapid Transit Company.[169] The letter writing of NAACP Assistant Secretary Roy Wilkins met with an unhelpful response from Hogan, however. Having failed to receive a reply to his initial letter, Wilkins tried to appeal to Hogan from the standpoint of a fellow supporter of organized labour, writing that:

> We feel that the working man will not be able to secure his rights except through organization. But we are also committed to the advancement of colored people and colored workers, and we cannot conscienciously [sic] urge unionization,

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[167] George Keegan to Charles Houston, 12 May 1938, Box I: C-414;15, NAACP Papers.
[168] Walter White to John L. Lewis, 4 October 1937; Telegram from Charles Collier to John L. Lewis, 11 October 1937, Box: I: C-414;15, NAACP Papers.
[169] *New York Age,* 25 February 1939.

> cooperation and solidarity upon them in the fact of mistreatment and betrayal by union leaders.[170]

Hogan, however, took offence, replying to Wilkins that this criticism was both 'unjust' and had also personally 'pained' him.[171] Wilkins' final contribution to this seemingly rather futile exchange was to agree with Hogan that company management was also an 'obstacle to labor unity,' but to reiterate that the duty of the NAACP was to attempt to protect black interests 'against anyone who may threaten the interests of that group or seek to ignore or put aside its rights'.[172] The significance of this case lay not so much in the fact that a New York union applied its rules of seniority on an unequal basis, which was a far from uncommon practice, but also in that city officials had helped precipitate these problems by requiring that employment on newly opened subway lines be subject to a union contract.

Many workers across various industries were aware of the problems, as well as the potential benefits, relating to the increasing interrelated control of employment. At the same time as the TWU was applying seniority rights unequally on the New York subway system, black members of the city's painters union were waging their own battle within the union to win increased work. An editorial in the *New York Age* explained how many painting jobs for black workers in New York were found on the subways and in schools, with both the Board of Transportation and Board of Education granting contracts to independent groups who severely discriminated against black workers in the allocation of this work. Black union painters had apparently become 'cognizant of this fact and realizing the job that confronts them, have set out to get all city departments to include in subsequent contracts that include a provision against racial discrimination'. The painters calculated that the best chance they had to gain fairer treatment was not through their union, nor through appeals directly to contractors - though apparently in a 'few minor instances' these direct appeals had been successful - but through appeals to the government body responsible for creating these terms of employment. Although they correctly identified a root cause of their limited job opportunities, their written

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[170] Letter from Roy Wilkins to Austin Hogan, 31 January 1939, 17 Feb 1939, Box I: C-414;12, NAACP Papers.
[171] Letter from Austin Hogan to Roy Wilkins, 23 February 1939, Box I: C-414;12, NAACP Papers.
[172] Roy Wilkins to Austin Hogan, 4 March 1939, Box I: C-414;12, NAACP Papers.

protests to the relevant city departments met with little apparent success. As the editorial lamented, one of the 'unfortunate things about it is that there is apparently nothing the Negro union painters can do about it unless they resort to picketing'.[173] The editorial failed to suggest exactly which group needed to be picketed, however. Though this tactic may have been employed by the unionized painters to wrest concessions from management by forcing a stoppage in work, work was also allocated by several city departments with the result that workers were faced with a much more elusive set of groups to tackle.

As the 1930s drew to a close, it was clear to unionized black workers that they needed to target the discriminatory practices of unions themselves in order to achieve the desired goal of gaining fairer allocations of employment and working conditions. Workers in Local 1 of the Amalgamated Lithographers in Brooklyn, an affiliate of the AFL, working at an unspecified company, had spent two years trying to achieve the union levels of pay they were due. The chief complainant in this case, William Henry Miller, wrote that black union members were prepared to strike to win this increase, even though white union leaders had made it clear the local would not be supportive.[174] The union was rightly perceived to have attempted to block the attempts of these black members, but company management also derailed these efforts by sacking fifteen black employees, thirteen of whom were union men. Miller wrote to Albert Castro, the president of Local 1, in response, arguing that:

> It all boils down to a question of working against the rules of the organization to which we belon [sic], or working in opposition to it. Since our dismissal came as a direct result of complying with the rules of the union to which we belong, we are appealing to you to take action in our behalf.[175]

Miller argued that the union was implicated in creating the initial source of the workers' grievance and in failing to take action on their behalf. Although no evidence survives of the response of Local 1, the case proved one of a numbers of internal union disputes piling up on the desk of the NAACP in the late 1930s.

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[173] *New York Age,* 25 March 1939.
[174] Letter from George Murphy to A. Philip Randolph, 16 November 1939, Box I: C-323;9, NAACP Papers.
[175] William Miller to Albert Castro, 14 December 1939, Box I: C-323;9, NAACP Papers.

Another example, also drawn from Brooklyn in 1940, highlighted that union membership had often become a necessity of employment. Robert Randall, an employee at the Tell Bakery in Brooklyn had been displaced out of his job after the unionization of his workplace; he had been explicitly denied membership of the union on the grounds that the union did 'not wish to accept Negro members'. Such was his desire to continue his employment, as a temporary measure Randall continued to work inside the plant unbeknownst to the union, while soliciting the help of the NAACP.[176] Unions' increasing power and their ties to management and government groups made it important from the perspective of workers like Randall that they receive appropriate help from organizations such as the NAACP.

Difficult questions were being raised regarding adequate solutions to the problems of black workers attempting to navigate a labour market where sources of discrimination could be varied, complex and connected. The extent to which the NAACP was able to provide appropriate leadership in this regard is the concern of Chapter 5, but the observations of its leaders such as Special Counsel Thurgood Marshall provide an important window into the nature of workers' problems. Though Marshall tended to see the worst of black experiences within unions operating in New York, it was clear that black workers were running into some recurrently similar problems; as Marshall put in 1940, '[t]he discrimination extends from the most conservative A.F of L. Unions to the most radical C.I.O. Unions'. On the Jersey side of the New York waterfront, Marshall received complaints from workers who reported that discrimination within the local of the International Longshoremen's Association had 'reached the point that if a Negro Union man applies for work he is beaten up by members of his own Union'. In Local 874 of the ILA in New York, a local reserved for commercial checkers, a joining fee of $500 was required, a practice which one unionist admitted was to keep 'undesirable' members out. Non-coincidentally, the unionist added that, 'Negroes don't do this kind of work. It is clerical and office work and they don't fit in'. Other ILA locals responsible for more general longshore work did have some black members, as in Local 791 where

[176] Letter from George Murphy to Frank Crosswaith, 29 March 1940, Box II: A334;10, NAACP Papers.

some had gained work as a result of strike breaking efforts in 1919 and 1934 but remained excluded from any official position in the union.[177] One complaint of a black longshoreman, Adolphus Braithwaite, described the experience of trying to work on the New York waterfront in the following fashion:

> I am the father of three children and I have to work to keep my family together, conditions are very good on the pier there are plenty of work the men are working day and night, but I find it very hard to obtain work because the Negro's [sic] are being discriminated.[178]

What was desired by Braithwaite, like so many other workers trying to successfully cope with the challenging employment market, was to have regular work.

More 'radical' unions on the waterfront also posed problems for black New Yorkers, such as the National Maritime Union (NMU-CIO). Marshall had to report the problems experienced by black workers:

> All hiring is done from a central hiring hall but when Negroes are sent to certain ships they are returned with the statement on their card that no Negroes can work on this particular ship and interesting point is that the man signing these cards is a member of the same Union as the Negroes.

The NMU leaders, when challenged on this practice, argued that although they believed in equality and would like to take action, to do so would risk splitting their fragile union and would send some of their white members into the arms of the rival AFL maritime local.[179] Despite the fact the excuses made by union leaders like NMU may have accurately predicted that increased support for equality would have split their membership, to black workers such excuses were a particular source of frustration as they encountered jointly responsible leaders among organized labour, management and government groups who attempted to shift the blame for lack of action.

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[177] Franklin, *Negro Labor Unionist of New York,* pp. 189-191.
[178] Goluboff, Lost Promise of Civil Rights, p. 107.
[179] Thurgood Marshall to William Hastie, 19 April 1940, Box II: A128;4, NAACP Papers.

While the NMU leaders blamed the competition they faced from the AFL for their lack of action, a local of the Carpenters and Joiners Union affiliated with the AFL blamed their union's national leadership for the persistence of discriminatory arrangements. Seeking to challenge these arrangements was Joseph Buffrong, a member of Local 1888 United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners. Buffrong had had little success in gaining work on the increasing number of projects instigated by the city of New York. The problem, in his view, was partly to do with employer discrimination but he had also met with little success in attempting to enlist the union to campaign on his behalf. As George Murphy paraphrased, 'the members of his union (a segregated local) do not wish to involve the local, as such, in this matter, for fear of reprisals from the council leadership'.[180] Buffrong identified the failure to stipulate a specific percentage of black workers on each public contract as a key reason for his problems finding employment. Others in New York reached a similar conclusion. For instance, the Progressive Bricklayers' Association compiled a petition of black union members who asked for a relatively conservative 3% black representation on future public building projects.[181] Even though management were refusing to hire black workers and unions often proved unwilling to help, workers like Buffrong astutely argued that as city projects, city officials needed to be held to account to stipulate fair terms of employment when agreeing union contracts.

Through New Deal public works and latterly through employment in defence contracts, branches of government had assumed increasing responsibility for the treatment of black workers in organized labour. This included direct public sector employment, by granting contracts to private firms which required bargaining agreements, all of which was underpinned by the legislative backing of the National Labor Relations Act and enforced by State and Federal Labor Boards. Foreshadowing an impulse in black workers' protest which crystallized in the March on Washington Movement in 1941, the desire for jobs in the defence industries and other government contracts often necessitated tackling the discriminatory practices of unions and management in concert. In 1940, workers who had been refused work on the Delaware Water Gap

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[180] Letter from George Murphy to Frank Crosswaith, 24 April 1940, Box II: A335;1, NAACP Papers.
[181] Petition from The Progressive Bricklayers' Association to Mayor La Guardia and Board of Estimate, Box I: C-323;5, NAACP Papers.

tunnel under construction in New York identified the policies of city officials as being partly responsible for the discriminatory treatment they received. One worker, Lawrence Britten, complained directly to the Mayor about the discrimination that he and his black co-workers felt was being practiced by employers during the construction of the tunnel in 1940. In offering a cautious denial of outright discrimination, LaGuardia handed the case over to the NAACP and said that the only restriction on employment was that employees were in 'good standing with the unions'.[182] LaGuardia's response encapsulated what was a recurring source of frustration for black workers in the early 1940s: caught between the interlocking structures of city employment policies, unions' racial practices and management restrictions, these parties shared responsibility for advancing or limiting employment opportunities.

On the eve of the USA's entry into the Second World War, black workers' responses to the rise of organized labour in New York had not only played crucial roles in dictating the outcome of a myriad of highly localized labour arrangements, but also exposed the limitations imposed on black labour in related occupational and geographical terms. Black workers' responses and complaints showed that the increasing power of unions created both opportunities as well as problems for protest, as workers made vocal and urgent demands for decisive leadership to address the problems they faced regarding unionism. As the 1930s progressed, the sources of white power responsible for dictating black employment opportunity underwent a change towards interrelated and complex systems where government and organized labour joined management in setting the boundaries of black progress. As many complaints demonstrated, workers well understood that they stood most to gain when these groups could either be challenged jointly, or where one group could be induced to bring about pressure on another. The difficulties inherent in these contradictory impacts of labour were beginning to be well understood by the numerous leaders who had become interested in black workers' problems. Writing in New York City in 1936, Lester Granger of National Urban League wrote of the problems experienced by those seeking employment on the Tri-Borough Bridge project. According to Granger, not only did

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[182] Mayor LaGuardia quoted in letter from Walter White to Lawrence Britten, 9 May 1940, Box II: A335;1, NAACP Papers.

workers have to contend with union discrimination, '[t]he red tape of tremendous governmental machinery discourages and chokes off a worker who suffers such discrimination'.[183] The experiences of workers during organization had been deeply contradictory, as shown through discussions of the importance of patterns of employment and interrelated networks of labour control. The third key element in this story relates to the attempts of men and women who, like Granger, attempted to understand and offer solutions to the issues presented by the complex impacts of the rise of labour.

[183] Conference in Colonel Hackett's Office, Re. Discrimination in Public Works, 2 June 1936, Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports 1936,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Conclusion to Part I

Part I has placed workers' experiences in a central role by adopting a comparative approach in order to recast understandings of the impacts of the rise of organized labour on black communities during the New Deal. The result of this approach which measures workers' experiences, attitudes and priorities, reorders existing stories told from the perspective of leadership groups. These narratives argue black protest underwent a 'proletarian turn' in the 1930s wherein support for interracial industrial unionism and an emphasis on class and the ideas of the left moved to the centre of the civil rights movement. Yet rather than representing a large-scale conversion among black workers to the principles of the radical left, or even much evidence of a conversion to the ideological principles of interracial unionism, workers' experiences were more fragmentary. Chapters 1 and 2 have sought to identify two key themes that marked the experiences of black workers across the distinct settings of Detroit and New York; first, in the importance of employment arrangements and the proportionate concentrations of black workers and second in the ramifications of the close relationships forged between union, management and government officials who came to share control of access to employment. Both of these developments had contradictory impacts on the lives of working black people.

Chapter 1 discussed how concentrations of black workers afforded opportunities for race-based political activism which used unionism as a vehicle for protest. At the same time, these arrangements also could contain activism and economic opportunity, either directly as a result of union policies practiced by groups like the Motion Picture Operators in New York or, in more subtle fashion, in CIO unions like Local 600. In New York, the pre-existing concentration of workers in Harlem in settlement and employment proved to be at once an obstacle through which unions could constrain the efforts of black union members, at the same time as it afforded workers the political space necessary to launch protests in protection of their rights which could spur wide-ranging coalitions of support. At the same time, black workers' responses to organized labour in Detroit during the rise to power of the United Auto Workers after 1937 were also heavily dictated by the exigencies of the pre-existing employment of black workers

in the motor industry. Although some became enthusiastic members of the new union, others directly opposed the union by crossing picket lines in 1937, 1939 and 1941, while a majority attempted to avoid either of these clear-cut stances. Although these apparently hesitant stances were frequently bemoaned by some contemporaries, what looked like dependency on middle class community leaders and on their paternalistic benefactor, Henry Ford, needs also to understood as an entirely rational attempt on the part of black workers to navigate a course between parties who jointly held power to advance, or perhaps more likely retard, their economic progress. When Ford was finally organized in 1941, these workers had not undergone a sudden conversion to the principles of interracial union-based strategies of civil rights advancement; instead, unionization brought about a shift in power, as participation in the UAW now represented an unavoidable – albeit more promising - avenue through which to attempt to address black workers' numerous problems in Detroit's labour market. Yet the activism of black workers was also formalized, routinized and contained, in many ways, as a result of the bargaining arrangements instituted at Local 600 and elsewhere. In addition, the majority of the black workforce in Detroit remained in minority groups in workplaces where opportunities for harnessing collective power were more limited.

Taken together, Part I advances two related parts of this dissertation's wider contribution. First, when built upon the lived experiences of black workers, the contradictions that attended the rise of organized labour stand out in sharp relief, in contrast to more triumphal revisionist portrayals. Second, this fresh understanding can only be arrived at as a result of a renewed focus on the impact of the rise of labour on black workers. As a result, it has become clear that as the 1930s gave way to the 1940s the question of how to extend these protest efforts and black employment opportunities beyond enclaves like Local 600 in Detroit and Harlem to cities-at-large became central. As the growing complaints made to black leaders, trade unions and city officials testified, all three groups were becoming jointly responsible for dictating the prospects for black employment and economic advancement. These arrangements provided opportunities for protest, by challenging one group by an appeal to another. But these developments also brought with them a series of new challenges and potential problems, for there was an increased propensity for blame to be shifted and obscured.

The attempts of various leaders to take up the challenges called for by the workers under discussion in Part I, and the difficulties in maintaining the coordinated and direct methods of protest that had become necessary, will be the concern of the rest of this dissertation.

Chapter 3: Opponents of Interracial Organized Labour and the Failed Alternatives of Local Protest

Part I examined the experiences of black workers in Detroit and New York as organized labour rose to power between 1933 and 1941. The focus now turns to leadership groups. Previous studies have concentrated heavily on the leaders whose political stances advocated union participation. Beyond numbers alone, the yardstick by which the achievements of black protest leaders will be measured in Part II will be successes in resolving the issues of importance to workers uncovered in Part I. Chapter 3 will begin this task by assessing the extent to which leaders who opposed black participation with organized labour managed to articulate, address and resolve the contradictory experiences of black workers as organized labour rose to power during the New Deal.

Although the stances of leadership groups have been central to many existing accounts, there has been a tendency to marginalize local leaders who opposed black participation in organized labour. Studies of both Detroit and New York by scholars including Robert Korstad, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Cheryl Lynn Greenberg position the opposition engendered from the black church and from nationalist groups, respectively, on the losing side of a political debate within which organized labour and the left enjoyed the ascendancy.[1] In her study of Harlem, Greenberg suggested that leaders of the Harlem Labor Union were more committed to lining their own pockets than to addressing the needs of the wider community, placing their vision as ultimately out of step with the desire of the community to achieve integration rather than separation.[2] Existing coverage of opponents of interracial unionism in Detroit, meanwhile, has suggested that certain church leaders and professional groups offered an outdated and ultimately

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[1] Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement', *Journal of American History,* 75 (1988),786-811 (p. 794); Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?' Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 123-133.

[2] Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?'* p. 128, p. 130, p. 221; However, an intriguing hint at the wider impact of the HLU's ideas is contained in the work of Mark Naison, who in his final summation of Communist Party influence in Harlem notes that the HLU and nationalist ideas 'struck a responsive chord "on the street"' but received less support from the intelligentsia or professionals, the groups among whom the CP drew most support. Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 176, p. 263.

losing vision of black community development. Often, the 'middle class' or 'bourgeois' status of these church leaders and their financial dependence on company management, in particular on Ford Motor Company, have been used as the main explanatory factors for this opposition. This has particularly been the in the older works of scholars such as Irving Howe and B. J. Widick and August Meier and Eliott Rudwick.[3] The purpose of this chapter is not to raise opponents of unionism to an overly inflated position of importance or influence, for existing works have been right to make clear that growing numbers of leaders did offer some form of endorsement for organized labour. Instead, this chapter suggests that opponents of organized labour played an important part in the larger story of the problematic relationships formed between black civil rights and organized labour during the New Deal in a way that existing accounts fail to acknowledge adequately. Opponents vocally articulated widely-held concerns and, in the process, continued to receive substantial levels of support among the wider working communities in ways that have been downplayed. In addition, opponents' relative failure to translate their popularity into feasible workable strategies to extend employment opportunities highlights the fundamental problems that lay at the heart of the relationships being formed between organized labour, management, government, working communities and their diverse leaders.

The first part of this chapter examines opposition in New York. Focusing on nationalist groups, an attempt is made to go beyond the accusatory contexts of these groups'

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[3] Irving Howe and B.J. Widick, for instance, argued that Ford 'had a powerful hold on Negro politicians and ministers,' who were members of Detroit's predominately anti-labour middle class. Irving Howe and B.J. Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther* (New York: Random House, 1949) p. 210; Horace Cayton and George Mitchell, also portray the antagonism of black leaders towards unionism as part of their class-based outlook which involved a belief in race-first capitalistic strategies, both conscious and unconscious dependence on their allies in white management, and a belief that if blacks were to be exploited, 'it is better that he be exploited by the white employer who offers some rewards in the form of more employment or promotions than by white workers.' Horace R. Cayton and St. Clair Drake, *Black Metropolis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946), pp. 378-379; Meier and Rudwick echoed some of these sentiments in arguing that church leaders' opposition to unionism in Detroit was spurred by a related combination of their dependant relationships with Ford and their inherently conservative middle class outlook, arguing that Ford's patronage 'directly and indirectly accentuated their bourgeois outlook and their scepticism of trade unions.' August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 16; Richard Thomas offers a more sympathetic reading, portraying black opposition as part of a strategy of 'corporate paternalism,' which in his view, represented a well-intended but 'outdated method of community building' that was the diametric opposite to the industrial unionism promoted by others. Richard Thomas, *Life for us is what we make it: Building Black community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

activities as depicted in the files of pro-union supporters. It is argued that groups like the Harlem Labor Union (HLU) were more than a racketeering operation conducted by a handful of manipulative leaders who sought to stir up racial antagonism to further their own personal goals. Personal motivations undoubtedly played a part in shaping the programme adopted, but the priorities of the HLU also spoke to concerns common to many black workers. Adapting to the changes of the decade, nationalists formed their own 'unions' which sought to increase black employment while offering a racially exclusive alternative which attempted to channel frustrations felt towards white-led union groups. Rather than offering an irredeemably wrong-headed opposition to interracial unionism, as voices from the left like the Negro Labor Committee charged, nationalists offered a fluid and, from the perspective of New York's heavily confined black community in Harlem, alluring alternative which drew upon powerful values, emotions, and practical considerations to achieve significant popularity among the working community.

Yet the second half of the case-study on opponents in New York will argue that, despite their popularity, these leaders struggled to offer a programme which could engage with the full-range of interrelated groups which came to control workers' economic progress. Shaped by the pre-existing concentration of black employment in Harlem, the HLU was afforded a firm base from which to launch job protests, but at the same time, patterns of geographical and economic separation also served to constrain their activism to existing parts of the city. Although attempts were made to extend separatist strategies beyond Harlem, the limitations of such a strategy in the realm of organized labour and employment soon became apparent. As the experiences of black New Yorkers outlined in Part I made clear, efforts to extend black employment increasingly had to accept the fact that three interrelated powers – government, management and unions – held joint control over employment. Nationalist groups failed in this regard, through their failure to work with other black groups in order to challenge unions, management and government groups to extend employment opportunities. The HLU's participation in the relatively successful protests regarding public transport employment in April 1941 represented an illustration of progress that could be made by coalitions of community leaders willing to mobilize large groups of black workers and to challenge the variety of

officials who controlled access to employment. However, for the vast majority of the organizational period, nationalist opponents of organized labour operated on their own. Though nationalists ably articulated workers' frustrations with discriminatory employers and unions, they failed to offer a comprehensive strategy which moved beyond an outright rejection of labour to challenge unions in concert with other responsible parties.

In similar fashion, the second case-study of opposition in Detroit will not seek to completely erase the importance of personal backgrounds and motivations, but will suggest that when matched up to the behaviour and priorities displayed by black workers in Chapter 1, anti-union church leaders articulated issues of concern to black workers. Tracing the careers of anti-union leaders in Detroit has to draw, in large part, upon the negative commentary their actions induced from supporters of unionism. With this evidence gathered together, it will be suggested that black church leaders who advocated a continuation of alliances with companies like Ford did so not only because of their own personal interests but also because they genuinely believed that maintaining these alliances represented a desirable alternative to cooperation with interracial unionism in the UAW-CIO. The real problem for these opponents was not the fact that they fiercely criticized organized labour, but the fact that they failed to address the other increasingly interrelated problems and dilemmas facing black workers as a result of unionization. The criticisms of unionism offered by church leaders continued to resonate throughout the organizational period. Although opponents were eventually forced to adapt their strategy during the organization of Ford in 1941, the belated endorsement of the Ford-backed UAW-AFL by anti-union church leaders did not represent a meaningful adoption of a workable economic rights agenda. Although opponents of interracial unionism spoke to a part of workers' concerns, they ultimately failed to fully tackle the problems experienced by black workers.

At first glance the growth of union support appears to place opponents on the losing side of history. Yet the relative failures detailed in this chapter still have relevance for the wider story told by this dissertation. In both locations, opponents of union

participation offered a powerful articulation of important aspects of the problems facing black workers as organized labour rose to power during the New Deal. All too often, however, opponents were unable to go beyond these criticisms to provide a workable alternative strategy; one which not only criticized interracial unionism but which accommodated itself to the newly powerful position of labour. Though many of their criticisms continued to resonate in the wider community, the limited achievements of opponents demonstrated how hard it was to translate diagnoses of dilemmas into practical methods that extended opportunity. The key significance of this relative failure is not that community leaders disagreed on matters of tactics and political principle. Such debates, particularly between integrationist and separatist and between radical and conservative strains of thought, were longstanding and important parts of the black protest tradition. Instead, this chapter suggests that the key issue was the increased cost of the failure of coordinated protest strategies. Against a backdrop where the rise of labour presented a series of dilemmas, there was an increased need for coordinated leadership that sought to bring order to these fragmentary and contradictory developments. Chapter 3 highlights the role played by opponents of organized labour in contributing to the relative failure to offer an effective coordinated response.

Opposition to Organized Labour in New York

The nationalist opponents of interracial unionism in New York first came to the attention of the wider community through their participation in the Don't Buy Where You Can't Work Campaigns in Harlem in 1934. From this point until the early 1940s, nationalists including Sufi Abdul Hamid, Francis Minor, Arthur Reid and Ira Kemp demonstrated a commitment not just to advancing their own financial situation, as their opponents frequently charged, but to protesting on behalf of black workers against management to win jobs. As the decade progressed, these leaders offered a nationalistic challenge to the frequent discrimination practiced by the interracial unions of the AFL and CIO.

The Citizens' League for Fair Play had initially been formed in February 1934 by Reverend John Johnson of Saint Martin's Protestant Episcopal Church and the editor of the *New York Age,* Fred Moore. The League initially enjoyed cooperation from nationalists including Hamid and former Garveyites Reid and Kemp.[4] Drawing direct inspiration from similar protests launched in Chicago in 1930 and attempts undertaken in Harlem by the Women's Housewives' League, New York's first Don't Buy Where You Can't Work campaign was directed against Blumstein's department store on 125th Street.[5] Formal requests were made by the League that black women be hired as sales clerks in numbers proportionate to the black customers of the store. When these requests were rejected by Blumstein's, pickets were set up and a boycott was launched, forcing the shop to enter negotiations. Blumstein's was eventually compelled to hire several new female black staff members. Although some in Harlem had deep reservations over the confrontational tactic of picketing (notably George Schuyler in the *Amsterdam News* who feared it could antagonize white employers further), on the

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[4] Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?'*, p. 120.

[5] Before the Citizens' League's efforts at Blumstein, Sufi Abdul Hamid had achieved success at the nearby Koch's Department Store, achieving an agreement with the owner, Morris Weinstein, in June 1934 to increase the number of black employees. The 'elite' of Harlem did not recognize Hamid's success, however, because, according to Winston McDowell, they wanted to control the jobs movement for themselves and to make it 'respectable.' Winston C. McDowell, 'Keeping Them "In the Same Boat Together"? Sufi Abdul Hamid, African Americans, Jews, and the Harlem Jobs Boycotts', chapter in *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century,* V.P. Franklin ed., (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1998), p. 226.

surface at least, the Blumstein campaign seemed to provide visible proof of a growing willingness among leaders to make common cause on behalf of black workers and of the efficacy of direct tactics.[6]

Yet despite this apparent success, the swift fracturing of the coalition between nationalist and more 'moderate' groups revealed divisions, divisions which became more pronounced over questions relating to organized labour. Both Hamid and Kemp were dissatisfied with what they saw as the inadequate settlement at Blumstein's. Hamid's Negro Industrial Clerical Alliance (NICA) and Kemp's African Patriotic League (APL) both subsequently renewed the picket lines at Blumstein's and attempted a new boycott of Beck's Shoe Store, also on 125th Street. These actions drew criticism from the majority of community leaders within the Citizens' League.[7] When explaining why the *New York Age* had chosen not to participate in the renewed job campaign of 1938, an editorial probably written by Fred Moore, one of the joint instigators of the 1934 campaign, explained that he had taken a lead in the earlier campaign until it had been 'taken over by a radical element,' before warning that '[t]hese same elements are creeping into the present drives'.[8] Moore suggested that the differences that split the initial jobs coalition and continued to set nationalist groups apart from others in the community related to their propensity to take direct action and to make threats which meant they were accused of intimidating the targets of their protests.

Various explanations have been put forward to account for the motivations of nationalist groups like Hamid's NICA and Kemp's APL to split with the Citizens' League in the jobs campaign of 1934. William Muraskin argued the split was primarily about personal power, saying this early schism is 'best understood if we see [black nationalists'] attempts to capture the boycott movement, with its mass following, for themselves'.[9] But even if nationalists like Hamid, Kemp and Reid did negatively impact

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[6] Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?'* p. 118.
[7] Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?'* p. 124.
[8] *New York Age,* 7 May 1938.
[9] William Muraskin, 'The Harlem Boycott of 1934 and Its Aftermath' (Unpublished master's thesis, Columbia University, 1966), p. 15; Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?'* pp. 114-115; McDowell questions Greenberg's portrayal between 'moderates' and 'nationalists,' arguing that 'it is more likely that these

the jobs campaign through their militancy, it is overly simplistic to argue that they were motivated solely by considerations of personal power and prestige, for they also tapped into genuinely held and relatively consistent ideas of race and protest tactics. In particular, Kemp, Reed and Hamid were unhappy at the placement of supposedly light-skinned girls for the positions at Blumstein's. Blumstein himself admitted that this had been part of the agreement, when in racially coded language he stated that, 'the store naturally picked the most attractive personalities among the Negro girls'.[10] Another demand was that no members of the picket lines were themselves to be offered jobs.[11] When questions surrounding black participation in organized labour climbed the political agenda, nationalist groups attempted to apply these ideas and priorities to form a powerful challenge to white-led mainstream trade unions.

Many of the nationalist opponents of organized labour had intellectual and organizational links with Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). During the UNIA's peak of popularity in Harlem in the early 1920s, it had not had to take serious account of organized labour. The UNIA had, nevertheless, extended its emphasis on racial self-help to reject black cooperation with interracial trade unions.[12] As the 1930s progressed, former Garveyites such as Ira Kemp and Arthur Reid took inspiration from nationalist philosophies, which still played an important part of black Harlem's political landscape despite the decline of the UNIA, while adapting these ideas to the altered economic and political landscape of the New Deal-era.

The biggest influence on nationalists' new activism in labour relations was the domestic economic depression and the corresponding political transformations of the New Deal

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tensions were the historical liabilities inherent in all race-based strategies advocated and employed in a community such as Harlem with strong Jewish origins.' McDowell, 'Keeping Them "In the Same Boat Together"?' p. 213.

[10] Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?'* p. 122.

[11] Muraskin's research revealed the racial perspectives that caused the decision to renew pickets at Blumstein's, recalling from his personal interviews with Arthur Reed that he claimed that the light-skinned leaders of the Citizen's League for Fair Play had intentionally picked "high-yellow" girls to work at Blumstein's. Muraskin, 'The Harlem Boycott of 1934 and Its Aftermath', pp. 41-44.

[12] Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 27-28.

which precipitated a surge in union organizing. At the same time, the overseas Italian invasion of Ethiopia also offered a spur to their burgeoning black-only labour agenda. As Loren Miller observed in the left-wing *New Masses* in July 1935, 'Garvey's preachment of an African Empire left a deep impression on Harlem [...] The Ethiopian situation has given them [nationalists] renewed vigor and their voices are raised on a half-dozen street corners crying out against the white man's injuries and urging Negroes to turn their eyes to the ancestral fatherland'.[13] Arthur Reid gave many street-corner speeches on stepladders urging that black people boycott Italian pushcarts and other Italian-owned businesses such as restaurants in Harlem. At the same time, Reid and Kemp were also engaged in protesting against the actions of the editorial staff in the dispute at the *Amsterdam News* while deciding to form their own black-only labour union, the Harlem Labor Union.[14]

The split from the job campaigns combined with the mixture of overseas events and domestic labour issues also determined the career of Sufi Abdul Hamid, who fused a mixture of black nationalism and anti-semitism while opposing interracial organized labour. Hamid was a converted Muslim, activist and self-proclaimed mystic who was frequently accused by contemporaries of directing vitriolic attacks against Jews in an attempt to rally supporters to his causes. Hamid was quoted in the *New York Times* in October 1934 as saying the 'war is on' against Jews.[15] Despite his personal aversion to Hamid's ideas, Loren Miller attempted to account for the apparent popularity of Hamid, saying that he 'made a fairly plausible case to Negro workers burdened with unemployment and angered at discrimination and rising prices at neighborhood stores [... but] Sufi twisted their [Jews'] middle-class outlook into manifestations of racial

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[13] Loren Miller, 'How "Left" Is the N.A.A.C.P.?' 16 July 1935, *New Masses.*

[14] Muraskin, 'The Harlem Boycott of 1934 and Its Aftermath,' pp. 50-51, using evidence from *Baltimore AfroAmerican*, 26 July 1936; Allen Chase, 'The *Amsterdam News* is Winning,' *The Nation,* 13 November 1935.

[15] Hamid quoted in *New York Times*, 9 October 1934, in Mark Christian Thompson, *Black Fascisms: African-American Literature and Culture Between the Wars,* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), p. 11.

characteristics'.[16] Hamid who claimed un-verified Egyptian ancestry, came to be known as the 'Black Hitler' of Harlem for his anti-Semitic outlook.[17]

Many of Hamid's ideas, particularly those related to the appropriate organization of black labour, found expression in the contemporary writing of Claude McKay. In McKay's novel *Harlem Glory,* Hamid was represented as the character of Omar, a leader who attempted to cement the unity of the mass of black labour and emphasize its superiority through the promotion of a universal religion. McKay drew inspiration from the career of Hamid to express a vision which presented black fascism as a 'Third Way' which represented an alternative to both communism and capitalism that the black community could pursue. Separate and organized groups of black workers played an important part in this vision, offering an opportunity for blacks to gain genuine political and economic power.[18] Although Hamid did not provide as direct nor as definitive a statement as found in McKay's fiction, similar ideas can be traced to the development of Hamid's platform and indeed to the more successful form of black-only unionism advocated by the HLU.

In order to pursue this radical vision, Hamid decided to adopt what seemed traditional methods that attempted to mirror the organizational forms of mainstream protest groups. This strategy, compelled in part by the necessity of complying with state laws governing labour protests, eventually led him and other opponents of mainstream labour unions to organizing in the style of a trade union. Hamid's organization in 1934 and the first half of 1935 was called the Negro Industrial Clerical Alliance, and though Hamid was personally associated with anti-Semitism and militant nationalism, his organization avoided mentioning these more contentious aspects of his programme. Instead, the NICA, like other mainstream groups, attempted to appeal to the concerns of 'ordinary' Harlemites. One leaflet distributed by the NICA advertised a meeting on 26 June 1935, and made reference to the committees charged with investigating the causes

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[16] Miller, 'How "Left" Is the N.A.A.C.P.'

[17] Muraskin claims that 'The reason that Sufi found a ready audience among Harlem's lower classes for an anti-Semitic campaign that was anti-Jewish feelings were endemic to the entire Negro community.' Muraskin, 'The Harlem Boycott of 1934 and Its Aftermath,' p. 20.

[18] Thompson, *Black Fascisms,* p. 104, p. 116.

of Harlem's March 1935 riot, promising attendees would 'Hear the TRUTH about the attempt, by the various committees appointed, to whitewash the real conditions in Harlem.' The NICA went on to promote their programme of organizing 'all Negro Workers in Harlem to insure to them Living Wages and Decent Working Hours, Better Housing Conditions, Better Hospitalization, More Opportunities for Negro Physicians, The ENDING OF RELIEF JOB DISCRIMINATION'.[19] The public face of Hamid's NICA thus presented the community with a list of generally shared priorities of importance, which centred on issues of employment and economics. The key question facing Hamid, as well as Kemp and Reid, was how to continue their fight against discriminatory employers without falling foul of state labour laws, a factor illustrated when Kemp, Reid and Hamid's decided to renew picketing at Blumstein's resulted in the New York Supreme Court declaring their activity to have been illegal because it was not a legitimate labour dispute.[20] Even after Hamid carried out his activism under the auspices of the Afro-American Federation of Labor, Judge Cotillo ruled a subsequent picket of the Manhattan Lerner shop to be unlawful as his organization was, in the opinion of Cotillo, a race group not a labour union.[21] This ruling proved to be the end of Hamid's involvement with unionism yet other nationalists managed to build upon his strategy and relatively successfully conducted their racial nationalism campaigns using a union form of organization.

The Harlem Labor Union (HLU), formed by Kemp and Reid in 1935, proved to be the most successful attempt to continue the job campaigns of nationalists in a union form. Alongside the personal motivations of its founders, the HLU sought to continue the jobs campaign through militant protest methods, but as the decade progressed and as organized labour came to occupy a critical role in dictating black employment prospects, the HLU attempted to provide a genuine challenge to mainstream unions of the AFL and CIO. The HLU had direct descendants from Hamid's organizations, such as Francis Minor, who was a leading figure in both groups. The HLU's original membership comprised seven individuals who were all in their late teens or early twenties, apart from Arthur Reed who was older, with the early majority hailing from the West Indies.

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[19] NICA Leaflet, LaGuardia Papers, Reel 76, New York Municipal Archives, New York.
[20] Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?'* p. 124.
[21] Muraskin, 'The Harlem Boycott of 1934 and Its Aftermath,' pp. 33-35.

Ira Kemp was originally from Georgia but was identified with 'the West Indian group.' The pragmatic element of the reasoning that underpinned the decision of Kemp and Reed to adopt a union-based structure was revealed by the subsequent comments of one initial member of the HLU, James Brown, who recollected that, '[w]e didn't know so much about labor unions, but since we weren't allowed to picket when we weren't a union [...] we became one'.[22] This tactical consideration was also reinforced by genuine and fiercely held opposition to a mixture of the radical left, white trade unions and black participation in these groups. This was visibly demonstrated in one of the HLU's first campaigns, where Kemp disrupted the picket line of black editorial staff who were members of the white-led American Newspaper Guild at the *Amsterdam News* by parking a truck adorned with US and Ethiopian flags, 'demanding to know why white Communists and Socialists were helping the white, outlaw, dues-collecting guild to wreck a great non-commercial Negro institution'.[23] The HLU did, in all likelihood, strengthen its leaders' own economic and political position, but also demonstrated a commitment to expanding job opportunities for black workers while offering a vehement rejection of the influence of white-led trade unions.

Much emphasis was placed by opponents of the HLU on this first factor and accusations of racketeering clung to its leaders. Despite the lack of conclusive evidence, it seems plausible that the organization did indeed make money by requiring its members to pay a membership fee in return for help in finding employment. During their picketing of Orkin's Dress Shop in 1935, which had already attempted to forestall a confrontation by hiring some black staff, the HLU demanded these staff be replaced with their own members from the picket lines.[24] The pro-union NLC repeatedly made accusations that the HLU was more interested in extracting money from employers rather than fighting on behalf of employees, saying that Kemp and Reed had 'received from the employers sums of $5 and $6 as a so-called membership fee for employees'.[25] The NLC's leader, Frank Crosswaith, personally repeated these accusations of racketeering in a letter to Mayor LaGuardia, writing that initially 'some of the merchants in an effort to escape

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[22] Muraskin, 'The Harlem Boycott of 1934 and Its Aftermath,' p. 52.
[23] Chase, 'The *Amsterdam News* is Winning'.
[24] Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?'* p. 128.
[25] 'Organizational Report,' 17 January 1936, Reel 1, NLC Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City.

dealing with bona-fide Unions, did give encouragement to this Incorporated Union, however, many of these merchants have since seen the error of their ways'.[26] There is corroborating evidence that suggests the HLU did indeed enter into agreements with managers not to picket or otherwise disrupt their business activities. In one surviving letter from 3 May 1939, John A. Parris of the HLU wrote a guarantee to A.G. Porter, the proprietor of the Paradise Grill and Restaurant on Lenox Avenue, that the AFL 'cannot and will not place a picket line outside of his premises,' and that deliveries and purchases would not be hindered by the AFL.[27] The HLU were in no position to offer guarantees from the AFL, and their actions in this case drew censure from AFL leaders angry at the attempt of the HLU to confuse the proprietor and to extract guarantees, most likely in return for money.

Even if the HLU's leaders did engage in 'furthering the fortunes,' the HLU also represented a relatively popular oppositional voice which, by challenging racial discrimination practiced by employers and labour unions, did attempt to speak to some of the legitimate concerns of Harlem's workforce. Between its founding in 1935 and the early 1940s, the HLU could claim some small scale successes in opening up employment opportunities for black workers. In April 1938, for instance, the HLU reportedly succeeded in placing Ruth Graham, a clerk-stenographer from 140th Street at the Metropolitan Casualty Insurance Company, while also opening up the first black clerical jobs at the Merton Cushman Bakery's main office on 116/117th Street. These negotiations were conducted by HLU member James Lawson, a nephew of Bishop Lawson who was a 'well-known Harlem clergyman'.[28] Some in the HLU were also clearly aware that these small victories were not enough to adequately address the scale of the employment and labour problem in Harlem. In reporting the successful placement of four black men at a pawnbrokers in July 1938, the organizer from the HLU, Roger Straughn, commented that:

> While the average Harlem job seeking agency would make a "great to do" over securing four jobs for ex-porters from a firm employing 100,000 white workers,

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[26] Frank Crosswaith to Mayor LaGuardia, 28 December 1938, Reel 4, NLC Papers.
[27] Letter from John A. Parris, 3 May 1939, enclosed in Letter from James A. Webster, Secretary to William Collins, Reel 4, NLC Papers.
[28] *New York Age,* 9 April 1938.

> we look upon our recent victory as a case of civic duty. The first four jobs on the part of the Harlem Labor Union is just one phase of the work of our organization which calls for the general economic development of the race, and the forcing of the white worker to share his job with his black brother.[29]

The HLU's attempts to address the 'general economic development of the race,' challenged organized labour as well as management, and in this sense, can be said to have accurately identified the interrelated nature of discriminatory problems facing black workers in New York.

The effectiveness of the HLU's chosen method to tackle mainstream labour unions was much more debatable, however. In a letter penned by Crosswaith and signed by associates of the NLC to Mayor LaGuardia in condemnation of the HLU, these abrasive tactics were described in the following terms:

> The leaders [...] have literally terrorized many merchants into not only giving employment to members of this alleged union at the expense of both Negro and white union men, but they also have been known to extract money from certain Harlem merchants [...] they have conducted picket lines before stores employing a majority of Negro workers who are members of a legitimate union.[30]

Many of these accusations, in particular the charge of placing their own members in work at the expense of even black unionized workers, were not without foundation, for the HLU did not appear to draw much distinction between challenging union or open-shop businesses, or between different unions who had varying policies of racial inclusion. At the same time, the HLU nevertheless displayed a genuine commitment to fight wherever they saw an opportunity to expand employment opportunities. For instance, praising the Supreme Court decision which finally nullified a state-level injunction against picketing on a racial basis, Arthur Reid argued that:

> this is one of the most important verdicts effecting [sic] the economic life of the Negro because it gives him the right to fight for jobs – something vitally needed –

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[29] *New York Age,* 16 July 1938.
[30] Letter from Frank Crosswaith, Jack Stein, Jacob Shaffren, Thomas Young, Ted Poston and David Rose to Mayor La Guardia, 28 September 1938, Reel 1, NLC Papers.

> without hog-tieing him to unions most of which fail to give him a fair share of jobs, even in the Harlem area. The fight is on![31]

Reid and the HLU had correctly identified that organized labour held increasing potential power to hinder the equal distribution of job opportunities. Edward Brown of the HLU complained that existing union contracts with organized labour were hampering efforts to expand opportunities. According to Brown:

> There are dozens of Harlem merchants who would be only too glad to add colored salespeople to their sales staff, but because of C.I.O. and A.F.L. commitments absolutely nothing could be done in reference to giving employment to members of our group [...] there is no reason why a small number of Bronxites, as C.IO. officials, should have the say as to whether these colored men and women should be given jobs.[32]

Members like Brown had a clear recognition that organized labour was often operating as a barrier to increasing employment opportunities. The willingness to vocally protest was an important part of their wider appeal to the workers of New York.

Despite their undoubted willingness to fight, the key question that remained was how effective the HLU, or for that matter any racially exclusive protest group, could be in engaging with the jointly responsible parties of management, government and unions who set limits on black economic advancement. The HLU did undergo a partial reorientation away from militant job protests towards an acceptance of more traditional union techniques, including signing contracts with management, attending labour board hearings, which combined with the continuing methods of picketing and street-level agitation. There is much debate about the actual benefits that these oppositional responses brought to black workers, however. By the end of 1939, the HLU's activities had reached the attention of the NAACP. Publicity Director George Murphy, who was a personal supporter of black participation in interracial organized labour, described the HLU as a 'sort of one-man organization' run by Arthur Reid which was willing to picket places with unionized black workforces and all-white workforces

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[31] *New York Age,* 9 April 1938.
[32] *New York Age,* 23 April 1938.

alike. Murphy concluded that, 'the organization is not interested in the question of employment of Negroes under union conditions, or even under conditions that may properly lead to unionization and thus security'. Instead, according to Murphy, the HLU was merely 'taking advantage of the perfectly truthful situation of a scarcity of jobs for Negroes in Harlem, and distorting the situation so that legitimate labor unions in Harlem get a black eye, and racial animosity is intensified'.[33] Although Murphy was partly correct to suggest that there was a strong element of opportunism within the HLU's programme and it was certainly not interested in simply mirroring mainstream organized labour groups, it was not the case that the HLU was simply the racketeering operation of one man.

Not only did the range of activities outlined above reveal that as the HLU progressed, on occasion, it sought secure guarantees regarding working conditions and to work within the structures of New Deal labour relations, but the HLU's wider appeal also shows it should not be written off as the operation of a handful of self-motivated opportunists. As Murphy himself adjudged, the HLU's membership was estimated to be between 200 and 300 members. Harlemites were greatly divided on the legitimacy and success of its program. Most civic leaders and labour leaders, according to Murphy, believed it to have a negative influence by exacerbating racial animosity, yet, in quoting an imaginary average 'man in the street,' Murphy suggests the following attitude prevailed:

> It makes very little difference to me whether the Harlem Labor Union is a legitmate labor union or not. I know this – they have been able to get several jobs for Negroes in Harlem where organized labor has been unable to do so.[34]

Where unions were seen to have failed in their unwillingness to address the employment difficulties of black workers, the HLU put forward an agenda which lambasted both employers and unions who were, to varying degrees, jointly accountable for limiting employment, while promising to address these problems through direct and militant protest.

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[33] Memo from George Murphy to Walter White, 1 November 1939, Box I: C-323;9, NAACP Papers.
[34] Ibid.

The problems for nationalistic labour organizations were related to practical restrictions on their activities imposed by legal decision-making. In addition, there were inherent barriers implied by nationalistic organization that precluded a full-scale participation with complicated networks of labour control being erected between trade unions, management and government. Not only were the gains of the HLU mainly made on an individual case-by-case basis, but also their organizational efforts were heavily geographically constrained within Harlem in general and to the shops on 125th Street in particular. Part of this geographical confinement was the result of constraints imposed by the HLU's legal charter to picket. Having fallen foul of state labour law the previous year, the charter eventually granted to the HLU on 19 July 1935 restricted their activities to between 110th and 125th Streets in Harlem.[35] Despite this partially imposed confinement, the HLU displayed an awareness of the need to extend their programme to address the problems of the many black workers in New York who lived and worked outside of Harlem, and similar protest activities were carried out by nationalist protest groups in other parts of the city. In September 1937 the African Nationalist Movement of Brooklyn conducted a two-week long protest that followed the tactics of Harlem's earlier 'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work' campaigns as they organized pickets at the Sumner Theatre, complaining that the theatre enjoyed black patronage but refused to employ black workers.[36] The following year, at the same time as a coalition led by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was renewing the jobs campaign in Harlem, the Citizens' Civic Affairs Committee in Brooklyn engaged in similar picketing activities to open up employment at Kushner's Store.[37] For campaigners in both Brooklyn and Harlem, as the arguments of groups like the Civic Affairs Committee recognized, 1938 represented a crucial year which some saw as an opportunity to extend protest pickets and nationalistic labour organization on a much larger scale.

A decision by the U.S. Supreme Court which nullified a previous city-level injunction against picketing on a racial basis played an important role in spurring nationalistic groups in New York to attempt to extend their activities. This was made apparent by a

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[35] NLC Minutes, 17 January 1936, 'Organizational Report,' Reel 1, NLC Papers; Muraskin, 'The Harlem Boycott of 1934 and Its Aftermath,' p. 51.
[36] *New York Age,* 25 September 1937.
[37] *New York Age,* 11 November 1938.

conference organized by the HLU in June 1938, in concert with other groups including the War Veterans League and Citizens' Civic Affairs Committee from Brooklyn, which attempted to apply its principles and methods of protest on a national scale. Termed the National Negro Labor Conference, the organizing committee explained that the 'time was ripe' for a national conference because of the large black population in urban areas, the increased unionization of black workers and the Supreme Court decision which legitimized picketing on a racial basis.[38] A letter to the editor of the *New York Age* from H. C. Francis provided a detailed explication of the motivation behind the timing of these nationalists' attempts to apply their ideas on a national scale:

> The time has come for Negro labor to shape a definite policy because the immediate circumstances demand action more appropriate than spotty movements, or aimless drifting [...] The interest of Southern Negro Labor, both industrial and agricultural; that of Northern Negro labor, which is urban, industrial and preponderantly unskilled and marginal; the attitude of Negro Labor to white labor unions; that of Negroes to Negro labor unions; the anomalous and conflicting interests of unorganized Negro business [...] The whole system of American business is now undergoing readjustment in alignment with the Wagner labor laws and other New Deal measures and conditions born of the depression. If Negro business men do not organize in the interest of their common outlook and development their business will never inspire confidence.[39]

Francis' final comment underscored the crossover that occurred between the nationalistic labour organization efforts of groups like the HLU and business-oriented strategies of self-help which continued to attract some support from some black professional groups. Despite being set up at a seemingly propitious time for black labour protest groups, the outcomes of the National Negro Labor Conference appeared to have been modest. Although representatives attended from other major industrial cities, there is little evidence that the promises of the conference were acted upon. These decisions included the appointment of Bedford Lawson Jr., the black lawyer who had represented black interests during the recent Supreme Court ruling, as chairman of

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[38] *New York Age,* 18 June 1938.
[39] *New York Age,* 11 June 1938.

a new organization called the National Negro Labor Federation which was intended to organize Negro Labor Units throughout the country.[40]

Though nationalists who opposed interracial organization strategies saw the late 1930s as an opportune time to organize within black business and to protest on a racially inclusive basis, the developments of the decade required engaging with a variety of interconnected white-led groups. H. C. Francis' letter in support of the National Negro Labor Conference demonstrated awareness that the entire U.S. economy was 'undergoing readjustment in alignment' with the labour laws and other reforms of the New Deal, yet in order to shape these changes to the best advantages of black workers, protest strategies had to engage with the related forces of organized labour, management and layers of government.[41] What really lay behind the failure of groups like the HLU's attempts to translate their local strategies into wider national successes was the limited extent to which nationalistic strategies were able to participate in wide-ranging, multifaceted protest strategies. The internal logic of black-only organization presented a fundamental problem for nationalist labour strategies, precluding them from taking more permanent and productive parts in the efforts of protest coalitions. While groups like the HLU enjoyed some local successes and were able to vocally articulate the problems faced by workers regarding discriminatory unions and employers, their organizational principles hindered them from engaging with the various jointly responsible white-led groups beyond a sporadic case-by-case basis.

That the HLU offered valid criticisms but was less successful at providing adequate solutions was visibly demonstrated by their role in two major efforts undertaken by coalitions of leaders on behalf of black workers in 1938 and 1941. In the first of these efforts, Reverends Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and William Lloyds Imes took a lead in establishing a new job campaign in 1938, and the HLU became one of many organizations represented on the newly established Greater New York Coordinating Committee. Conspicuous by its absence was the NLC, which quickly moved to challenge

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[40] *New York Age,* 9 July 1938.
[41] *New York Age,* 11 June 1938.

the influence of the HLU in these job campaigns, fearing they would undo the progress they felt had been made in improving relationships between organized labour and black workers. The NLC appointed a committee to interview Powell Jr. and Imes because it wanted the leaders, 'to publicly clarify their position on the activities of the Harlem Labor Union [and...] to assure the trade unions that nothing in their compact will be used to jeopardize the gains of the trade union movement in Harlem'.[42] Seemingly in response, Powell Jr. issued a public statement that said there was, 'complete harmony between all of the organizations in the Coordinating Committee, particularly in reference to the Harlem Labor Union. In the future there will be no picketing instituted by the Coordinating Committee or any of its affiliates without first a definite understanding'. Powell Jr. had also managed to secure the cooperation of Reid in this matter, who had promised not to picket stores where black workers were employed and were members of CIO and AFL unions, but that the HLU would still attempt to carry on its activities in unorganized concerns.[43] In this instance, the HLU was able to play a part in what proved to be one of the more successful campaigns undertaken on behalf of black workers in the 1930s.

This relative cooperation from the HLU reflected an increased accommodation to wider developments which made it clear that outright opposition to organized labour was an untenable position. Even if opposition was still ideologically attractive to advocates of nationalism, such a stance would have made the HLU's platform irrelevant to the growing numbers of black workers for whom some form of union membership was a condition of work. Yet at the same time as this partial shift in the HLU's position, internal upheavals within the organization also limited its influence. In December 1939 the HLU took a lead in a campaign to extend job opportunities for black workers in public transportation, a cause which soon energized a wide variety of other community leaders. Arthur Reid, eschewing an outright denunciation of labour or attempting to challenge its influence by counter-organization, began a campaign to open up jobs for black bus drivers in New York and correctly identified that the Transport Workers'

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[42] Reel 3, NLC Papers.
[43] *New York Age,* 5 November 1938.

Union (TWU) needed to be a first target in these efforts.[44] Only two weeks later, however, Reid was forced to resign from the HLU alongside Vice President James Lawson, Secretary John Parris and Treasurer James Kelly, following their arrest after an altercation with a store detective who was attempting to take a fifteen-year-old to the police on accusations of shop lifting. On leaving the organization, Reid discussed the changes that had occurred in the HLU's strategy since the beginning of his work in 1934:

> When I set out in 1934 to place Negroes in sales and clerical positions I was frank to admit that my primary purpose was to train Negroes in white owned concerns in order that they might eventually go in business for themselves. Nit-wits who think that I have set up a rival union to either the AFL or the CIO are foolish. I'm only concerned with Negroes being integrated in the economic life of America.[45]

Reid's claims not to have attempted to rival mainstream unions and to have become committed to the integration of black Americans may have been met with incredulity from opponents such as Crosswaith, but despite being somewhat hyperbolic, they did reflect a partial accommodation among nationalists that as organized labour assumed a more permanent and powerful role in shaping black economic prospects, new strategies would have to be adopted.

This purported change in policy was also articulated by Francis Minor, a business agent for the HLU who had also been one of Sufi Abdul Hamid's most militant and nationalistic supporters. Describing plans for a conference to be held between the HLU and the Uptown Chamber of Commerce, Minor insisted that the HLU wanted to work more cooperatively with other groups, saying that although previously they had used a 'trial and error' system in their efforts to address Harlem's economic problems, they had now reached a 'happy medium'. As evidence of this, Minor promoted the role they wanted to play in launching a 'Shop in Harlem Campaign' in concert with the chamber of commerce.[46] Yet despite the stated change in policy, picketing stores which failed to employ black workers remained a central part of the organization's agenda. In August 1940, the HLU's affiliate in Brooklyn, the Amalgamated Labor Association, participated

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[44] *New York Age,* 2 December 1938.
[45] *New York Age,* 16 December 1939.
[46] *New York Age,* 3 February 1940.

alongside the local branch of the Greater New York Coordinating Committee and the Local Affairs Committee of the Kings County Young Republican League, in what was planned to be an 'orderly parade' of about 50 people of Fulton Street Stores in Brooklyn who did not employ black workers.[47]

Towards the end of 1940, therefore, the HLU had not fully altered its strategy to engage with rather than straightforwardly oppose organized labour. The HLU's effectiveness was also hampered by internal tensions between factions that emerged in the wake of Reid's resignation the previous year. In particular, some members were apparently 'disgruntled,' with the new President George Wattley because he was viewed to have been under the influence of another member, James Thornhill, whose leftist tendencies allegedly 'caused a deal of contention among the membership'.[48] Even though the eventual winner in these internal disputes, Roger Straughn, was part of a three man committee which managed to achieve a notable victory in challenging a combination of company management and organized labour to extend black employment on New York's bus network in 1941, it was subsequently apparent that the HLU had only a limited role in a rather exceptional occurrence of cooperation.

The successes of the United Negro Bus Association (formerly United Negro Bus Strike Committee), which was led by Adam Clayton Powell Jr., attorney and NNC member Hope Stevens, and Roger Straughn of the HLU, sprang from their concerted and coordinated efforts. One role of these leaders was to attempt to intervene to quell violent disturbances which occurred during the strike. Powell Jr. apparently tried to take a lead in dissuading some youths who had smashed the windows of buses on Lenox Avenue, while spontaneous demonstrations against the restrictions placed on black employment also occurred near 135th and 138th Streets.[49] A key factor behind these

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[47] *New York Age,* 3 August 1940.

[48] The *New York Age* reported two factions emerged within the HLU at this time, one which desired the reinstatement of Reid and the other which supported James Lawson. *New York Age,* 30 November 1940.

[49] Although the participation of the HLU in the bus strike committee of April 1941 has been noted before, much attention has been focused on the internal political working of the union involved, the TWU. See in particular Meier and Rudwick who assess CP influence, and acknowledge some productive pressure was put on parts of the committee. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, 'Communist Unions and the Black

leaders' successes was their realization that the management of the bus company and the TWU needed to be engaged in a coordinated fashion to make the pressure of the strike tell.

Even as the agreement was about to be reached, however, some in the HLU remained sceptical about the promises of progress being made to them by management and the TWU. Indirectly quoting a former officer of HLU, the *New York Age* reported that some of its members feared that some black workers would be 'dressed up as drivers' after the settlement and then, after the public had been suitably appeased, these men would be moved back into working in garages once more. The former member charged that this was part of a conspiratorial agreement being put in place to avoid embarrassment to TWU leader Michael Quill by Stevens and Powell who were also both leftists, while Straughn was criticized for being too easily led. John Ritchie, the chairman of the bus company, was more positively judged to have been in favour of extending black employment, therefore leaving the TWU as the main obstacle.[50]

Eventually a contract was signed between all the interested parties which agreed to call off black pickets and protests in return for the placement of 70 black workers in maintenance and 100 as drivers. But even as victory was celebrated, it was noted that participants associated with the HLU were not pleased at the outcome and intended to take further action. These members, who included veteran nationalist activist Carlos Cook, told the press that:

> We are serving an ultimatum on the United Strike Bus Committee, New York Omnibus Co., Fifth Avenue Coach Co., and the Transport Workers Union, that unless we see Negro drivers driving buses throughout Harlem within the next month, ending May 30 the committee will reopen picketing of bus lines.[51]

Community: The Case of the Transport Workers Union, 1934-44', *Labor History,* 23 (1982), 165-197; *New York Age,* 5 April 1941.

[50] *New York Age,* 12 April 1941.

[51] The contract was signed by John Ritchie and John McCarthy for company, Quill and Hogan for TWU, and Arnold Johnson, Roger Straughn, Dr Cyril Ollivierre and Hope Stevens and Adam Clayton Powell Jr., for strikers. The agreement stipulated, 'No member of any race can be employed until this 170 has been

Spokesmen like Carlos Cook continued to be well aware that the coach companies and the TWU were jointly responsible for setting the boundaries of black employment, and promised to hold both groups to account not to renege on their promises.

Just as had been the case with their initial involvement in the job campaigns of 1934, nationalists demonstrated a willingness to address economic issues but proved ultimately unable, and often unwilling, to work with other leaders in the community on a sustained basis. 1941 proved both a high and low point for the influence of the HLU, for as the year progressed, internal factionalism seemingly contributed to its disappearance from the historical record. Nationalist ideas would long continue to play an important role in Harlem community politics, but in terms of facing the specific problems of workers regarding organized labour of vital importance in the early 1940s, the career of nationalist opponents like the HLU had been characterized by vocal denunciations of the problems facing workers, but an inability to work with other community groups and the joint determiners of black employment to truly address the complex issues facing black New Yorkers.

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employed. After that there will be an employment of one Negro for each white until 17 per cent of the working group is Negro.' *New York Age,* 26 April 1941.

Opposition to Organized Labour in Detroit

Opposition to black participation in organized labour in Detroit emanated most loudly and consistently from church leaders, although some similar attempts at race-based union alternatives were briefly tried in 1939. The career of opponents to unionism in Detroit showed that frequently vocal, and partly accurate, denunciations of unions' discriminatory practices were not effectively matched by workable solutions that took unions' increasing joint control of the job market into account. Opposition to unionism had been common to certain groups of community leaders in Detroit, particularly among sections of the black church, and this position was seemingly exacerbated during the sit-down strikes of 1937. Some church leaders combined opposition to the UAW with advocating continued support for company management who had provided jobs for black workers. This particularly applied to those ministers who, since the 1920s and in some cases before, had engaged in reciprocal arrangements with Ford Motor Company whereby 'suitable' black workers would be recommended to Ford, while churches in return would receive financial and material support from Ford. Opposition to the unionization of Ford's workforce among these church leaders was part of these arrangements.

The most high profile and influential churchman in this category was Reverend Robert Bradby of Detroit's Second Baptist Church. Brady's relationship with Ford Motor Company dated back to 1918 when Charles Sorensen, a white official at Ford, contacted Bradby seeking his assistance in attempts to stop violence among workers of both races at the company who had been bringing weapons into plants. From these beginnings, an arrangement was begun whereby members of Second Baptist could be placed in work at Ford. Bradby himself had a personal position of influence at Ford, often mediating in disputes on behalf of black workers in the plants at Highland Park and River Rouge.[52] In return for this position of relative influence, Bradby, the most high profile among several church leaders who entered into these relationships with Ford, displayed gratitude in his dealings with company officials. In one letter of recommendation to

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[52] Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It,* p. 273; Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* p. 10.

Russell Gnau, Sorensen's secretary, Bradby concluded saying that should the man be provided with a job, 'you know how grateful I will be to you'.[53] In another letter, Bradby attempted to personally appeal to the favour of Henry Ford himself, as he sought patronage of two young black children aged five and seven who possessed particular musical talent.[54] For Bradby, these arrangements were attractive from a personal and group point of view, affording church leaders power and prestige in the wider community and helping enlarge congregations and aiding their financial survival. They also constituted a genuine avenue through which workers in the community could secure employment in Detroit's highly discriminatory labour market.

Despite the personal benefits they and their churches stood to gain, these arrangements were not one-way streets on ingratiation and dependency, however. A letter written by Bradby in 1931 to Donald Marshall, a black employee of Ford responsible for personnel issues, reveals some of the tensions involved in these arrangements. The letter was prompted by rumours circulating in Detroit that Bradby had been overstating his influence with Ford and also criticising Marshall. In his defence, Bradby was keen to emphasize the limits of the assistance his church had received from Ford, which he estimated as only fifty tons of coal that year, which he claimed had been paid for at cost.[55] Bradby also wrote that:

> I give men letters to see you and they bring me lots of tales about even the treatment of the letters I give them. But I know that you have acted in the interest of some. I do not even decide with the men who discuss the questions, and you know that I with one or two exceptions have never made an appeal from your decision.

As well as revealing the limits of his ability to place men in jobs at Ford, Bradby went on in the letter to give his rationale for his alliance with Ford:

> I still have a position that I would not care to give up for anything that they would give me [...] Ford Motor Company can live without any of us. It might be a

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[53] Letter from R. Bradby to Russell Gnau, 11 December 1931, Second Baptist Church Records, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
[54] Letter from R. Bradby to Henry Ford, 29 December 1931, Second Baptist Records.
[55] Letter from R. Bradby to Donald Marshall, 20 November 1931, Second Baptist Records.

> struggle but we would live through without them. But we do want to give our best support to their organization because of certain fine things that they are willing to do and are doing without discrimination.[56]

Fearing that he may have been about to lose his position of influence with Ford, Bradby was making a determined move to scotch these rumours, yet he did not rationalize his relationship with Ford in terms of unthinking dependence. Members of the black church who offered a vocal denunciation of organized labour during the UAW's organizational efforts in 1937 did so both because they personally stood to lose from the cutting off of support from management, but also because they held what appeared to be a genuine concern that a continuation of these alliances, which necessitated a rejection of organized labour, represented a preferable option for the community-at-large.

Opposition to black participation in organized labour not only represented the most attractive option from the personal point-of-view of leaders like Bradby, but also corresponded to a much more widely held mistrust over union promises of equality. Following the UAW's organizational victories at General Motors and Chrysler in 1937, the most vocal critic of organized labour from Detroit's numerous black churches was Reverend Everand Daniel of St. Matthews Episcopal Church. By the mid-1930s, Daniel had overtaken Bradby as the foremost church spokesmen in black Detroit. Whereas Bradby's Baptist congregation was predominantly made up of factory workers and recent migrants, Daniel was reported to have had a more professional congregation. Daniel had arrived in Detroit from the Virgin Islands, via New York University and the Union Theological Seminary. Described as the 'darling of the black elite,' Daniel was a prominent supporter of Ford, which corresponded with his position as an opponent of organized labour.[57] In public pronouncements, Daniel attacked the decision of the

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[56] Ibid.; Despite occasional blips such as this, Bradby remained steadfast in his support for Ford, writing after the Battle of the Overpass in a letter to Charles Sorenson in May 1937 that the company could "count on our group almost one hundred per cent." Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* p. 55. Meier and Rudwick got their information from David L. Lewis's paper, who based his findings on a letter from Bradby to Sorenson subsequently removed from the Ford archives.

[57] Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It,* p. 274; Meier and Rudwick describe how there was an 'overt rivalry' between the two churchmen, with Henry Ford having closer personal ties with fellow Episcopalians like Daniel. Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* p. 10, p. 17.

national branch of the NAACP to invite UAW leader Homer Martin to speak at their conference in July. Martin's remark during his address that he, like Jesus, represented the 'poor and oppressed' drew an angry response from pro-Ford church leaders, including Daniel who mentioned it in his Sunday sermon.[58]

Some weeks later, Daniel turned his attention to the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine editor Roy Wilkins, holding him responsible for influencing the supposed pro-labour agenda of the conference. The following was an excerpt of a sermon given by Daniel at St Matthews:

> I don't think anybody can sit in a swivel chair in New York and work out conditions in Detroit. You can't tell a man whom to employ and whom not to employ. He might close down on you, and then where would you be? I had prayed that I might not have to fight anymore, but I just must fight for some things. Some things I will not stand for. I will not stand for the crucifixion of our boys and girls who are coming up. The doors of opportunity must be kept open to them.[59]

Daniel said some months later that, 'if any people criticize Ford, it should not be blacks. They ought to get up and bless his name'.[60] By placing such emphasis on local employment arrangements and the overriding need for continued and expanded job opportunities, and despite his personal motivations and relationship with Ford, in many ways Daniel's denunciation of unionism reflected the extent to which existing employment concentrations shaped opposition to unionism.

If Daniel and other opponents of labour in the black church accurately articulated part of the concerns of black workers, opponents of labour had much less to offer in the way of practical strategies to address problems associated with union discriminatory practices. Daniel and Bradby had little to offer in the way of constructive solutions, other than a continuation of existing arrangements requiring relying on company management. In similar fashion, the vehement opposition to organized labour

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[58] *Detroit Tribune*, 10 July 1937
[59] *Detroit Tribune*, 21 August 1937.
[60] Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It,* p. 292.

expressed by Ford's black personnel department employee, Donald Marshall, managed to capture part of the problems facing black workers but was completely ill-suited to provide a workable set of solutions through which workers could have their problems in employment satisfactorily resolved. Speaking at fellow Ford supporter Reverend Daniel's St Matthews Church in August 1937, where he was member, Marshall emphasized Ford's employment record at length:

> Lewis promises the bait of high wages and short working hours but Henry Ford beat him to that achievement by a score of years or more [...] The U.A.W. boast of their extensive power and control but let them show me anything to compare with the things Henry Ford has done for us and let them abolish the segregated pay lines and the segregated meeting places for the colored members of One Grand Union and then let them get rid of the Moscow sponsored black and white agitators.[61]

Many others in the black community would have had much sympathy with these sentiments. The critique of the UAW's racial practices, despite the union's denials, had some basis in fact and, perhaps more importantly, reflected a perception among black workers that unions stood to erode their hard-won employment position. Workers had shown throughout the organizational period in Detroit that they were unwilling to adopt a course of action that sided outright with either company management or organized labour, in a context where both were seen to have the potential to advance, or as likely threaten, their employment prospects.

Like opponents of organized labour in the black church, Marshall was better at vocalizing part of workers' concerns than he was at offering solutions that would resolve their problems. As a conduit for Ford's anti-union campaign in the black community, Marshall played a visible role in the discussions on unionism but only by attempting to stifle debate and silence competing opinions. In February 1937 Marshall threatened Reverend William Peck of Bethel A.M.E. for allowing his church to host a conference co-sponsored by the pro-union NNC. After initially rejecting Marshall's criticism, the prospect of his congregants losing their jobs at Ford apparently forced

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[61] *Detroit Tribune,* 28 August 1937.

Peck to acquiesce when a similar conflict arose in January 1938, with a planned speech by Howard University President Mordecai Johnson, a supposed critic of Ford, being cancelled.[62] Similarly, in 1939, Marshall used his personal influence to force the denial of church facilities to the West Side Improvement Association in 1938. Marshall also stopped the Conference of Negro Trade Unionists speaking at a black YMCA branch in 1940. Ministers of churches refused to allow these pro-union groups to meet because of fears of reprisals from Ford, after being warned by Marshall.[63]

Marshall and his colleague in the personnel department, Willis Ward, made much of their influential role as mediators and advocates for black workers at Ford. Following rumours that black workers were being discriminated against at Ford, Ward publicly declared he had received personal assurances from Harry Bennett, the head of Ford's notorious Service Department, stating that Donald Marshall would mediate in any discrimination cases.[64] Black workers at Ford were in need of spokesmen who could tackle the numerous problems they encountered, but aside from attempting to silence criticisms of the company by union supporters, Marshall's only contribution as an opponent of organized labour was to recruit black members for Ford-sponsored anti-union groups such as the Ford Brotherhood and the Loyal Worker's Club.[65] This latter group was formed in an attempt to counteract the UAW's attempts to organize Ford in the second half of 1937, with meetings being held in various churches in the River Rouge district where Marshall spoke. Although it attempted to portray itself as an 'educational society to better the condition of the colored workers of the Ford Motor Company,' its clear purpose was to defeat unionization of Ford employees.[66] As Marshall put it, '[n]o amount of propaganda in this wide world can convince me that the man who gives me an opportunity to earn my living is my enemy and no one who tries to make me believe it can be considered a friend of mine or yours'.[67] Yet as the UAW became a permanent and influential power in Detroit's labour market, the set of choices

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[62] Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* pp. 59-60.
[63] Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It,* pp. 292-293.
[64] *Detroit Tribune*, 19 November 1938.
[65] Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It,* pp. 290-291, based upon *United Automobile Worker,* 25 September, *1937* and *Detroit Tribune*, 6 November, 1937.
[66] *Detroit Tribune*, 23 October 1937.
[67] *Detroit Tribune,* 28 August 1937.

presented to black workers was far more complex than characterized by Marshall. Rather than becoming converted to the cause of interracial unionism and coming to reject the paternalism of Ford, black workers had more difficult decisions to make. Marshall's critique of the UAW spoke to some of these concerns, but like other oppositional leaders in Detroit, these criticisms were not matched by a feasible alternative, practical solution through which workers' multifaceted grievances could be pursued.

As the 1930s progressed it became clear even to opponents of interracial organization that, with the legislative backing of the New Deal, systems of collective bargaining had become a normalized, powerful and unavoidable part of the economic landscape. As a result, other leaders outside of the auto industry sought to offer a black-only alternative form of labour organization to challenge interracial organization in Detroit. Although it did not grow out of job protests or have obvious direct links with nationalist politics and Garveyism, the National Association of American Workers (NAAW), which operated in Detroit between 1939 and 1940, in many ways mirrored the activities of its New York contemporary, the Harlem Labor Union. Founded by black churchman William Lyles, the NAAW first came to prominence in November 1939 during its attempt to organize the predominantly black patronized bars and restaurants on Hastings Street in Detroit.[68] During its short life, the NAAW commented upon the contemporaneous Chrysler strike, giving a sympathetic hearing to black workers who had attempted to break the strike, and attempted to organize black truck drivers and black nurses at Trinity hospital, apparently without success in the latter case.[69] Throughout its career, Lyles and the NAAW sought to organize workers into all black union locals which, in their view, provided a solution to the failure of service sector AFL-affiliated unions to treat black workers on an equitable basis. As Lyles put it, '[t]his is a fight against Negroes having a labor organization of their own and not dominated by whites,' claiming with much justification, '[t]he A.F.L. does not fight for equal rights for its members'. Later that month at his Third Baptist Church, Lyles went on to criticize the firemen's unions within the AFL for operating a colour bar policy. Lyles claimed that

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[68] *Detroit Tribune,* 4 November 1939.
[69] *Detroit Tribune,* 2 December 1939; *Detroit Tribune,* 9 March 1940.

they had most of the bars on Hastings under closed-shop contracts and that an all-black union had been the choice of the workers themselves.[70]

Just as the HLU in New York had mixed principles of nationalism and racial self-help to develop from black job boycotts to advocate black only forms of labour organization, the NAAW also drew upon notions of racial self-help and nationalism.[71] One NAAW activist, Harold Bledsoe, railed against discrimination in the labour movement, arguing that, 'I have been kicked and driven to the conclusion that [the] Negro must first exploit and seize all economic opportunities within the race. I hope we will go in to the field of labor through the front door,' not in the back as in the past.[72] Opponents of interracial unionism in the black church and the orbit of Ford continued to attempt to reject unionism outright, but as the NAAW started to demonstrate, there was a growing need for more flexible strategies that attempted to solve the problems of black workers who were seen to be losing out as organized labour increased in size and strength.

The timing of the formation of the NAAW in 1939 reflected a growing realization that nearly seven years into the New Deal and almost two years after the UAW's seminal victories, new demands were being placed on leadership strategies by workers' experiences in organized labour. In particular, the event which precipitated the formation of the NAAW was the strike at Chrysler in 1939, where a disproportionately high number of black workers had been involved in a failed company-inspired back-to-work movement. Commenting first on the potential of strike breaking to retard black workers' progress by causing racial disturbances, NAAW leader Lyles said:

> No sensible Negro wants a race riot but if someone wants to start a race riot because men want to work and feed their families the question of right and

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[70] *Detroit Tribune,* 4 November 1939; *Detroit Tribune,* 25 November 1939; Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought,* pp. 1-2.

[71] During the 1920s Detroit had been home to a vibrant chapter of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association which, in some respects, complemented the notions of race pride and entrepreneurship which underpinned the prevalent self-help advancement strategies of groups like the Detroit Urban League. Yet during the 1920s these groups came to view Garveyism as 'a threat to the project of constructing a cohesive identity.' Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 129.

[72] *Detroit Tribune,* 25 November 1939.

> wrong takes another turn. If the Negro economic status does not change in the next two years and persecution in industry and labor does not cease, it will take more than a race riot [to stop] the Negroes from work – from getting brea[d] and meat to feed his loved ones... We all have a right to strike but that right ends where the other man's right to work begins.[73]

Lyles captured the frustration felt by black workers in Detroit over the ongoing problems of discrimination in employment, over two years after the UAW-CIO had secured collective bargaining contracts with almost all of the motor industry (albeit with the crucially important exception of Ford). Both the union and company management frequently blamed each other for the ongoing problems in opening up meaningful employment opportunities to black workers; equally, successes in increasing jobs and conditions were claimed by both groups. In regards to the specific situation at Chrysler, Lyles advanced a somewhat ambivalent position that although the NAAW would not advise workers to scab, workers were entitled to join a back-to-work movement.[74] Lyles, like so many other black leaders, placed emphasis on the right to work as the overriding concern which shaped his complex outlook on unionism.

Despite the apparently shared goal of furthering black employment opportunities, the NAAW was fiercely rejected by the many other leaders in Detroit who had come to support the industrial unionism of the UAW-CIO in increasing numbers in the years leading up to the organization of Ford in 1941. One such leader, State Senator Charles Diggs, spoke at a meeting on the subject of the NAAW, declaring that, 'I don't believe this NAAW union is good [...] and I want to tell Mr. Lyles right now that I think it is nothing but a company union'. Lyles, meanwhile, defended his position by arguing, almost certainly disingenuously, that the NAAW had many white members, before going on to explain that 'we intend to continue our fight against discrimination [...] until every union barrier is broken down'.[75] Diggs' accusations of company unionism were mirrored in the response from the white leadership of the local AFL union with whom the NAAW had come into conflict. Morris G. Drapkin, local representative of the AFL affiliated

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[73] *Detroit Tribune,* 2 December 1939.
[74] *Detroit Tribune,* 2 December 1939.
[75] The UAW-CIO organizers Samuel Fanroy, Walter Hardin and Perry Keyes were also present. *Detroit Tribune,* 2 March 1940.

Hotel and Restaurant Employees' Alliance said the NAAW was, 'not a union but only a boss-controlled group holding a yellowdog contract with the owners of various taverns'.[76] White unionist Drapkin also voiced his frustration with the NAAW's attempt to undo AFL efforts, saying:

> We have been fighting for a long number of years to break down racial barriers, and now when we have victory in sight, the colored workers go out and start a union of their own [...] We have spent considerable money trying to organize the colored workers and it would be to their own advantage to join forces with us instead of offering opposition.[77]

Accusations of compliance with management may well have had some justification, for most of the rhetorical and physical energy of the NAAW was expended in criticising rival AFL unions rather than battling company management. Lyles himself said the NAAW's purpose was 'to correct evils in labor,' rather than to fight against employers. [78] As part of this strategy, the NAAW achieved an early success by signing a contract with the East Side Tavern Owners Association, an agreement which the AFL refused to recognize.

Just as the gains of organized labour as a whole in the 1930s had frequently been reliant on the accommodating framework set by New Deal legislation, so too was the future of the NAAW determined by questions over its legal status. A committee from within the black community was set up by the business-oriented Booker T. Washington Trade Association and headed by Detroit NAACP secretary J.J. McClendon. The committee investigated the legitimacy of the NAAW, finding that it was indeed a bona fide organization, a decision met with a chorus of criticism from elements of Detroit's black trade union community.[79] After the NAAW set up pickets around the Cozy Corner 'nitery' after its rival AFL union refused to recognize a contract signed between the NAAW and the owners, Judge DeWitt Merriam ordered the NAAW to change the reading used on their placards, which had charged the bar's owners of being unfair to union

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[76] *Detroit Tribune,* 11 November 1939.
[77] Ibid.
[78] *Detroit Tribune,* 2 December 1939.
[79] Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* p. 79, based on evidence from *Michigan Chronicle,* 10 and 24 February, 1940.

labour. By mid-April 1940, a legal petition had been launched by the East Side Tavern Owners Association and in response to the granting of a temporary injunction against their picketing activities, NAAW activist Harold Bledsoe responded, saying, '[i]t is against the law to damage property, and we agree to that [...] However we have the right to picket any establishment and that is what the NAAW was fighting for'.[80] Yet legal battles such as this, and no doubt the fierce opposition and competition that faced the NAAW from other labour groups, meant its initial high-profile gains proved short-lived. By June 1940, Lyles had resigned as head of the NAAW and the organization disappeared from public view, seemingly disbanded.[81] The NAAW had demonstrated a capacity to accurately diagnose a key problem being felt by black workers in Detroit who, as labour unions gained in power, felt marginalized or excluded entirely. But while the NAAW accurately tapped into an issue of importance to a great many black workers, its method of action – black-only labour organization – proved entirely ill-suited to providing the type of concerted pressure necessary to fully address these problems. The key issue was to do with the motor industry, specifically preserving and expanding the quantity and quality of job opportunities open to black workers. By 1939, the only means through which these issues could be addressed was to pursue a strategy which engaged with and jointly challenged white-led organized labour and management.

During the strike at Ford in April 1941 which led to its first collective bargaining contract between the UAW-CIO, even company management and their supporters in the black community had been forced to accept that some sort of labour organization was inevitable. Yet the endorsement by black opponents of organized labour, as demonstrated by church leaders involved with the Detroit Minsters' Conference, of the UAW-AFL, in line with Fordist company policy, was not intended to function as a real vehicle through which the problems of black workers could be solved. In the months before and the early days of the strike, opposition to the UAW-CIO and support for Ford continued to emanate from church leaders like Robert Bradby and from personnel department employee Donald Marshall. An article in the *Detroit Tribune*, while

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[80] *Detroit Tribune,* 20 April 1940; *Detroit Tribune,* 27 April 1940.
[81] *Detroit Tribune,* 22 June 1940.

acknowledging the existence of some high-profile pro-union ministers, described how 'Most of the ministers, while not expressing verbal or implied opposition to the union, have urged support of the Ford Motor Company'.[82] Ford's most longstanding ally in the black clergy, Robert Bradby, remained a supporter and was quoted as saying at a banquet organized by Ward and Marshall in January 1941 where 300 black leaders were in attendance that, '[i]f Henry Ford hires one colored for every ten whites, I am for him first, last, and always'.[83] Reverend J. R. McClain of the pro-Ford Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance said that many of the organization's clergy had warned their congregants not to 'bite the hand which had fed them'.[84] Marshall, for his part, was accused of being, 'behind a strenuous anti-union campaign, which is being conducted from the pulpits of several large Negro churches in Detroit'. It was reported that in the run up to the strike, Marshall had helped recruit new black workers to defy picket lines and defeat union organization.[85]

Opponents of unionism had been forced to alter partially their stance to endorse the UAW-AFL after it become clear that NLRB elections would be held. The UAW-AFL had its roots in the internal factionalism that beset the UAW after 1938, when Homer Martin's Progressive Caucus split from Wyndham Mortimer and Walter Reuther's larger, and seemingly more radical, Unity Caucus.[86] Between 1938 and 1941, black unionists in the UAW-AFL such as William Nowell and Frank Evans actively criticized the UAW-CIO on several occasions, including during the Chrysler strike in November 1939. They, in turn, were assailed by CIO unionists including Joseph Billups and Paul Kirk.[87] Once some sort of union was guaranteed with the agreement of Ford management to union elections in April 1941, it was to Homer Martin's UAW-AFL, the

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[82] *Detroit Tribune,* 12 April 1941.
[83] Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* p. 85.
[84] *Detroit Tribune,* 12 April 1941.
[85] *PM,* 4 April 1941.
[86] This split, according to Meier and Rudwick, 'only incidentally involved the question of organizing black workers, yet... seriously damaged that effort,' as the dedicated Negro organizing department within the UAW-CIO was dismantled in 1938, with major efforts to recruit black workers only beginning again on a large scale in the second half of 1940. Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* p. 61.
[87] Clipping from *Michigan Chronicle*, 2 December 1939, quoting Frank Evans, affiliated with UAWA-AFL, who criticised 'irresponsible' CIO leaders who he said had 'exploited' black workers in strikes, found in Box 52, CRC Papers, ALUA; On UAW factionalism and implications for organization of black workers see Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* pp. 61-67.

more management friendly and Ford-endorsed grouping, to whom members of the pro-Ford black clergy transferred their support.

Although the switch in position was clearly dictated by the change in company policy, church leaders attempted to appeal to the direct problems of black workers. A front-page statement from the Detroit Ministers' Conference laid out in some detail their reasons for advocating that black workers at Ford support the UAW-AFL. The ministers argued that 'Affiliated with the American Federation of Labor working together we shall organize:

1. Ford workers into a Democratic organization, dedicated to the welfare of both labor and industry.
2. To build an organization dedicated to American principles without any taint of foreign "isms."
3. To secure the settlement of grievances without going on strike if at all possible.
4. To secure wage increases.
5. To cooperate in the establishment of an annual wage.
6. Seniority for all Ford workers.
7. To promote increased cooperation, understanding and good will between employee and employer, for our mutual benefit.
8. To promote safety and sanitation for our own protection.
9. To resist all efforts to create hatred, violence and unnecessary industrial disturbances.
10. To get vacations with pay. [88]

Among those promising to 'fight for the above principles to the best of our ability,' were Reverends T. Timberlake, A. L. Merritt, Robert H. Pittman, Lee T. Clay, S. D. Ross, E. C. Copeland, E. M. Kaigler, L. J. Benson, G. G. Foster, H. E. Owens, C. M. Newton, W. R. Matthews, A. C. Williams, F. B. Reed, and Reverend William Lyles.[89] That Lyles, prime instigator of the NAAW the previous year, was aligned with this pro-Ford grouping highlights the crossover in political principles between 'nationalistic' black only union

[88] *Detroit Tribune,* 26 April 1941.
[89] Ibid.

groupings and advocates of alliances with company management. On the surface, Detroit ministers had begun to accept that many of the issues fought for by organized labour were of importance to black workers. The proposed programme of the UAW-AFL endorsed by the ministers attempted to combine longstanding goals of organized labour such as seniority, improved work safety, wage increases and holiday pay, alongside a rejection of the militant method of the strike.

Opponents of organized labour in Detroit had been forced to adapt to the altered conditions of 1941. Organized labour had become an established and powerful part of the motor industry, which also witnessed close intervention by the federal government as war production increased. This last development was also reflected in the anti-UAW-CIO literature of the Detroit Ministers' Conference who, like their pro-union counterparts, framed the issues at stake in the unionization of Ford in a global perspective. One leaflet issued by the Detroit Minsters' Conference that endorsed the UAW-AFL stated that:

> We believe that the American Federation of Labor is a truly American organization and that it has acted in the best interests of the Negro in the United States of America. Because we know fully well that the American Federation of Labor is solidly behind the national defense program, aid to the allies, and because it is doing everything in its power to aid American workers, we endorse this patriotic organization with all the power at our command. [90]

Leaving aside the highly contentious claim that the AFL had acted in the 'best interests' of black workers in the past, the deployment of this highly patriotic language was reflected a national political discourse emphasizing national unity as part of the national defence programme, and also echoed the rhetorical strategies of Detroit's pro-labour groups. Even during the Ford strike itself, an unsigned leaflet aimed at black workers, possibly produced at the instigation of Donald Marshall, linked patriotism, support for Ford and opposition to the union, with events overseas. Dated 7 March, before the strike at Ford and addressed to 'all law abiding American citizens,' the leaflet read:

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[90] *Detroit Tribune,* 26 April 1941.

> While we are sacrificing every effort and perhaps blood, to aid England, in their fight to crush Hitler, let's not stand by and let one of our own American born citizens who is trying all he can to aid in this fight, be persecuted in America. Is there time now to fight feuds of years gone by? Henry Ford is the next man to Abe Lincoln in helping the Colored Race... And think before you act. Henry Ford has done more for our Race than the Union.[91]

The reasoning deployed here neatly joined the longstanding tactic of emphasizing the personal benevolence of Henry Ford in providing job opportunities for black workers with more recent international developments. Just as pro-union groupings were conflating the fight against 'Fordism' with the fight against 'fascism,' pro-Ford spokesmen also attempted to argue that the fight to defend Ford was comparable with that being waged against Hitler in Europe.

By the time that Ford was finally unionized in June 1941, opponents of organized labour in Detroit's black community who concentrated in the black church had offered a relatively consistent rejection of black participation in the interracial unions of the UAW while, correspondingly, advocating a continuing alliance with company management. As the UAW, like other unions across the country, had built upon its early gains and become jointly responsible for setting the terms of employment alongside management under the auspices of legislatively enforced collective bargaining contracts, opponents attempted to respond by supporting the UAW-AFL and drawing upon patriotic wartime rhetoric to justify this position. Part of the reasoning behind these church leaders' stances was because of their own personal dependence on Ford money and other reciprocal arrangements of support.[92] But in addition to the personal stakes in maintaining friendly terms with Ford, criticisms of organized labour also tapped into aspects of genuine problems and issues facing the wider working community. As was demonstrated both by the numbers of workers who attempted to avoid taking either side in the Ford strike, as well as by those who remained inside the River Rouge plant,

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[91] Undated leaflet, Box 51, CRC Papers, ALUA.

[92] Howe and Widick tend to imply it was *all* about dependency, arguing that 'All but one of the Churches included in the Conference was mortgaged... the average Negro minister is behind in his payments, and consequently fears that pro-union activity would invite foreclosures. Howe and Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther,* p. 218.

many agreed that the necessity of maintaining employment far outweighed the risks that were perceived to be inherent in offering support to the UAW-CIO.

Although no firm figures exist, contemporary observers were probably correct to suggest that most black workers voted for the UAW-AFL rather than the UAW-CIO in the June 1941 union elections, suggesting that opponents of labour in the black church continued to have influence. Yet the victory of the UAW-CIO was clear, and as a result, Ford Motor Company's employment policies underwent a substantial reversal, as paternalistic ties with the black community were ended. All the while, problems of discrimination still confronted black workers at Ford, despite the formation of the particularly high-profile, majority black Local 600 at the River Rouge complex. After 1941, opponents of labour disappeared from direct historical view. Despite their gradual shift to endorse a form of unionism which, in theory, should have also allowed the criticism of unionism to be matched with a means through which to challenge the jointly responsible party of management, the choice on offer did not constitute a credible workable alternative from the point of view of black workers; workers attempting to navigate a complex labour market where varying groups held power to constrain their employment opportunities. As they intransigently opposed organized labour throughout the crucial formative organizational period, oppositional leaders proved unable to offer the truly coordinated leadership that was needed. Although opponents proved willing to criticize organized labour, they proved much less able to address the other problems faced by black workers relating to the role of management and government in shaping employment prospects.

Conclusion to Chapter 3.

Opponents of organized labour have previously been positioned on the losing side of debates in narratives which depict an increasingly close and productive relationship between organized labour and black civil rights in the 1930s.[93] While scholars have, to some extent, been justifiably sceptical of the motivations of oppositional leaders, it has been argued here that opponents' views and actions still need to be part of accounts of the period. This is because, like advocates of unionism, opponents also engaged in attempts to offer solutions and strategies for the dilemmas presented to black workers by the rise of organized labour. The relative failure of oppositional leaders in Detroit and New York to achieve tangible solutions to the issues presented to black workers by the rise of labour help illuminate an important facet of the wider story told by this dissertation. There were immense difficulties inherent in offering the coordinated, multifaceted and sustained protest strategies which the negative impacts associated with the rise of organized labour – particularly the potential exclusion of black workers to existing confined occupations and the operation of interrelated methods of discrimination as a result of joint control of employment by management, union and government – meant yielded best results.

The street-level nationalist leaders who eventually provided a source of opposition to supporters of black participation with organized labour initially displayed a willingness to work with others in the community during the jobs campaigns in Harlem in 1934. The eventual split of these leaders from the mainstream of community leadership was not only the result of their personal desire for increased power, but reflected substantive disagreements over the direction of 1930s protest in general. The programmes adopted first by Hamid's Afro-American Federation of Labor in 1934 and Kemp and Reid's more successful Harlem Labor Union in 1935, constituted an attempt to marry longstanding ideas of race pride, self-help and nationalism (which were themselves being reinvigorated by events overseas in the middle years of the 1930s), with the increased importance being placed on economic issues and jobs within the

[93] Korstad and Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost', 794.

conducive legislative environment for organized labour during the New Deal. The result was the formation of a popular form of opposition to mainstream organized labour which vocally promised to address many of the dissatisfactions felt by black workers. The platform of the HLU proved unable to fully address the problems before it, however, not just because its leaders were only committed to furthering their own standing, as critics charged, but because their programme proved ill-suited to address the wider problems facing black workers regarding unionism in New York. The participation of a weakened HLU on a committee tasked with achieving concessions from organized labour and management during the dispute in New York's bus department did not constitute lasting recognition of the need for coordinated protest strategies. It did, however, show what could be achieved where coalitions of willing leaders - in harness with a large group of black workers in support - engaged with union, city government and management officials as part of an integrated and sustained strategy.

In Detroit, meanwhile, the rise of organized labour and the perception of problems relating to discrimination also led opponents to fiercely reject black unionization. For leaders in parts of the black church, the legacy of pre-existing arrangements played a crucial role in determining these stances, but not just because of financial dependency or a class-bound rejection of unionism. Alongside personal motivations, opponents like Reverends Brady and Daniel were also fired by a genuine concern to advocate what they perceived to be the best course of action for black workers faced with a choice between the unproven and unreliable promises of equality offered by the UAW and what they saw as the tried and tested continuation of alliances with auto company management. Despite the fact that these efforts offered a vision that spoke to part of the concerns facing black workers, the joint opposition of Ford officials like Donald Marshall worked to stifle a necessary debate in Detroit over what strategies and tactics should be adopted by black workers. Although the National Association of American Workers (NAAW) made a more concerted attempt to fuse criticisms of white-led unions with a recognition of the need for some way of organizing these dissatisfied black workers, this attempt to form a separate black only union, like the HLU in Harlem, proved unable to operate effectively on a larger scale and unable to translate criticisms of union's racial policies into meaningful action. Instead, opponents in the black church who continued

to wield influence including during the unionization of Ford in 1941 were unable to put forward realistic and credible solutions.

Part I showed that pre-existing concentrations of black workers and the increased need to engage with the interrelated powers that controlled employment presented routes through which to harness union power to adjust black workers' grievances. These same factors, however, also occasionally served to reinforce discriminatory employment patterns while placing a premium on protest strategies that coordinated efforts and tackled numerous interrelated parties. As a result, new demands were being placed on coordinated and direct political activism. Opponents of organized labour's relative failure in this regard lay not, it has been argued, through an outright ignorance of the dilemmas posed by unions nor in a lack of interest in offering up solutions and strategies to the wider community. Instead, the failure of alternative strategies to participation in interracial organized and of leaders who opposed unionism meant it fell to the range of local supporters of organized labour not only to campaign on behalf of organized labour but to also address its negative impacts. Though the contradictory impact of unionism exemplified in Chapters 1 and 2 was reflected in the diversity of political local opinion, the rise of labour had placed an increased requirement on coordination and unity. The difficulties experiences in this regard, though understandable, help shed light on the ultimately fragile foundations upon which efforts to advance black rights in harness with organized labour were built.

Chapter 4: Beyond the 'Proletarian Turn:' Union Supporters and the Challenge of Coordinated Community Leadership.

This thesis suggests that the careers of black protest leaders who supported organized labour need to be reassessed. This reassessment needs to take place in the context of a more central focus on the contradictory effects of unionization on black working communities. Chapter 4 sets out to recount not just the words of the increasing number of local leaders who supported unionism, but to assess the extent to which these leaders were able to achieve tangible gains that addressed the complex set of problems facing black workers uncovered in Chapters 1 and 2. The uneven distributions of black workers in specific workplaces meant unionism brought with it the potential for new avenues of protest at the same time as it could threaten to reinforce existing confinement. Similarly, the increasing power of unions alongside management and government groups offered new routes to make complaints, but could also lead to sources of discrimination to be obscured and for blame to be shifted. What was needed, it became clear, was for direct leadership on behalf of black workers which could resolve these contradictory tendencies via means of a multifaceted strategy of coordinated protest; ideally one which harnessed the power of large concentrations of unionized black workers and which made protests to the various parties responsible for black employment. This chapter witnesses occasional instances where protests along these lines occurred, for instance during the Bus Strike protests in New York in April 1941 and in the actions of the Citizens Committee for Jobs in War Industry in Detroit in 1942. These sporadic instances of success were all too limited, however. Leaders found it difficult, as in many other eras of black protest, to bridge organizational, personal and ideological gaps to agree on a unified course of action. The failure to coordinate was not new, but the impact of this relative failure was increased. The set of expectations placed upon protest leaders needs to change, therefore, in order for historians to move beyond emphasizing the 'proletarian turn' to pay closer attention to the fragile nature of labour-based civil rights protest.

The increased number and audibility of local leaders who supported the labour movement have been central to narratives which position the 1930s as the foundational

period of a labour-based civil rights movement in the 1940s and early 1950s. Works covering New York and Detroit, as well as other locales in the North and the South, have suggested that those on the radical left, either with direct ties to the Communist Party or as 'fellow travellers,' played important roles in advancing the rights of workers through their own protest efforts, while also serving to redirect the agendas of more traditional civil rights groups. Studies covering Detroit conducted by scholars such as Nelson Lichtenstein and Robert Korstad, Beth Bates and Angela Dillard argue that the new pro-union coalitions of support were built among local leadership in the successful effort to organize Ford in 1941 that provided a base for the subsequent labour-based protests of the war years and beyond. According to Bates, these 'new crowd protest networks' both redirected the nature of protest in Detroit to address the concerns of industrial workers, and also successfully brought about a reorientation of the NAACP's national agenda.[1] In New York, local black leaders' increased support for organized labour has been part of narratives which have stressed the important role played by the radical left; first in Mark Naison's study of the Depression decade which, while careful to draw a distinction between the Communist Party's influence among black professional and working groups, argued the left reached an unprecedented level of influence in the 1930s. Martha Biondi, more recently, emphasized the apparent successes of Popular Front protest coalitions formed towards the end of the Second World War, within which, we are told, the CP became central to rights advances made by black New Yorkers.[2]

The first part of this chapter shows that increased numbers of local leaders in New York did come to offer support for the principles of labour organization. When working together in coalitions that targeted union and management groups in combination, such as during the 1941 Bus Strike protests, pro-union leaders managed to intercede effectively to address the employment problems of black workers. These instances of

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[1] Beth T. Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941', *American Historical Review,* 102 (1997), 340-377; Angela Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 106-109; Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement', *Journal of American History,* 75 (1988), 786-811.

[2] Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, 1984) pp. xvii-xix; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 3-4.

successful coordinated protest were actually in short supply during the organizational period, however. Often local leaders who supported labour – including the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the Negro Labor Committee and some church leaders – found it difficult to work together and develop effective strategies of protest even during the relative highpoint of leftist cooperation during the first Popular Front between 1936 and 1939. That divides and personal antipathies continued to abound on the labour-left of black politics was entirely consistent with conditions both before and after the 1930s. There was much mutual antipathy between Socialist Frank Crosswaith and his Negro Labor Committee and the Communist Party, despite the efforts of committed churchmen like Adam Clayton Powell Jr. to bridge community groups and protest on behalf of black workers. Instances of coordinated protests such as those undertaken to extend jobs in 1934 and 1938 were not fully oriented towards engaging with organized labour as well as management.

The second half of this chapter covering Detroit will examine the careers of groups including the Communist Party, the Detroit National Negro Congress, black trade unionists in the UAW, supportive church leaders, and the protest coalitions formed in efforts to organize Ford and in the early war years. This analysis will take into account frustrations and problems as well as their commitment to unionism, for increased numbers in the ranks of the 'new crowd' did not, necessarily, equate to successful working-class civil rights advances. Black workers were attempting to navigate a labour market controlled by increasingly complicated systems which connected union, management and government groups. As a result, greater importance had been placed on coordinated strategies of protest that applied concerted pressure to each of these jointly responsible parties in an appropriate balance. In similar fashion to New York, but with more direct focus on organized labour and centring on the organizational efforts of the UAW, the number and historical audibility of local pro-union leaders in Detroit noticeably increased in the 1930s. Despite the awareness and willingness of many pro-union groups to tackle the problems of discrimination faced by workers, they remained unable to unite and develop a lasting and coherent strategy which truly addressed the issues being faced by black workers as Detroit's economy converted to war production. When local leaders operated in harness and maintained pressure on

the UAW, company management and state employment agencies via effective coalitions, such as in the Citizens Committee for Jobs in War Industry in 1942, they were at their most effective and began to address the complex interrelated source of workers' frustrations. All too often, however, this survey of activity in the crucial organizational period highlights how often local supports of labour, because of their own problematic relationships and the immensity and complexity of the challenges they faced, failed to work together effectively and were ultimately frustrated in many of their efforts.

The intention of this chapter is neither to denigrate those who supported organized labour, nor to deny the impact of left-wing political ideas or the sincerity of those who attempted to offer leadership to black working communities. On the contrary, both were important features of the black response to organized labour. If historians are to take the role of pro-unionists, and indeed the heterogeneous left in general, seriously, this analysis must be conducted by assessing the success of actions - as well as the words - of these newly assertive would-be political leaders. Studies must attempt to measure the tangible gains achieved in addressing the problems facing black workers in employment.[3] The story that emerges in relation to the key issue of organized labour is one where frustrations and relative failures stand out in contrast to occasional successes in offering coordinated leadership on behalf of working blacks.[4] Recognizing that effective, connected, multifaceted and broad-based protest efforts in areas relating

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[3] Indeed Keith Griffler argues the primary efforts of black radicals were directed at combating racism within the left. Keith Griffler, *What Price Alliance? Black Radicals Confront White Labor, 1918-1938* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995); Eric Arnesen, in the process of discussing the focus on the CP's role in United Packinghouse Workers of America by Horowitz and Halpern, Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe,* Michael Honey's work on Memphis, and in Robert Korstad's work, summarizes as follows: 'Although they have skilfully reconstructed party members' contributions to various crusades for racial justice, revisionists have shied away from addressing the party's penchant for secrecy and duplicity, Soviet control or influence, and its profoundly undemocratic character—matters that are not incidental to the broader story of the party and its agenda or to the hostility it engendered in many quarters.' Arnesen also charges that Biondi, meanwhile, 'is uninterested in critical assessments of the party and takes little notice of the Soviet sources now available. Instead, she offers an unqualified celebration of Communist activists, their supporters, and their efforts in the post-1945 period.' Eric Arnesen, 'Passion and Politics: Race and the Writing of Working-Class History', *Journal of the Historical Society,* 6;3 (2006), 323-356 (pp. 344-345); Another example where CP has been praised for its role in 1930s activism, but without any mention of its activities in the crucial field of labour and employment is, Lashawn Harris, 'Running with the Reds: African American Women and the Communist Party during the Great Depression', *Journal of African American History,* 94 (2009), 21-43.

[4] Although protests were also occasionally conducted in other areas, notably in housing, this chapter focuses on analyzing the extent to which pro-union leaders were able to act in harness and adopt strategies which, although adjusted to fit specific situations, managed to hold all three increasingly interrelated parties to account in their treatment of black workers.

to trade unionism were actually in short supply during the formative period in question does not, therefore, constitute an attempt to deny the importance of these local activists and their impact per se.

Instead, Chapter 4 presents another facet of the wider story told by this dissertation which challenges not the growth in importance of organized labour, but the value-laden terms used by historians to assess its significance on civil rights strategies. The rise of organized labour, and industrial unionism in particular, presented black workers with potential opportunities to protest discriminatory employment conditions at the same time as it posed many problems. Challenges were placed on leadership strategies as organized labour became drawn into complex relationships of joint-responsibility in dictating the extent of black employment opportunity. Local supporters like Frank Crosswaith were aware of the new burdens these developments placed on organized and coordinated protest action. As Crosswaith put it, 'there is little sense or profit in complaining unless we organize to make effective our complaint against discrimination and secure our righteous demands for justice [...] Negroes must learn the power of organized thinking and organized acting in our struggle to win our full citizenship rights in American life'.[5] Though unionism brought with it the potential for the organized activism called for by Crosswaith, it brought interconnected side effects, as demonstrated by the difficulties experienced by pro-union leaders who sought to form coordinated protests. The blame for this failure should not be placed at the door of pro-union leaders, however. Instead, it is the expectations placed by historians on this era of protest that need to change to recognize the fragile foundations of labour-based protest.

[5] *New York Age,* 15 March 1941.

Pro-Union Leadership Groups in New York

No single union dominated New York's economic landscape to the same extent as did the UAW in Detroit, but as the 1930s progressed, the city's diverse trade union locals increased in size, number and power, setting off reactions in local black politics which had profound implications for strategies of advancement. The editorial line of Harlem's two broadsheet newspapers – the *Amsterdam News* and the *New York Age* – exemplified the fact that support for black participation in labour *in principle,* became a mainstream political position as the 1930s progressed. An editorial written in the *Amsterdam News,* for instance, emphasized the potential benefits that could be won by cooperation with the industrial unionism of the CIO, formed in 1935 initially within the AFL:

> The committee is young. Now is the time for Negro labor leaders and Negro workers to start on the ground floor and advance with a movement which will have a profound effect on the future of this country. The hand of fellowship has already been extended. It is up to us to grasp it and create for ourselves our rightful position in the working class of America.[6]

Written just after their editorial staff had won reinstatement after fighting for their own membership of the American Newspaper Guild, the editorial reflected the newspaper's tendency to be sympathetic to organized labour, despite also covering instances of unions' discriminatory practices. Also around the time of the formation of the CIO, the *New York Age,* described with some justification by contemporaries as the more conservative of Harlem's newspapers, offered a reasoned endorsement of black cooperation with industrial unionism:

> Past experience with the A.F. of L. has caused many Negro leaders to be sceptical of the sincerity [...] It seems to us that the movement headed by John L. Lewis is the most forward-looking step taken by labor in this country in the past thirty years and the Negro stands to benefit by joining with him.[7]

Yet the *New York Age* remained wary of the promises of unions and criticized instances where it adjudged labour to have been too militant. In November 1938 an editorial

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[6] *Amsterdam News,* 4 January 1936.
[7] *New York Age,* 12 September 1935.

advised that, having achieved the unionization of large employers like US Steel, General Motors and Chrysler, these gains would best be consolidated by ensuring they were backed up by legislation rather than continued union militancy.[8] Despite their wariness of overly militant activism and their continued political support for the Republican Party, the *New York Age* acknowledged in another piece that black workers could no longer continue in the 'old way,' and should 'now realize that it is to their advantage to join with other workers in the labor movement'.[9] In this fashion, both the *Amsterdam News* and *New York Age* demonstrated that although support for black participation in organized labour, and in the industrial unions of the CIO in particular, represented a mainstream political position among Harlem's politically articulate, there was also a clear awareness of the serious issues that still faced black workers attempting to negotiate the changing labour market of the 1930s.

While the black press reflected the rhetorical support offered for black union participation, it was the leaders of New York's array of black churches who continued to provide the most important source of direct community leadership during the New Deal. As the writers of the Federal Writers' Project observed towards the end of the decade, 'secular interests [had come to] dominate church life under the title of 'institutional work,' and church notice boards became, 'loaded down with announcements of labor mass meetings, notices for those who are on relief, calls for jobs, and a variety of social gatherings and meetings'.[10] Many black church leaders became more directly involved in addressing the economic issues faced by their congregations, first through the provision of relief in the early years of the Depression, and as the decade progressed, through offering leadership in campaigns for jobs which, by necessity, had to engage with questions relating to unionism too.

The most well-known and successful of Harlem's church leaders in the field of labour and economic activism was Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

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[8] *New York Age,* 19 November 1938.
[9] *New York Age,* 18 February 1939; *New York Age,* 24 October 1936.
[10] 'I Too Sing America,' from 'The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History,' ed by Ottley and William J. Weatherby, pp. 289-291, Reel 5, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.

In the 1930s, Powell, who later went on to have a stormy career as a national congressman and became an advocate for black power in the post-war period, attempted to fuse religious faith, relief campaigns, and racial militancy along with support for labour organization. Described by the FWP writers as the 'revolutionist of the Negro pulpit,' Powell was elected to succeed his father as pastor of Abyssinian Baptist in 1937 but had been active in many of the most militant causes in Harlem politics for many years. This activism reportedly caused some to doubt whether Powell would make a suitable successor.[11] Positioning himself at the forefront of community activism meant Powell was often deemed to have held links with the radical left, yet like other local leaders, his relationship to Communists and other leftist labour groups was born more out of common interests in the plight of workers rather than on a doctrinal alignment in political principle. Powell explained how he was happy, on occasion, to cultivate links with members of the radical left, saying that during this 'period of conflict I used everyone I thought might aid us'.[12] Powell also became involved with the electoral efforts of the American Labor Party, a largely unsuccessful attempt on the part of the CP to gain an electoral foothold, campaigning on their behalf in the elections of 1936.[13] To Powell and others concerned with the economic issues of their congregations, cooperation with groups on the left, including unions, could make intellectual and strategic sense.

The most successful instances of churchmen taking a lead in local activism on behalf of workers occurred through their role in coalitions of other groups. Powell, for instance, had played a role in the Don't Buy Where You Can't Work Campaigns of 1934, a movement which was led by John Johnson of Saint Martin's Protestant Episcopal Church and the editor of the *New York Age,* Fred Moore. As Chapter 3 described, the Citizens

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[11] 'The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History,' ed by Ottley and William J. Weatherby, Reel 1, Schomburg Center; *New York Age,* 23 October 1937; Interview of Helen Brown by Martia Goodson, 17 August, 1992, pp. 10-11, Box 1, Folder 1, Abyssinian Baptist Church Oral History Project, Schomburg Center.

[12] Adam Clayton Powell Jr., *Adam by Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell Jr.,* (New York: Dial Press, 1971), p. 67; On Powell's role in coordinating relief in 1930/1931, see Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?'* p. 60; As his biographer Charles Hamilton put it, future congressman Powell's 'career was constantly one of positioning himself on the "militant" wing of the racial protest movement... this was a complex mixture of sincere temperament and astute tactics.' Charles V. Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma* (New York: Athaneum,1991), p. 5.

[13] The American Labor Party claimed support of 5000 organized black workers. *New York Age,* 24 October 1936.

League formed to lobby for increased jobs on 125th Street also initially had the support of nationalist activists including Arthur Reid and Ira Kemp.[14] According to a member of Powell's church, at that time, people 'were in the mood [because...] they couldn't even work in a lot of places on 125th Street like Blumstein's' and in local restaurants.[15] Particularly after the Wagner Act and the formation of the CIO spurred union organization in 1935, church leaders concerned with increasing job opportunities and solving workers' problems also came to advocate participation with organized labour with increasing force.

The intra-racial dispute at the *Amsterdam News* in 1935 moved many church leaders to adopt clearer positions regarding trade unionism. Powell was quick to offer support for the editorial workers, arguing that, '[a]ny cause which is just demands the complete support of all sensible human beings [...] Unionism is the only hope for all, especially Negroes'.[16] Reverend Licorish categorized the actions of the *Amsterdam News* owners as, 'another attempt on the part of Negro capitalists to hinder the progress of their race,' while another supportive church leader, Reverend Byrd, mixed a class-based analysis with a religious conception of justice, arguing that the, 'Negro press is urged to practice what it preaches to the "bosses" of the other race just as much as any other group'.[17] Reverend Bishop of St Phillip's Episcopalian Church went on to state that:

> I believe fundamentally in the cause of workers whenever they come into conflict with employers. I stand unequivocally for their right to organize and to use the reorganized corporate weapon of 'the strike' [...] A minister of the Carpenter's Gospel is either on one side or the other. He cannot honestly be 'on the fence'.[18]

The assertive support offered by this array of church leaders did not constitute an acceptance of the radical left. Rather, it should be viewed as a reflection of the extent to

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[14] Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?'*, p. 120.
[15] Interview of Helen Brown by Martia Goodson, 17 August 1992, p. 17, Box 1, Folder 1, Abyssinian Baptist Church Oral History Project.
[16] *New York Age*, November 23 1935.
[17] Both quotes from *New York Age*, 23 November 1935; Writing to John P. Davis of the NNC in June 1937, Licorish confirmed his belief that the church needed to take a lead in economic matters, arguing that '[t]he most paramount topic that confronts all American life is that of Labor and the adequate adjustment of wages.' Letter from Rev David N. Licorish to John P. Davis, 18 June 1937, NNC Papers, Part 1, Reel 10, Schomburg Center.
[18] *New York Age*, 23 November 1935.

which economic issues in general, and questions surrounding union organization in particular, had become of importance to workers and those who sought to offer them leadership.

At other times, Powell Jr. took a lead in encouraging pickets to be formed in protest of job dismissals. One of his congregation recollected that when an elevator man was dismissed, Powell launched a protest outside in which he called others in the community to support a stand to reinstate the worker.[19] In addition to a growing convergence in interest between church leaders and the left, the practical methods of labour – notably the picket – was another area where community leaders found common interest. Even the most militant and high profile church leaders like Powell found it difficult, however, to address fully the complex problems being faced by black New Yorkers regarding labour. This was demonstrated over the course of the second large-scale jobs campaign of the decade, conducted by the Coordinating Committee of Greater New York in 1938. This Committee, led by Powell, sought to challenge public utilities companies, many of whose customers were black, to employ on a more racially equitable basis. The tactics employed in this campaign included getting several hundred customers in Harlem to pay their bills in small change, holding mass meetings where Powell spoke to the assembled crowds, as well as conducting personal negotiations with the utility companies.[20] According to Helen Brown, a participant in these protests, Powell exercised considerable dramatic flair, entering the offices of the electricity company at the appropriate 'psychological moment,' declaring that 'It's money isn't it?' before walking out.[21]

The Coordinating Committee achieved successes in opening up some employment opportunities, partly as a result of Powell's appropriation of the techniques of labour organization, with the Federal Writers' Project describing his statements during the

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[19] Interview of Helen Brown by Martia Goodson, 17 August, 1992 p. 30, Box 1, Folder 1, Abyssinian Baptist Church Oral History Project.
[20] 'I Too Sing America,' from 'The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History,' Ottley and Weatherby, eds., pp. 288-289.
[21] Interview of Helen Brown by Martia Goodson, 17 August, 1992 p. 30, Box 1, Folder 1, Abyssinian Baptist Church Oral History Project.

campaign as being 'more in keeping with the militant spirit of a labor leader,' than a church leader.[22] The increasing importance of unionism went beyond tactics and spirit, however, for the agreement signed also included an agreement that black workers in unionized concerns would also be bound by collective bargaining contracts. Black journalist Floyd Calvin spoke positively of this development, saying that even though white labour had won the right to bargain collectively, 'Negroes could not have benefitted by the right already won had they not acted as a unit [...] It shows that if Negroes organize and stand their ground, they can get what they go after – get some things, of social importance, which white labor would not necessarily be interested in seeing Negroes have'.[23] Some provisions in the Coordinating Committee's agreements relating to unionism proved controversial, however. The *New York Age* was glad that the Committee had been able to reach an agreement with merchants on 125th Street in Harlem and was anxious that 'street speakers [...] withhold their judgement for a while'.[24] Earl Miller, president of the Consolidated Tenants League, was glad that more stores had opened up employment to black Harlemites, but disagreed with arrangements where union membership was a condition of employment. Miller said it was only after workers had been employed that unions should begin organization.[25] This desire ran counter to the trend that necessitated that job campaigns would also have to engage with labour if they were to succeed in extending employment opportunities.

It was not without significance, therefore, that despite the apparent success of the Committee in both achieving work and equal membership for black workers in union contracts, Harlem's most influential labour leader remained separate from the campaign. Frank Crosswaith deemed Powell and the Committee's tactics to expand job opportunities unnecessarily antagonistic towards unionized public utilities companies and hence counterproductive.[26] As organized labour became a powerful force to be reckoned with, it became crucial that local black leaders had the ability to engage with

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[22] FWP , Chapter XIX, 'I Too Sing America,' from 'The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History,' ed by Ottley and William J. Weatherby, 1967 NYPL edition, NY. Reel 1.
[23] *New York Age,* 10 September 1938.
[24] *New York Age,* 20 August 1938.
[25] *New York Age,* 20 August 1938.
[26] Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?',* p. 133.

and, where necessary, challenge white labour leaders to treat black workers on an equitable basis. In this regard, by far the best placed individual and organization was Frank Crosswaith and his Negro Labor Committee (NLC). Crosswaith, a longstanding member of the Socialist Party who had advocated the joint causes of socialism and trade unionism in Harlem since the 1920s, enjoyed contacts with a wide-range of labour groups in the New York area. Crosswaith was himself a member and organizer for the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). Although Crosswaith and his organization, renamed the Negro Labor Committee from the Harlem Labor Committee in 1935, promised to address the many problematic issues for blacks that attended the rise to power of organized labour, a variety of personal, political and programmatic factors meant that the NLC failed to take a truly decisive lead in adopting a protest agenda geared to the concerns of black New Yorkers.[27]

That the NLC held potential to become a powerful advocate on behalf of black workers was demonstrated by both its stated platform, which showed a strong grasp of the importance of economic issues and the frequently problematic role played by unions, and by some instances where it provided useful support to black workers engaged in labour disputes. Upon the opening of the NLC's new headquarters in December 1935, the Harlem Labor Center, Crosswaith said in a speech that its opening was tied to the 'increasing clarity' with which black workers' problems were being viewed in the community. According to Crosswaith, workers were coming to learn:

1. That the so-called Negro problem is basically economic
2. That to meet the problem effectively economic organized action is essential
3. And that because of the widespread prevalence in America of the virus of race prejudice it is necessary to organize an agency to combat the evil within and without the labor movement[28]

Such a diagnosis and statement of intent augured well for the NLC's attempts to act as an advocate for black workers in the labour movement, demonstrating Crosswaith's

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[27] According to Claude McKay, it was only after the formation of the NLC in 1935 that Crosswaith started active organizational work in Harlem. McKay quoted in Philip S. Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II I* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 339.
[28] Quote from Frank Crosswaith's radio speech, 'Harlem Labor Center,' by Charles Franklin, Reel 3, NLC Papers.

realization that despite his personal belief in the benefits to black workers that would follow unionization, organized labour needed to be challenged to treat its members on an equal basis.

Crosswaith's advocacy of black union participation did not preclude his organization from attacking the discriminatory practices of unions, in similar fashion to black members who became early leaders in the UAW in Detroit. Yet though the NLC's agenda did, in theory, involve a challenge to unions over racial equality, its biggest successes did not involve challenging discriminatory union policies. Often with Crosswaith personally in the lead, the NLC helped facilitate the organization of several thousand mainly female black workers in the ILGWU, while the Building Service Employees Union (BSEU) was a particular source of pride to the organization, with a reported 17,000 workers having been organized, in part through cooperation with the NLC.[29] In the main, the organizational reports of the NLC were full of individual successes in terms of increasing black union membership, containing no direct examples where unions were successfully challenged to amend discriminatory practices.

In a context where many locals of unions in New York City had excluded black workers altogether, the acceptance of black workers as union members could be viewed as a success for the NLC. The NLC certainly saw unionization as a cause for celebration and triumph. In its fifth anniversary celebration, Crosswaith celebrated 'Five Years of the Most Constructive Work Among Negroes Since Emancipation,' claiming that:

> In addition to increasing the trade union population of Harlem to over 70,000 with all that means in improved wages and working conditions, and the establishment of the Harlem Labor Center as "Labor's Home in Harlem," we have enabled many Negro and white workers, through education and association, to appreciate their common problem and to cooperate effectively for their common good. Within the folds of organized labor many Negro workers occupy with

[29] Minutes of Meeting 16 April 1935, Reel 1, NLC Papers. The minutes also detailed the NLC's provision of 32 pickets for the Chain Store Executives and Employees Association's strike for union recognition at James Butler Stores in Harlem, and contains leaflets distributed on behalf of the Taxi Chauffeurs' Union during their strike for recognition at Marshall's Garage.

> credit responsible posts and are exercising a healthy influence upon labor's life and outlook.[30]

The NLC had achieved some success in bringing black workers into organized labour, and it also provided support for these unionized workers who, in the course of seeking to redress the numerous grievances, occasionally became embroiled in a variety of labour disputes. For example, the NLC joined picket lines sets up by the Shoe Repairers of Greater New York and worked with several hundred black union members of Local 24 of the International Cloth Hat Cap and Millinery Workers Union in their successful efforts to get rid of an 'especially vicious sweat shop,' in the industry. Support was offered for the strike of the Grocery Chain Store Executive and Employees Association, affiliated to the AFL, with the NLC reporting that in a strike at James Butler Store, '[i]n behalf of the Union we have thrown as many as 30 Negro men and women on the picket line at one time with excellent results'.[31] Committed to supporting established unions in Harlem, the majority of whom were affiliated to the AFL, the NLC helped Local 721 of the Retail Hat and Furnishing Salesman's Union fight the attempt by employers to replace white union employees with non-unionized black workers. The NLC saw a clear need to help organize these black workers, but in other instances in 1935, encountered violent recriminations, as in the case where having organized pickets on behalf of the Bakery and Confectionary Workers' Union at four newly opened bakers refusing to sign union contracts, pickets were assaulted after '[r]acial feelings developed which made it impossible to continue activity without proper protection'.[32]

Despite the NLC's high opinion of their own successes, which have been echoed in some secondary accounts, many successes were of a limited or even questionable nature when compared to the scale and size of the problems being faced by the working community.[33] Crosswaith's commitment was not to working-class activism in general but to what was referred to as 'legitimate trade unionism,' with organizations affiliated to the AFL and later, the CIO. The belief that benefits would be brought to black

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[30] 'Five Years of the Most Constructive Work Among Negro Since Emancipation,' Reel 4, NLC Papers.
[31] 'Report of the Harlem Labor Committee,' December 1934 to March 1935., Reel 1, NLC Papers.
[32] 'Report of the Harlem Labor Committee,' December 1934 to March 1935., Reel 1, NLC Papers.
[33] John C. Walter, 'Frank R. Crosswaith and Labor Unionization in Harlem, 1939–45', *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History,* 7 (1983), 47-58.

workers through membership of mainstream organized labour meant that a preferred strategy was to 'teach' black workers about the benefits of unionism, rather than tackling unions and striking at a frequent root cause of discrimination. Little evidence exists of the NLC delivering on its promise to 'assist in amicable adjudicating the grievances of organized Negro workers'. Instead, the NLC promised to 'use its influence to weed out of the ranks of labor, racial and other prejudices that are harmful to the best interest of the working class [by using...] the civilized weapons of education, fraternization, persuasion and organization'.[34] Many of Crosswaith's dealings with union leaders emphasised the need to educate black workers, rather than developing methods through which to challenge unions to reform their discriminatory practices. In a letter to Luigi Antonio, manager of Local 89 of the ILGWU, Crosswaith wrote that:

> the Negro has developed a suspicion and distrust of persons and institutions not definitely Negroid. Just as white workers bring into the labor movement the accumulated prejudices they acquired at home, into school etc., the Negro worker brings into the labor movement his accumulated suspicions and so forth. In many instances these suspicions are unfounded.[35]

In similar fashion, a circular letter from the NLC to the leadership of the ILGWU seeking financial support argued that:

> if we did not have this Center for the members of [the] I.L.G.W.U. to come when they feel aggrieved, they would go to the opposition group, Father Divine and various other anti-labor factions which are active in Harlem. There are times when our people feel they are being discriminated against even in our International, and it is only when they come to the office that we are able to convince them of their error and guide them on the path of being better union members.[36]

The strength of the NLC's commitment to increasing membership of 'legitimate unions', as well as the close personal ties between Crosswaith and white labour leaders, meant

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[34] Undated, 'Rules Governing the Negro Labor Committee and the Negro Labor Assembly,' Reel 1, NLC Papers.
[35] Undated letter from Frank Crosswaith to Luigi Antonio, Reel 1, NLC Papers.
[36] Letter from NLC to Norman Donawa, Maxine Dandridge, Lyra Sixto, Anna Belle Curry, Edith Ransom ; Letter from Winifred Gittens to General Executive Board of ILGWU, San Francisco, 15 May 1936, Reel 1, NLC Papers.

the NLC did not visibly become involved in activism which challenged unions over racial matters.

The NLC's commitment to supporting mainstream unions meant it was unwilling to work alongside competing political voices who criticized these groups. In particular, the NLC, as evidenced by the frequency with which the issue was mentioned in their minutes, organizational reports and written records, devoted an incredibly large amount of its time to combating and attempting to discredit the work of the HLU. Many of the NLC's criticisms of the HLU were either justified or deeply understandable. Indicating the amount of energy devoted to this task, the NLC's annual report of 1938 detailed how:

> many conferences were held during the year and plans formulated to combat this ill-begotten organization. Some of these plans have not yet been put into operation because of the unwillingness of some Unions to act when the activities of the Harlem Labor Union, Inc., were not directed against their particular Union [...] Efforts are still being made to stir the city officials and especially the District Attorney's office into action against this dangerous organization. The Committee has successfully opposed during the year the granting of State Charters of Incorporation to many groups seeking to establish bogus labor unions in Harlem.[37]

One of the activities designed to stop the HLU was to try to organize a general strike. With the apparent support of some allies in the unions of the AFL and CIO, Crosswaith accused Arthur Reid of the HLU of defying a union agreement signed between the Retail Drygoods Clerks Union and employers which had stipulated a total of 50% black employees and other conditions of employment. Crosswaith accused Reid of seeking to override this agreement and to place his own members in employment. Crosswaith went on to suggest that a general strike should be called in protest at the HLU's actions and he continued to personally write to LaGuardia and representatives at the State

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[37] 'Report of Activities of the Negro Labor Committee January 1st to December 31st, 1938, Reel 2, NLC Papers.

Labor Relations Board in order to have the HLU's charter revoked.[38] The NLC was unable, if not unwilling, to address the many problems of union discrimination which had led the HLU to achieve popular support if not outright success.

Even more damaging to the goal of New York leaders cooperating in order to address black workers' problematic experiences in the labour movement was the disunity and fragmentation among those on the left. Exemplifying the limited and patchy successes of coalitions on the left, when measured by the successes their efforts brought to black workers in labour, was the career of the National Negro Congress (NNC) in New York. Many local leaders from Harlem and other parts of New York played a role in the first NNC, held in Chicago in February 1936, and a New York branch of the NNC was set up. In relation to labour matters, however, the NNC was a nigh-on invisible force throughout the first Popular Front era between 1936 and 1939 when it achieved its peak of influence. Part of the reason for this relative failure of the NNC to coordinate protest between white unions, the left, and black workers in New York, was due to the failure to form a productive relationship with Frank Crosswaith and the NLC who continued to be the dominant leaders in labour issues.

Crosswaith had both practical and political reasons for his reluctance to cooperate with the NNC. Before the NNC's second national meeting, the NLC resolved, by a margin of four to two, that it 'should not endorse or send delegates to the National Negro Congress as it conflicts with the established policy of the Committee which is not to endorse any organization other than labor organizations which have the endorsement of affiliate unions'.[39] The NNC's National Secretary John P. Davis had tried hard to solicit the support of Crosswaith, saying he wanted 'to share your experience with the Harlem Labor Committee and in the trade union field more generally [in order to make...] definite contributions to the genuine struggle we are making in aid of Negro labor'.[40]

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[38] *New York Age,* 3 September 1938; *New York Age,* 24 September 1938; Arthur Reid did on at least one occasion write to Crosswaith asking for his assistance in placing black union members in work. Letter from Arthur Reed to Frank Crosswaith, 10 July 1938, Reel 4, NLC Papers.
[39] Minutes of the NLC, 6 October 1937, Reel 1, NLC Papers.
[40] Letter from John P. Davis to Frank Crosswaith, 8 June 1936, Part 1, Reel 4, NNC Papers, Schomburg Center,

Two years later, in another exchange, Crosswaith was generally supportive of the NNC's efforts, but warned that 'the Congress must be eternally on guard against anything that would justify the charge of splitting the ranks of labor by advocating and promoting so called independent unions'.[41] Underpinning Crosswaith's wariness of allying with the NNC was his dislike of groups that operated outside of the official and established unions; this included nationalist groups like the HLU, and also related to an antipathy towards the Communist Party's influence.

The result was frequent clashes and competition between the NLC and the Communist Party, who were a driving force of the NNC in New York. Writing in the *Daily Worker* in February 1936 before the NNC's first meeting, black Communist James Ford, challenged Crosswaith and the Socialist Party to make clear their stance regarding the NNC. Ford quoted Crosswaith, almost certainty accurately, as having said that, 'I have been forced to advise a number of trade unions not to participate in the Negro Congress movement, not that I am against the Congress in principle'. Crosswaith worried that there would not be adequate representation of unions at the conference, but James Ford countered by arguing that the NNC movement was a 'real menace for fence-sitters and radical wisecrackers,' and arguing that the 'masses are demanding unity and action,' before challenging the Socialist Party rhetorically by asking, '[a]re you for the organization of Negroes into trade unions?!'[42] This early spat on the eve of the NNC's first meeting characterized the thorny relationship of the NLC with the NNC and Communist Party which endured throughout the first Popular Front period.

Some subsequent attempts were made by the Communist Party to work with the NLC. In a meeting between Crosswaith and Communist Party members Ben Davis, Abner Berry and Manning Johnson, Crosswaith reportedly, 'pointed out to the delegation that he would be very pleased to have the cooperation of the progressive trade unions in helping to build up a more strong Committee where they can bring their problems and intelligently discuss them'. But Crosswaith also stressed that 'the Committee should not

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[41] Letter from Frank Crosswaith to John P. Davis, 11 April 1938, Reel 12, NNC Papers.
[42] *Daily Worker*, 7 February 1936.

in any way play with politics so as to prevent it from giving the impression of being a political organization which might in the future prove disadvantageous to said committee'. Ben Davis finished off by expressing his 'belief that because of the way in which the Socialists and the Communists have cooperated together in the past that they should be able to meet and plan jointly and intelligently for the solution of problems which will confront both of them in the labor fight,' but Crosswaith and the NLC remained wary of Communist influence and motives. The NLC regarded Communists' increased interest in trade union work in the mid 1930s with scepticism.[43]

The Communist Party never managed to develop an effective relationship with the most influential group in the area of black trade unionism, despite a comparative increase in its trade union activity. In certain industries and areas, Party members provided support and leadership for black workers in the area of organized labour. Through its endorsement of the NNC in particular, the Party reported that it had worked with the Teachers' Union, the Laundry Workers International Union, Local 280, (AFL), and the Association of Workers in Public Relief.[44] The Communist Party made some attempts to engage with established union organizations as part of an international strategy to form a broad leftist front. An article in the *Daily Worker* which had emphasized its organizational work in the black community concluded that, 'Communists are realists eager to reach the masses as they are – and not wait until they are 100 per cent class-conscious'.[45] Yet despite some of their own positive appraisals, the Communist Party itself noted in 1940 that their impact during the first four years of the NNC and Popular Front activity had been limited. A memo written within the NNC laid the blame for the relative lack of effectiveness at the door of opponents in the Socialist Party and the NLC. William Gaulden and John P. Davis wrote that the NNC had achieved great success in steel, promoted its role and success of NNC's labour committee. They praised the NNC's record in steel, packing, auto, marine, and hotel industries for playing a role in winning strike and 'stabilising' black union membership. In New York, however, they had to concede that efforts had been limited, because:

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[43] Minutes of Meeting, 29 January 1937, Reel 1, NLC Papers.
[44] *Daily Worker*, 3 February 1936; *Daily Worker*, 7 February 1936.
[45] *Daily Worker*, 11 February 1936.

> under the presidency of A. Philip Randolph our efforts to accomplish [a union committee] were thwarted, inasmuch as his close friend, Frank Crosswaith, had already developed a similar idea which had won the support of a small section of the labor movement [...] Trade union organization among Negro workers in the city of New York lags appreciably and has lagged [...] during the period when tens of thousands of Negro workers were being brought into unions by our labor committees in Chicago, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit.[46]

The failure of New York's leftist political groupings to effectively collaborate in the pursuit of black workers' rights in the field of labour cannot, however, be laid solely at the door of the NLC, for more fundamental problems were at play.

The reasons for the relative failure of the Communist Party, despite their stated commitment to fight for equality for blacks in organized labour and their occasional successes in this regard, related to the internal political dynamics of Party policy as well as the wider political sensibilities of New York's black working communities. Both of these factors became apparent in the reaction of the black labour community to the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 and the subsequent fracturing of the Popular Front and groups like the NNC. Even though relations had been strained in the preceding years, after 1939 Frank Crosswaith and the NLC, in similar fashion to fellow Socialist Party member and former President of the NNC, A. Philip Randolph, became even firmer in their attacks on the Communist Party. In a newspaper article written in October 1939, Crosswaith noted that it had been a 'constant source of disturbed feeling to note the weekly attempts of the Communist movement to proselyte among our people,' but was encouraged to see that 'since Stalin and Hitler affected a "united front" we notice a decided change in the tenor and tempo of Negro journalists and others who heretofore were obviously under Communist influence. This is indeed a healthy sign'.[47] A similar view was expressed by Randolph when explaining his reasons for resigning the presidency of the NNC, where he explained he was 'convinced also that until the stigma of the Communist Front is wiped from the Congress, it will never rally the masses of the

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[46] Undated memo from William Gaulden and John P. Davis to Abram Flaxer, Reel 20, NNC Papers.
[47] *New York Age,* 14 October 1939.

Negro people'.[48] Yet all the while the Communist Party and other parts of the trade union left were engaged in these internecine battles after 1939, the problems facing black workers in the labour market were becoming even more urgent.

In the crucial period between 1939 and 1941, when the US economy was undergoing a series of related transformations as government intervention massively increased during the conversion to wartime production. In this period, organized labour and systems of collective bargaining became even more established and powerful forces, but New York's black workers found their hopes and issues being addressed, perhaps ironically, less and less by leftist radicals. That is not to suggest the labour activists like Crosswaith were ignorant of the changes of the late 1930s, nor entirely powerless to act on behalf of black workers. On the contrary, Crosswaith displayed a sure grasp of the transformative impacts which international events were having on the black workforce. In 1941, for instance, Crosswaith acknowledged the importance of increasing job opportunities, but said he would, 'like to see an organized campaign for jobs for Negroes throughout Greater New York but do not feel that such a campaign will get far at this time under auspices of any left-wing group [...] we should realize that this is an economic problem and that it cannot be solved by political pressure groups'.[49] Crosswaith's participation in the MOWM was limited, therefore, in part because he remained so staunchly committed to trade unionism and socialism.

When New York's MOWM committee formed in May 1941, its leaders were listed as Walter White, Reverend Imes, Lester Granger of the Urban League, Layla Lane of the American Federation of Teachers, Richard Parrish of the Federation of Colored College Students, Henry K. Craft of the Harlem YMCA and Frank Crosswaith. This committee seemed, like the MOWM at a national level, to represent the final successful collaboration of various black protest groups to work towards improving employment opportunities.[50] Yet Crosswaith's role in New York's March on Washington Movement was only partial. This was partly the result of Crosswaith's unwillingness to jettison

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[48] *New York Age,* 18 May 1940.
[49] *New York Age,* 11 January 1941.
[50] *New York Age,* 24 May 1941

principles of interracial cooperation within 'legitimate' trade unionism in favour of an all-black protest strategy. But it also suggested that just as black nationalists could only offer partial solutions to the multifaceted problems of black workers, so too did those on the left, perhaps more surprisingly, find that their commitment to principles of union membership and interracial equality addressed only part of a much wider and tangled set of problems.

It is finally worth briefly returning to the most visible success of coordinated protest among the labour-left in New York in the organizational period: the Bus Strike protests of April 1941. This event highlighted that gains could be made by coalitions of willing leaders, yet it also demonstrated the unique demands placed upon leaders to cooperate and engage with a wide variety of parties to achieve demonstrable progress. Although Communist Party members occupied leading positions in the union concerned, the Transport Workers Union (TWU), the Party generally did not put sustained pressure on the TWU to tackle the many instances of discriminatory practices, from hiring to upgrading, which were obstructing black progress. Instead, the Party accepted the TWU's defence that it was doing as much as was reasonable in the face of opposition from white rank and file members.[51] Thus it was left to non-Communist leaders from the black community to take the lead in efforts to extend black employment in the city's public transportation system. A committee was formed, led by Adam Clayton Powell Jr., which included Hope Stevens of the NNC and Roger Straughn of the HLU, despite the fact this latter nationalist group soon split from the coalition once an agreement was reached. Having launched and managed a successful boycott of city transportation, the committee managed to negotiate effectively with both the TWU and city officials, despite the fact that the TWU had distributed leaflets during the strike attempting to claim they were neutral in the dispute and had little power to control hiring practices. This erroneous claim was successfully surmounted by the successful negotiations conducted by the protest committee. Eventually the TWU and city transport officials

[51] Joshua B. Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966,* [second edition] (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), pp. 154-155.

agreed to place 70 black workers in maintenance and 100 as drivers.[52] As Greenberg rightly pointed out, '[o]nly with a strong black voice and the cooperation of management and union leadership did private industry change its practices'.[53] The preceding careers of interested parties on the pro-union black left highlighted the tremendous difficulties encountered in providing this strong, unified, consistent and powerful black voice.

New York, for its part, also witnessed a large increase in governmental economic control in the war years, as both city, state and federal authorities came to direct the war effort. Many thousands of complaints about employment discrimination from black New Yorkers poured into the various agencies concerned with equality in employment after 1941. Just as in the late 1930s, these complaints told of situations where management, unions, and government held difficult to define, but related, measures of responsibility. As a result of the growing federal presence in both cities, Detroit produced nearly 20% of complaints sent to the FEPC before July 1943, while New York produced nearly 20% in the period between July 1943 and December 1944.[54] This upsurge of complaints from black workers regarding discrimination was, in itself, evidence of an increased concern within certain branches of government for issues that had been concerning black workers for many years. Yet as elsewhere, effecting solutions to black New Yorkers' multidirectional sources of concern proved incredibly difficult. Unlike its federal counterpart, New York moved earlier to create mechanisms for adjusting instances of employment discrimination, after Governor Lehman's established the New York State War Council Committee on Discrimination in Employment (CDE) and signed an anti-discrimination law, decisions made at the instigation of both Harlem assemblymen and some CIO representatives. Yet these arrangements, like their federal counterparts, had weak powers of enforcement. The CDE focused most of its energy on attempts to educate employers on their responsibility to hire on non-discriminatory basis. The CDE took on 304 cases in 1942 and 435 in 1943, but was replaced by the Temporary Commission Against Discrimination in 1944.

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[52] The contract was signed by John Ritchie and John McCarthy for company, Michael Quill and Austin Hogan for the TWU, and Arnold Johnson, Roger Straughn, Dr Cyril Ollivierre, Powell Jr., and Hope Stevens, *New York Age,* 26 April 1941; Freeman, *In Transit,* pp. 255-256.
[53] Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?',* p. 205.
[54] Kryder, *Divided Arsenal,* pp. 113-115, p. 120.

Eventually the efforts undertaken by concerned parties, which included Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP and CIO unionists like Michael Quill of the TWU who had became a firmer supporter of equal employment after his earlier reticence, met with support among New York State's liberal legislature and the Ives-Quinn Bill which legislated against discrimination in employment, was passed in 1945.[55]

The passage of the Ives-Quinn Bill, and the fight for FEP legislation more generally, raised many of the same questions that had been first aroused by the rise of organized labour in the 1930s. Protest efforts became channelled into the quest for government action on fair employment during the Second World War. The course of FEP in New York, and the fierce opposition it provoked, also had a twisted and tortuous career like the FEPC nationally. The apparent unity of groups, including race advancement organizations, the far left, and trades unions, in the battle for Ives-Quinn masked significant underlying divisions which continued to hamper the effectiveness of protest coalitions, in much the same fashion as groups only cooperated on an occasional basis over jobs protest during the 1930s.[56] Though often not because of a lack of willingness or commitment, local black leaders in New York struggled throughout the war years to coordinate their activities to achieve more meaningful concessions from the various interrelated powers who held control over black employment prospects.

Although many high profile demonstrations were held, often featuring representatives from the black labour community and the left, the problems of cooperation and coordination that marked the response of supporters of labour in the 1930s continued into the war years. These divisions were not visibly overcome by a resurgence of the radical left in the war years, despite some attempts to argue to the contrary by Martha Biondi.[57] It was certainly true that activists on the radical left often played high profile roles in various protest efforts, including the formation of Negro Labor Victory Committee and protests to desegregate the workforce at Sperry Gyroscope on Long

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[55] Anthony S. Chen, '"The Hitlerian Rule of Quotas": Racial Conservatism and the Politics of Fair Employment Legislation in New York State, 1941-1945', *Journal of American History,* 92 (2006), 1238-1264 (pp. 1242-1262).

[56] Biondi, *To Stand and Fight,* p. 20.

[57] Biondi argues that a strengthened Popular Front was reconstituted in the postwar period, in part because, '[i]n the 1940s, the increase in Black unionization and urbanization gave the Black left a larger base.' Biondi, *To Stand and Fight,* p. 6.

Island. The efforts of the 'Communist-led' United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America have also been praised for their efforts to combat discriminatory practices.[58] But identifying the presence of Communist Party members and trade unionists in wartime protests, just as during the 1930s, was not, in and of itself, evidence of a successful period of unified and productive working-class led protest. As black union membership continued to rise as bargaining contracts continued to operate as a condition of work, protest efforts on their behalf still needed to operate on a wide range of fronts. The continuing antagonism between the left-leaning activists listed above and opponents of the Communist Party, notably Frank Crosswaith, A. Philip Randolph and Walter White, stood as a clear reminder that providing a coordinated program of action on behalf of black workers continued to be fraught with difficulty.[59] With this in mind, the potential of a left-labour-liberal coalition did not unravel in the post-war period, as is frequently claimed by Biondi and other civil rights unionism advocates, but never really got off the ground beyond the highpoint of coordinated protests undertaken in 1941. In November 1941, for instance, a Citywide Citizens' Committee was formed in Harlem, which featured 250 attendees including Adam Clayton Powell Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Lester Granger and white representatives from the Jewish and Catholic communities who met to discuss the common goals of increasing job opportunities and resolve inter-community tensions, managing to lobby for increased jobs to be opened to blacks in New York's telephone departments.[60] But coalitions of this sort, though having the potential to unify New York's diverse black and white leadership groups, continued to struggle to maintain their unity and protest on a broad range of fronts.

In many ways, the wartime Citizens' Committee, aside from its white religious representatives, closely resembled the coalitions formed during the MOWM earlier in 1941. The New York MOWM, as in Detroit, embodied both the potential and the wider problems faced by leadership groups seeking to provide an effective program to

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[58] Biondi, *To Stand and Fight,* pp. 7-9.
[59] Biondi says in postwar years: 'A pro-union attitude among Black community and civil rights leadership that took hold in the 1930s solidified in this period.' Biondi, *To Stand and Fight,* p. 26.; Joshua B. Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966* [Second Edition], (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), p. 256.
[60]'Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?',* pp. 205-207.

address workers' issues. Initially the MOWM seemed to effectively galvanize local opinion and translate this energy to directly target the Federal Government in a direct way that achieved the tangible concession of Executive Order 8802. Randolph, alongside other organizers, spread word of the planned march in Harlem, going into a range of taverns, beauty parlours and barber shops, and a reported 15,000 promotional buttons were sold. Towards its end in 1942, the MOWM organized a mass rally in Madison Square Gardens in a protest which, after the USA's entry into the war, drew upon the ideas associated with the 'Double V for Victory' campaign which called for victory against fascism overseas and racism at home.[61] The promise of the MOWM in New York, as elsewhere, was not capitalized on, however, and splits in the coalition were felt in New York as in Detroit. What appears, in retrospect, as the coalition with the most potential to bring together a broad range of black community leaders and workers in pursuit of a common goal by employing direct protest strategies, flickered briefly between 1941 and 1942, only to largely disappear off the radar of black protest. By the end of the Second World War, the MOWM's headquarters in Harlem had become a bookshop.[62]

Economic gains in employment were subsequently made after the USA's entry into the war, but many of the problematic issues highlighted by this study of the formative years of the New Deal remained in place. In particular, from the perspective of the increased number of those on black New York's diverse left, the rise of labour represented a time of great promise, but also brought with it a series of inherent problems. These problems related to the necessity to break out of existing areas of confinement, arrangements that also proved black workers' greatest source of strength in unionism, to undertake protests that engaged with a broad-range of interrelated parties. That groups on the left from the black church, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the NNC had difficulties working together was not particularly surprising; what was particularly significant, however, was that the problems facing black workers as organized labour rose to power were placing an ever-increasing demand on these

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[61] Bates, *Pullman Porters,* pp. 153-155, p. 164.
[62] Kruse and Tuck, eds., *Fog of War,* p. 6.

groups to coordinate these efforts to devise new protest strategies, and thus their failures to work together had arguably become more costly.

Pro-Union Leadership Groups in Detroit

In Detroit, a variety of groups on the left of black politics increased in number and audibility in the 1930s, particularly after the first organizational success of the UAW in 1937. The Communist Party, the first of these groups to be discussed, began to increase in prominence from the early years of Depression. Practical relief efforts were combined with support for racial equality to afford those on the political left a greater hearing among a black community facing unprecedented challenges in the early years of the Depression. Joseph Billups, himself reported to have been a member of the CP during the 1930s, and his wife described the practical nature of the work undertaken by Communists to help black families in the early 1930s. Mrs Billups recounted that when they 'had nothing to eat [Communists...] helped the family [...] When they had no place to stay, they saw that they got back to their homes, if they were evicted'. Communist protesters, a majority of whom were white, also reportedly managed to help reconnect black families whose electricity had been cut off.[63] While leftist groups' ideological predispositions varied, the practical efforts undertaken on behalf of black workers often appeared similar. Characterizing the Unemployed Councils, the Nat Turner Clubs and the CP's International Labor Defense, the group through which protests on behalf of the Scottsboro Boys were conducted, Joseph Billups argued they 'turned out to be an unemployed club, taking care of evictions, turning on the lights [...] the activities didn't vary much'.[64] The increased visibility of radical leftists, and their partial degree of increased popularity, was also reflected in the comments of another black unionist, Shelton Tappes, who described how in many meetings held at places like Grand Circus Park, radicals could be found decrying the 'attitudes of the power people in the community'.[65] Caution should be exercised when deploying the comments of those who were themselves often direct participants in leftist activism when trying to assess impact. It seems fair to say, nevertheless, that left-wing radicalism enjoyed a much higher profile in the 1930s as a result of its own efforts on behalf of black workers and, correspondingly, the black community's desire for new strategies and change. Even a

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[63] Joseph Billups Oral History, Interview by Herbert Hill, Shelton Tappes and Roberta McBride, 27 October 1967, ALUA.
[64] Joseph Billups Oral History.
[65] Shelton Tappes Oral History, Interview by Herbert Hill, 27 October 1967, ALUA; Joseph Billups Oral History.

newspaper with a relatively moderate editorial line like the *Detroit Tribune* noted in 1934 that because, 'Negro students and workers, like students and writers of other racial groups, are beginning to think for themselves. They realize that the Capitalist system in this country has broken down,' and, according to the editorial, it was possible that the programs of Communism and Socialism may well have had something to offer.[66] It did not seem, however, that the majority of the black community noticeably reoriented to support the wider political programs of the left. In Tappes' opinion, although, 'There were many who listened and responded to the Revolutionary groups' among those being deprived of 'bare necessities of life [...] there was [never] any mainstream attachment of the Negro, as such, to any of these movements [...] the response of the Negro was usually most vocal to that group who was the most vocal in expressing the hopes and aspirations of the Negro for equality'.[67] Similarly, Billups recollected that there was generally more white participation than black when protests were taken from the park to City Hall, because 'They [black workers] just didn't believe in it'.[68] There was no visible wholehearted community attachment to the radical doctrines of the left, but increasing numbers of local activists came to share a concern with economic issues while advocating direct protest methods.

The career of one black Detroit activist, Snow Grigsby, represented a high profile and successful example of activism that drew inspiration not from the political doctrines of the left, but from a pragmatic assessment of the priorities of most importance to the community. As Grigsby aptly summarized some years later, underpinning his and others' activism was a shared awareness of the vital need to help black workers struggling to survive in Depression-era Detroit, which had to occupy a primary place in the civil rights agenda:

> We based it on economics, because we found this: it's not worth anything to be able to go in one of your finest places and sit down to eat, if you don't have the

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[66] *Detroit Tribune Independent,* 10 March 1934.
[67] Shelton Tappes Oral History.
[68] Joseph Billups Oral History.

> price of a meal. We figure the first thing is to have the job, and other things will automatically follow.[69]

This perceptive diagnosis led Grigsby to set up his own protest group in 1933, the Civil Rights Committee, which promised it would 'have as its first mission the seeking out of the proper authorities and the demanding of jobs to which Negroes are justly entitled in the various city departments'. In pursuit of the primary goal to expand employment opportunities for black workers, Grigsby collated employment statistics on black workers in public employment in the city of Detroit. According to his research only 35 out of 3734 police, 50 out of 7323 teachers and 4 out of approximately 700 hospital staff, were black.[70] This emphasis on presenting public bodies with incontrovertible evidence of employment discrimination succeeded in opening some public jobs to black workers in Detroit's municipal system.[71] The activities of Grigsby were not only significant for challenging public and private employers to employ black workers on a more equitable basis; they also revealed how those with no direct attachment to the causes of the far left came to also place an increased emphasis on addressing the economic problems facing black workers in the 1930s.

The shared concern to provide help for Detroit's black working communities could lead to genuine alliances being formed on their behalf; it could also make local protest politics appear more unified and effective than it actually was. This became apparent as questions surrounding black participation in the interracial set-up of the UAW shot to the centre of the political agenda in the organizational period between 1936 and 1941. A range of local groups, which occasionally overlapped in membership and work, built upon their shared desire to tackle economic and practical concerns of workers to advocate participation in the UAW. In the summer of 1937, Grigsby participated in a two day conference co-sponsored by the UAW that aimed to rally the support of the

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[69] Snow Grigsby Oral History, Interview by Roberta McBride, 12 March 1967, ALUA.
[70] *Detroit Tribune,* 7 October 1933; *Detroit Tribune*, 23 December 1933.
[71] Grigsby recalled that after confronting the Board of Education with his employment statistics, 72 out of 10,183 total, they got 19 jobs for blacks that very day, and a nearly a further hundred in the next year. He attributed this success to his focus on presenting the facts, saying 'they will give you a lot of alibis and reasons, but facts will stand up.' Snow Grigsby Oral History; Later on in the 1930s Grigsby moved on to campaign for job opportunities in the Edison electric company, with the company subsequently agreeing to discuss plans to hire more black workers. *Detroit Tribune,* 27 May 1939.

black community behind the effort to unionize Ford Motor Company. Topics for discussion included, 'The Negro as a tool in Ford's anti-union fight,' 'Industrial Unionism as exemplified in the UAW and CIO,' 'Greater benefits to Negroes through organized labor,' and 'High rents, the rising cost of living and the unions'.[72] Support for the union became a logical next step for activists like Grigsby who had broader aims to ameliorate the economic impact of the Depression on black workers by challenging the inadequacies of existing arrangements, particularly those strategies which advocated a continued reliance upon management's provision of employment.[73] Yet in summing up the CRC's work in the 1930s, which combined efforts to achieve more equal treatment in the electoral system and the probation department, Grigsby stated: 'It was still related to economics, jobs. Our whole picture was economic, through the whole life of the Committee'. Demonstrating the natural progression from an economic emphasis to support for unionism, when the CRC ended in 1941 Grigsby continued to work through the Postal Alliance, with the union allowing his protest activities to 'carry on, only under a different name'.[74]

Though Communist Party activists differed on many ideological points from other local protest leaders, they also developed from the relief efforts outlined above to urge that workers be organized into the UAW. Such a stance among local actors mirrored the policy of the national and international policies of the Party, which during the first Popular Front between 1936 and 1939, advocated cooperation with other groups as part of the fight against global fascism. The CP received plaudits from sympathetic observers who, while often not being members directly, worked in close proximity with the Party. Arthur McPhaul, for instance, argued that as far as white leaders were concerned, 'the Communists were the only ones that were really fighting against police brutality, really fighting for complete equality of Black'.[75] The first leader of Detroit's National Negro Congress branch, Lebron Simmons, indicated that though he was not a member, he respected Communists because, 'with few exceptions, Communists are the only white unionists who have consistently and aggressively fought for complete racial

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[72] *United Automobile Worker,* 31 July 1937.
[73] Snow Grigsby Oral History; *Detroit Tribune,* 8 January 1938.
[74] Snow Grigsby Oral History.
[75] Arthur McPhaul Oral History, Interview by Norman McRae, 5 April 1970, ALUA.

equality in the union and in the shop'.[76] Yet if Party members' apparent support for black rights, in the union and the wider community, won them the praise of some, it was also the case that, most often, they were not in a position to directly influence the course of the close relationships being built between unions, management, government, workers and their communities.

Although the Communist Party cooperated in the building and activism of the National Negro Congress (NNC), neither overlapping organization was able to take a decisive lead in advancing the interests of black workers as unionization continued. LeBron Simmons wrote to National Secretary John P. Davis in 1938 seeking guidance on how prominent a role of Communists should play in the branch, noting that they 'have done a good job in the building of the congress so far'.[77] The priorities of the Detroit NNC, which was officially formed relatively late in the decade in 1938 despite the fact that activists had been working in Detroit under the auspices of the Michigan chapter for two years, were reported by Simmons: 'Some of the things that we are planning on taking up immediately are a People's Grand Jury on unemployment and relief, the housing situation and the question of raising funds, approximately two thousand dollars for the third congress'.[78] Underpinning their programme was a desire for taking direct action. As Simmon subsequently put it:

> [...] we initiated programs and activities, and I suppose that's why they called us agitators. Because we felt that the time had come when black folks could not sit by and wait for their rights to be handed to them, but to get up off their behinds and do something about it.[79]

After 1935, support for industrial unionism through the UAW became a central unifying cause for the activists on a broadly-constituted left in Detroit, but the actual influence of groups like the NNC, in terms of shaping the outcomes of unionization and addressing black workers' issues was often limited.

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[76] Simmons quoted in Lloyd Bailer, 'Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1943), p. 323.
[77] Lebron Simmons to John P. Davis, 8 February 1938, Part 1, Reel 14, NNC Papers.
[78] Ibid.
[79] C. LeBron Simmons Oral History, Interview by Norman McRae, 1969, ALUA.; Arthur McPhaul presented a similar depiction of Simmons, describing him as a 'real fighter, no questions.' Arthur McPhaul Oral History.

The NNC did have some sporadic impact where they acted in support of local union efforts. LeBron Simmons described how he and other black activists played a role on the picket lines supporting strikes at Budwheel, Chevrolet Gear and Axle, Chevrolet, and Kelsey-Hayes in late 1936 and early 1937. The NNC was also involved in co-sponsoring meetings that promoted unionism to the community. National chairman A. Philip Randolph gave a speech highly critical of Ford's open-shop labour policies in 1937 at a conference co-sponsored by the Michigan NNC as part of the drive to organize Ford Motor Company.[80] Related to these pro-labour efforts, the Detroit branch also campaigned against the anti-labour and heavily racist Black Legion, many members of which were also white policemen and openly against organized labour, as part of which they 'scheduled a week of Negro cultural activities, with an art exhibit viewed by fifteen thousand people'.[81] But, as Simmons himself lamented, he and other militant activists committed to the union cause who travelled around between the various strikes taking place in these years, 'were the ones who did not receive any of the fruits of the organization of the CIO, in the unionization of these particular plants'.[82] The reason for their comparative lack of influence lay not in any lack of commitment to the cause of black participation in organized labour, nor in a lack of willingness to undertake direct protest action. Despite their concern to agitate on behalf of black workers' interests, the militant pro-labour stance of radical leftists put them at odds with the many workers in Detroit for whom both management and labour held the potential to help or hinder the economic position.

Detroit was not alone in witnessing these new sources of working-class leadership and the rise of a relatively small but high profile group of black union officers who came to prominence during the UAW's first organizational victories in 1937. Accompanying the victories of CIO unions in the North, many saw much promise in the prospect of new sources of black political leadership. For instance, journalist George Schuyler, in the process of lambasting existing black political leaders in an article published in the *Crisis*

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[80] Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* p. 48.
[81] Lawrence S. Wittner, 'The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment,' *American Quarterly,* 4 (1970), 883-901 (p. 889); Dillard, *Faith in the City,* pp. 90-91.
[82] LeBron Simmons Oral History.

in November 1937, described the role of these black workers in the newly powerful labour movement over the preceding year:

> The new position Negro labor has won in the past year has been gained in spite of the old leadership. It has been won with new leadership; militant young men and women from the ranks of labor and grizzled black veterans of the pick and shovel and the blast furnace [...]Perhaps these rough and ready black organizers, shop stewards and pickets who are not afraid to go to jail for a good cause may formulate the socio-economic program we must have as a group to survive.[83]

Events in Detroit echoed the wider northern developments described by Schuyler. A variety of observers agreed that although black workers did not participate as a group in the organizational efforts of 1937, most plants with some black workers usually had a black representative in a leadership position. Tappes recollected that in Pontiac, Buick in Flint, Chevrolet and Packard in Detroit, some of the Fisher Body plants, Murray Body, Midland Steel, and Federal Mogul, 'almost every one of these plants which had Negroes in them had Negro leadership. They had Negroes in them who were vocal and were participating in activities'.[84]

At a basic level, the opportunity for these black workers to gain any form of role in the UAW was dependent upon the comparatively liberal racial policies of the UAW. This was not necessarily because of a straightforward commitment to racial equality. The union had an interest in including black unionists in elective offices as part of its attempts to spur the participation of the wider mass of black workers, which was particularly crucial when organizational attention switched to Ford in the second half of 1937.[85] Yet these black unionists had their own motivations and reasons for not only

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[83] *Crisis,* November 1937.

[84] At Packard and Murray Body, for instance, Tappes recalled a Mr. Perry and Prince Clarke who were both black union officials, while at Budd, Luke Fennell was 'one of the first Negroes to be elected to one of the higher posts.' Shelton Tappes Oral History; Geraldine Bledsoe recollected that although black workers moved only slowly into the labour movement as a whole, 'they began to develop people in leadership positions from the very beginning.' Geraldine Bledsoe Oral History, Interview by Norman Bledsoe, 1970, ALUA.

[85] Meier and Rudwick give a relatively detailed sketch of blacks in early elective offices, but admit the total was really 'very small' and that 'the number was even this large partly reflected conscious efforts in some local after the sit-down strikes to encourage black membership and participation.' Other examples included Samuel Fanroy who was a steward in the sanding department of Chrysler Kercheval, Oscar Oden

cooperating with organized labour, but actively campaigning on its behalf. The personal backgrounds of unionists were important. Though many of these unionists were either second generation residents of the North, other more recent migrants from the South could also be found adopting leadership positions in the early UAW, such as Shelton Tappes, who came to Detroit from Alabama in 1936 and enjoyed a particularly influential career as a unionist in Local 600 at Ford Motor Company. Another early pro-union activist, Hodges Mason, had been working in various roles in Detroit's motor industry for some years before he became a union representative for UAW Local 212 at his plant, Bohn Aluminum in Detroit. His testimony not only sheds light on the sorts of reasoning that motivated the early black activists in the UAW, but also hints at the potential divides their active participation in the union created with black co-workers.

While the sit-down strike at General Motors in Flint was still ongoing, Mason was working as a chipper at Bohn Aluminum, a parts plant in Detroit, when an apparently spontaneous strike was called there in January 1937. Mason described how the unfair system of piecework, where perfectly good castings were often rejected by foremen to decrease the amount paid to workers, was a key factor that prompted him and others to go on strike and confront the management with their grievances. Mason was approached by a white worker who asked him to shut his department down, and together they, 'promptly started the grapevine going [... and] were successful in closing the department down, with the exception of two people, a Negro fellow by the name of Lou Pope [...] and a Belgian that we called "Whitey"'.[86] Mason described the work stoppage as a spontaneous action in response to specific local grievances, with little outside instigation by the UAW. As Mason described, 'we didn't have any union. We just went up ourselves'. Indeed although Mason and others on the bargaining committee secured a ten percent increase in pay, they did not initially make the management agree to a collective bargaining union contract, because 'we didn't ask for it, to be frank. The union was new and we knew nothing of it. This was a spontaneous

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at Midland Steel, Leonard Newman at Briggs Local 212, and the Grey Iron Foundry Saginaw where William Bowman was on Executive Board and Boss McKnight was a local union vice president. Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* p. 54.

[86] Elaine Latzman- Moon, *Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes: An Oral History of Detroit's African American Community, 1918-1967* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 131.

thing, without any leadership at all'.[87] The union also provided more personal opportunities for the several other black union leaders who rose to prominence in both union and wider community affairs in the organizational period between 1936 and 1941. In Mason's case, he recollected how once he joined the UAW, 'I jumped into it with both feet because I felt I had disappointed my mother by not having become a doctor'.[88] Mason's stated motivations highlight the interplay between a sense of dissatisfaction with existing management arrangements, a sense of personal opportunity offered by personal leadership in labour activities, as well as the lingering threat of union discrimination. In Mason's case, this wariness was overcome by union promises; in a wide variety of other situations in Detroit and elsewhere in the organizational period, such reservations were not as successfully surmounted.

Black trade unionist leaders were afforded a position that allowed them to promote the cause of unionism to the wider community. One elected union official at Budd Corporation, Luke Fennell, was quoted approximately six months after a union contract had been signed as saying that the improvements in working conditions, increased pay and the seniority system that had accompanied the union agreement at Budd 'proved beyond all doubt that we [black workers] have benefitted tremendously from the Union'.[89] Yet even in the union's promotional literature, black unionists' individual personal belief in the benefits of union participation often corresponded with a sense that black workers as a group remained unconvinced over the benefits of unions and wary of the potential negative consequences such actions may incur. Despite the fact that they viewed the union as the best way through which to secure economic rights, these small but committed new union leaders remained someway removed from the workers who they sought to lead.

In 1937, after the wave of sit-down strikes had spread from General Motors to Chrysler, a handful of black members were among those making the case for unionization. One man, Samuel Fanroy, was involved in trying to organize the approximately 400 black

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[87] Moon, *Untold Stories,* p. 131.
[88] Hodges Mason Oral History, Interview by Roberta McBride, 6 February 1968, ALUA.
[89] *Pittsburgh Courier,* 11 September 1937.

workers at the Chrysler Kercheval plant, and was described by a white unionist as 'very good material for the union,' but after the strike was settled in favour of the union, another source reported that Fanroy 'ruefully declared that he secured more cooperation from white workers than from Negroes'.[90] Also in 1937 at Chrysler Dodge, meanwhile, foundry shop steward William Lattimore described the March sit-down strike in the following way:

> I stayed in the plant several hours and decided to go home but returned to cheer on the people who were sitting down in the plant [...] At that time we were sort of frustrated as Negro union members because of the many – because the white elements within the Dodge plant refused to accept the Negro brothers and sisters as equals. [91]

Their position in support of the union certainly did not mean officers like Lattimore were ignorant of or unconcerned about racist union practices, but crucially, black unionists found it difficult to launch and maintain sustained activism that challenged the union while also attempting to negotiate the changing relationship between the union and management.

These problems were demonstrated two years later during the November 1939 strike at Dodge Chrysler in Detroit. Far from being resolved, the racial tensions described by Lattimore within the Chrysler workforce came to the fore when the UAW went on strike. The move to strike was met with a company-orchestrated attempt to recruit predominantly black strike breakers to start a back-to-work movement. The efforts of black community leaders to deter this effort and prevent an outbreak of racial violence has led to the 1939 Chrysler strike to be positioned in the existing literature as a relative success story for race relations in Detroit. Yet viewed from another perspective, the Chrysler strike also proved a visible demonstration of the fact that over two years after the UAW's first bargaining contract, there was a lingering disjuncture between black workers and black unionists.

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[90] Nick DiGaetano Oral History, Interview by Jim Keeney and Herbert Hill, 17 June 1968, ALUA; Lloyd Bailer, 'Negro Workers in the Automobile Industry,' p. 200.
[91] William Lattimore Oral History, Interview by Roberta McBride, 11 March 1969, ALUA.

Particularly prominent in the 1939 Chrysler strike, as in 1937, was Samuel Fanroy. In response to the attempts of other black workers to cross the picket lines, white unionist Nick DiGaetano recollected how, 'Fanroy said "Hold on – don't do anything drastic. Let us handle that," [... and] from the two hundred, only about fifteen went in the plant'.[92] William Lattimore, meanwhile, described how 'we had a problem of Negroes jumping over the fence going into the foundry. And this progressive group [... including Kirk Davis, Kirby Jones, Lattimore and others] jumped over the fence and talked to these Negro workers down in the foundry and we all marched out together'.[93] Yet despite the portrayal of success presented here, the very fact that unionists like Lattimore and Fanroy had to become involved with diffusing racial hostilities indicates the persistent early problems faced by black unionists who believed in using the union as a method to advance the position of black workers. Even at a company which had been unionized for over two years and where in certain sections, such as the foundry, black workers were found in large numbers and were, officially at least, members of the union, scope to make progress by using internal pressure within the union was limited.

Unionists like Lattimore realized that potential for progress was greatest in plants and factories where black workers were found in large enough numbers to form an independent lobbying force. In a move which foreshadowed one of the most successful tactics subsequently employed once black union membership had massively increased after the unionization of Ford in 1941, Lattimore and others at Chrysler set up a group called the Dodge Local Union Progressive Group. This group, according to Lattimore, achieved some successes in the early 1940s in efforts to secure upgraded positions throughout the plant, and in winning jobs for black women on assembly lines, by using the measure of political power which accompanied a relative concentration of black workers to lobby within the union structure.[94] Little evidence survives of the extent to which this internal union pressure group managed to make gains for black workers in the early years after unionization, though evidence survives of the continuing problems

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[92] Nick DiGaetano Oral History.
[93] William Lattimore Oral History.
[94] William Lattimore Oral History.

with racial divisions within the workforce at Dodge and Chrysler as a whole through the 1930s and into the Second World War.

The key roadblock to black unionists' efforts to develop successful strategies that could have brought their position in line with workers' expectations was intimately related to the failure to organize Ford Motor Company. Building upon the presence of the handful of committed black unionists who had come to prominence during the UAW's early organizational successes, a group of black organizers were recruited by the UAW in the summer of 1937 for the specific task of convincing large numbers of black workers at Ford, many of whom worked in the foundry, to join the union. These included men such as Veal Clough, Paul Kirk, William Nowell, and Jimmy Anderson, who 'came up out of the ranks of the unemployed, developed as leaders of the movement, and were actually successful and well-known organizers of the autoworkers'.[95] Paul Kirk provides an indication of the typical background of these leaders. Not directly employed at Ford during the organizing drives, Kirk was an employee of the Michigan Steel and Casting Company, who was originally from Alabama but had settled in Detroit in 1929. Kirk was also a member of the Detroit NNC, highlighting the occasionally direct relationship between 'new crowd' protest groups and black union participation.[96]

Part of the reason why the effectiveness of black unionists' efforts were constrained was related to internal factional divides within the UAW. This was partly responsible for the delayed organization of Ford Motor Company while also dividing black labour activists and hindering the efforts to present a unified coherent program to their unconvinced co-workers. Writing in a union publication some two years after he had first been engaged on behalf of the UAW, Kirk gave an indication of the impact that the internal factional strife in the UAW had had upon black unionization in a summary of discussions at a conference of black unionists, saying, '[m]uch greater progress would have been made, they declared, if former President Martin had not sabotaged unity between the two groups of workers'. Kirk also condemned black unionists who had

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[95] Shelton Tappes Oral History.
[96] *Pittsburgh Courier*, 24 April, 1937; *Pittsburgh Courier,* 4 September, 1937; LeBron Simmon Oral History; On factional struggles see Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* pp. 42-43.

sided with Homer Martin's [Unity] Caucus, saying that William Nowell and Frank Evans were 'described as false leaders on the road to company unionism of the Martin-Bennett type,' and apparently the conference 'was 100% for the UAW and the CIO'.[97] These factional struggles were significant in hindering the efforts to unionize Ford. From the perspective of efforts to secure black rights through organized labour, their importance lay not just in the often highly divisive personal battles waged between various unionists, but in the corresponding influence on retarding unionism and hence keeping black unionists at odds with the crucially important but dormant source of massed black workers at Ford's River Rouge plant.

This is not to criticize pro-union activists like Kirk, however, for although the failure to organize Ford meant they often found themselves at variance with a great many of their natural constituents, the reasoning they deployed in their organizational efforts displayed a consistent and clear willingness to act on their perception of workers' best interests. Walter Hardin, for instance, emphasized the tremendous opportunity presented to black workers by the prospect of union membership, criticizing anti-union leaders whose stances, in Hardin's opinion, revealed '[...] a profound lack of appreciation of the fact that not since emancipation of the Negro has there been presented as favourable an opportunity' for economic progress to be made.[98] The efforts of unionists to convince workers at Ford involved attempts to promote a sense of a demonstrable opportunity for advancement, rather than on ideologically-infused rhetoric of working class interracial equality. Part of the frustration for unionists like Kirk and Hardin was that although they clearly desired to help black workers advance in Detroit's motor industry, their position within organized labour meant that they alone would struggle to provide the strong and coordinated leadership necessary to apply concerted and consistent pressure on various responsible parties.

The importance of protest coalitions that brought together the interests of black workers, unionists, leftists, and religious and civic leaders meant that the organization

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[97] *United Automobile Worker,* 11 March, 1939.
[98] *United Automobile Worker,* 21 August, 1937.

of Ford was a crucial event in terms of efforts to address workers' problems. Yet although the diverse composition of those that supported unionization during the Ford strike in April 1941 has led some to suggest it represented the start of a broad-based union civil rights movement, from the perspective of workers' experiences, it can be seen as a rather brief peak in coordination which, when assessed in the long term, brought about only patchy and uncertain gains for newly unionized workers. Shelton Tappes recollected that the Ford Organizing Committee, set up when the UAW renewed its efforts to organize Ford in 1940, was 'composed of citizens, ministers, attorneys, Ford workers, Dodge workers, Murray, Packard, and every large plant which had a Negro membership in the UAW was represented on the Ford organizing committee'.[99] Before the decisive strike at Ford in April 1941, however, it was the union officers of the committee that carried out most organizational work, as a relatively small group of black unionists worked in coordination with other salaried organizers of the UAW. These unionists, unsurprisingly, sought to emphasize their successes in recruiting members to the union cause. For instance Paul Kirk, NNC member and a union officer at Chrysler Dodge Division who had also been reported to have been a Communist Party member, trumpeted the successful recruitment of 200 Ford workers in January 1941 which was attributed to the UAW's policy of forming specific Italian, Polish and Negro organizational sub-committees.[100] Other unionists had been involved with the UAW for several years, and men including Hodges Mason, Shelton Tappes, Horace Sheffield, Joseph Billups, and Veal Clough played high profile roles supporting the UAW in its efforts to recruit black Ford workers to the union's cause. As Robert Battle, who was himself recruited as an organizer during the strike, said of this small but committed group, 'at the time you only had about five Negroes that was active in – who had any knowledge of what was going on'.[101] Hodges Mason was won over to unionism during the 1937 strike at Bohn Aluminum and was an active member of the Detroit NAACP's youth branch at this time which campaigned using cars with a loudspeaker to rally support for the union cause. Mason described how, 'Shelton [Tappes] and I were

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[99] Shelton Tappes Oral History.; An article in the Daily Worker said the following: 'Alertness to the need of organizing the Negro workers of the Ford Company was indicated by the warm reception given to the plea of Vic Ford, Negro delegate from Local 212, who asked the international Union, "to put aside everything to organize Ford." The Ford Corporation has "shown that it does not care what the government tells it,... but we can make it respect [the union].' *Daily Worker* clipping Nat Ganley Papers, Box 10;6, ALUA.

[100] *United Automobile Worker*, Local 155 edition, 1 January 1941.

[101] Robert Battle Oral History, Interview by Herbert Hill, 19 March 1969, ALUA.

together, working the sound truck, and we had a lot of fun about it'.[102] Their aim was to promote the union side in the dispute, whose picket lines had been broken by predominantly black strike breakers at the instigation of Ford management.

Black union organizers were often members of other community groups, and helped to carry the campaign beyond the factory gates of the River Rouge plant into the black community. Horace Sheffield was part of the active youth branch of the Detroit NAACP, while another who actively campaigned for the union, Geraldine Bledsoe, was a social worker and member of the Detroit Urban League. Horace Sheffield described how, '[w]e set up an office in Milford in the black community and, you know, it was a matter of ringing doorbells and really talking to folks in the plant'.[103] Geraldine Bledsoe recollected that as a result of the AFL's discriminatory policies black workers 'really had no confidence in the sincerity of the labor movement at this time,' but that through the strike at Ford, 'finally, working with the union, working with the men in the community, working with their wives especially, because they were particularly resistant to having their husbands go into the movement, we finally were able to get the Negro moving into the labor unions'.[104] In similar fashion, Mrs Joseph Billups also recounted that organizational efforts with workers' wives in the community had been an important part of the campaign at Ford, saying that, 'We brought in the Negro women into the organization, because the wives were afraid the husbands, the Negro husbands would join the union and lose their jobs'. A women's auxiliary was set up as part of the main River Rouge Local 600.[105]

Organizational efforts such as these did have some effect on recruiting black members to the UAW, but as Chapter 1 outlined, many black workers remained aloof from both

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[102] Hodges Mason Oral History.
[103] Horace Sheffield Oral History, Interview by Roberta McBride and Herbert Hill, 24 July 1968, ALUA.
[104] Geraldine Bledsoe Oral History.
[105] Billups and others tried to explain to the wives of workers that: 'If their husband joins we will be responsible, we will see to it that they have their jobs, and how much better conditions if the husband doesn't come home drunk, or the husband doesn't come home sick. We had to tell them that, that this brings happiness, in the family, and the only way to get these things is by joining, and coming in, and some of them became dear friends ... I used to go to the saloon, in the alleys, to meet the Negroes. They gave me their dues, and I used to bring them to Mike Widman.' Joseph Billups Oral History.

parties in recognition of the capacity of both to impact upon their employment position. Yet the Ford strike did bring together a range of leadership groups, many of whom attempted to address the dilemmas being faced by black workers. These groups included the adult branch of the Detroit NAACP, headed by J. J. McClendon despite the fact that before and after 1941 he attracted a reputation as being indifferent if not outright opposed to workers' issues and unionism. Official support was also offered by the Detroit Urban League, the Detroit NNC, the interracial Civil Rights Federation, and high profile church leaders including Charles Hill and Horace White and State Senator Charles Diggs. A leadership meeting, held at the Lucy Thurman YMCA of the Committee on 3 April 1941, included Charles Hill representing the NNC, Beulah Whitby and Bledsoe of the Detroit Urban League, Louis Martin of the Michigan Chronicle, J. J. McClendon of the Detroit NAACP, LeBron Simmons of the NNC, while Snow Grigsby represented the CRC and NAACP and Geraldine Bledsoe of the Detroit Urban League.[106] In an edition of 'Ford Facts' published by the UAW after the strike had been concluded, a diverse range of these participants offered their thoughts on the strike and unionism in general. McClendon of the NAACP gave a somewhat unconvincing endorsement of unionism, saying that, 'I belong to the American Medical Association, which is a sort of a union, and I know the value of unions and organization,' while Lebron Simmons offered the much more forceful statement that, '[t]he National Negro Congress regards the Ford strike as of vital significance to the Negroes'. Recognizing the challenge posed by Ford management and their endorsement of the UAW-AFL, Beulah Whitby of the Urban League said '[t]he labor movement is a great surging tide that the three or four thousand Negro Ford workers, who are being approached by the AFL to start a back-to-work movement, cannot stop,' while Paul Robeson, probably the Communist Party's most high profile black supporter, commented that '[t]he Negro must be interested in and must become a part of progressive labor – and by progressive labor I mean the CIO'.[107] An important part of the motivations that led to this unusually united front among local leaders was the desire to avoid racial violence as a result of the presence of black strike breakers. This consideration was central to many of the public statements

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[106] Meier & Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* pp. 93-94.
[107] 'Ford Facts,' 19 April 1941, Box 54, CRC Papers.

made by community leaders, who joined forces to oppose black strike breaking in a well publicized leaflet.[108]

In addition to the shared desire to avoid racial violence and prevent recriminations as a result of strike breaking, the public statements of those leading the campaign in the black community demonstrated the growing crossover between liberal and left-wing causes. Many had come to link anti-fascism with union rights, while there was evidence of growing cooperation between interracial leaders. Embodying this coalition of support was the Civil Rights Federation (CRF), a white-led but interracial group formed in 1935 in order to combat perceived threats to civil liberties emanating from groups on the rights including the Black Legion, Gerald K. Smith and Charles Coughlin. Part of their remit included supporting the right of unions to organize, and the CRF took the lead in launching a 'Fordism is Fascism' campaign as a response to Ford Motor Company's various union countermeasures in 1937.[109] During the strike at Ford in 1941, the CRF reported they had delivered 3000 letters in support of the union, had delivered 15,000 copies of an open letter written by Charles Hill and had taken out advertisements urging black cooperation with the UAW in the local press.[110] In this letter, Charles Hill, Owen Knox and Louis Martin of the Michigan *Chronicle*, addressed the Ford Motor Company directly:

> The efforts of your company to sow dissension and race hatred between Negro and white workers are efforts to divert their attention from their common economic struggle, confuse and divide them, and to break their strike. Your

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[108] There were similarities with the response offered to the 1939 Chrysler strike, where a statement made by Reverend Charles Hill, Reverend Horace White, Louis Martin of the Michigan Chronicle and State Senator Diggs attempted to defuse racial tensions, arguing that the 'back-to-work movement contains possibilities of race riots and race conflicts.' *United Automobile Worker,* 29 November 1939.

[109] Initially called the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights,(CFPCR.) 'Civil Rights Federation: Report of a Year's Activity.' Under 'Negroes' sub-head, Investigation into N-W high school riot, Decreasing discrimination at Grinnel Brothers Music Store festival, Hazel Park, delegation to get police protection after KKK incite violence on family, Resolutions condemning discrimination in army and defense jobs, Part of nationwide anti-lynching campaign, and 'Since last February, a Negro Civil Rights Committee led the Reverend Charles A. Hill, has been functioning, cooperating actively with the Federation.' And in same collection there was a Press release, January 10, 1940, announcing CRF's lecture series, featuring JPD on 'the Rights of Racial Minorities.' In John Zaremba Collection, ALUA, Box 6; 'Civil Rights Federation, 1938-1941.'; Dillard, *Faith in the City*, p. 89, pp. 99-100.

[110] Report on Activities on Ford Strike.' Box 51, CRC Papers.

> tactic in this instance is a typically fascist one, in emulation of Hitler's success by means of radical strife.[111]

Leaders within Detroit's rights community, both black and white, shared the belief that issues at stake at Ford were closely related to the international developments, both of which were seen to pit the forces of fascism against those seeking freedom of speech and to address the economic problems common to working people.

Another statement, written by Hill but eventually signed by a wide range of pro-labour leaders, explicitly explained how the issues at stake in the unionization of Ford were seen to be of importance not only to the crucial domestic issues facing workers, but were part of a wider battle for democratic rights. Describing the strike as being 'of national importance,' the statement argued that the entire community had a stake in its outcome, while also arguing that '[t]he fight for job security is the Negro peoples' fight [... and] The struggle to end the speed-up system strengthens the Negro home [... and] safe-guards the Negro's future'. After citing the promises of racial equality made by John L. Lewis of the CIO in positive fashion, the statement drew reference to a growing national crisis which had brought with it increased concerns over national unity and patriotism, arguing, 'Mr. Ford is seeking to put white labor against black. There is nothing more un-American, undemocratic and subversive than such an act,' while the statement concluded '[t]he Negro must be on the side of democracy. To be elsewhere is fatal'.[112] Articulating a sentiment which received even more direct expression under the auspices of the 'Double V for Victory' campaigns the following year, a crucial part of the support of pro-union leaders in Detroit rested on their conviction that the issues at stake were of crucial importance to black workers in the local community and were also part of international battles being waged between progressive and reactionary political forces.

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[111] 'An Open Letter to Ford Motor Company', UAW-Ford Department 1940's, Reuther Library Vertical Files.

[112] Box 51, CRC Papers.; A copy of the same letter signed by Coleman Young- Executive Secretary of NNC-D, Robert Evans- Secretary of NAACP-D, John Miles, Geraldine Bledsoe, Hodges Mason- CRF, Louis Martin, Dr Albert B. Cleage, Elizabeth Baird of AKA, Charles Harris of NAACP's Youth Council, William Sherrill, Lebron Simmons was carried in the *Daily Worker,* clipping found in Box 10;10, Ganley Papers.

The drive to organize Ford had, therefore, brought together an unusually diverse range of groups, many of whom displayed an internationalized political sensibility while remaining concerned with the interest of workers. The organization of Ford did not *in itself* provide a solution to the issues being faced by black workers, however. Once organization of Ford Motor Company was finally completed in June 1941, black leaders who had acted in support of the UAW-CIO had to turn their attention to securing the gains promised by union leaders and addressing the many other problems being faced by black workers in Detroit's fast-changing economy. Taking up this difficult task in the period between 1941 and 1943, some important gains were made by black workers as a direct result of the pressure applied by broad-based and well organized protest coalitions of their leaders. This moment of opportunity, when new mechanisms of protest were created that tied organized labour, management groups and state bureaucracies together, remained only partially explored and exploited, however.

That there were opportunities for advances to be made by black workers in Detroit in the early 1940s was well-recognized by contemporaries, while historians have focused on the ways in which political space was opened up for civil rights protest on behalf of workers' issues. At a federal level, a variety of newly created mechanisms including the Office of Production Management set up in 1941 and its successors, the Committee on Fair Employment Practices that had been created in the wake of the March on Washington Movement and Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802, and Detroit organizations like the Michigan Unemployment Commission, offered new routes through which protests for equal treatment could be pursued. Around the same time, the UAW established its own Interracial Committee through which instances of discrimination could be tackled.[113] Yet these various new routes would only be truly effective when challenged to live up to promises of equality, a fact well recognized by protest leaders.

At the very moment when new opportunities were provided to address black workers' problems by government and unions, the close interactions between these groups had

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[113] Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* p. 111, p. 117.

made coordinated protest efforts of even greater importance. Some efforts at forming coalitions to take up these issues were made after the USA entered the Second World War in December 1941, and were led by many of those who had been brought together by the common interests in the Ford strike. The first such effort was the formation of the interracial Metropolitan Detroit Council on Fair Employment Practices, a group organized by white economist Edward McFarland from Wayne University and which was also supported by black unionists Prince Clark, Shelton Tappes and Oscar Noble, as well as the new Executive Secretary of the Detroit NAACP, Gloster Current, Reverends Charles Hill and Malcolm Dade, Geraldine Bledsoe of the DUL and white CRF leader Jack Raskin. This group built upon the coalition exemplified the previous year in Ford strike, and assisted the FEPC investigations into discriminatory labour practices in Detroit through 1942.[114] Yet these activities, though important, were not enough to fully address the multifaceted issues of importance to black workers. Efforts to address workers' issues that only operated through one channel, in this case the federal Fair Employment Practices Committee, would only be as successful as the willingness of these government groups would allow.

In an effort to take up the challenge of pursuing a strategy which would work within the limited protest structures of government or labour fair employment mechanisms, some black leaders in Detroit attempted to set up a more wide-ranging and militant protest grouping: the Citizens Committee for Jobs in War Industry. This group was overwhelmingly black in composition and was set up in the autumn of 1942 by Charles Hill. The Committee included among its leaders unionists Horace Sheffield, Shelton Tappes and Walter Hardin, while Gloster Current, who had emerged as a pro-labour Executive Secretary of the Detroit NAACP the previous summer, became secretary. By 1942 Charles Hill had become President of the Michigan NNC, while Coleman Young served as the NNC's Executive Secretary. Yet Hill, recognizing that less overtly partisan protest coalitions held greater prospects for wresting the concessions needed from various responsible parties, ensured the Citizens Committee was not merely a NNC or leftist front organization. Instead, Hill chose to run the group through the officers of the local NAACP. For a brief period in 1942, the Committee drew comments from observers

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[114] Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* pp. 114-116.

for its apparent success in coordinating diverse community groups and its ability and willingness to challenge various groups. One federal investigator said of the group that, '[e]mbracing the whole Negro community [it became...] the main instrument for exerting [...] pressure,' on government, unions, and management alike.[115]

Yet despite its brief high profile, internal divisions in the local political community soon split some of the component parts of the Citizens Committee. The Detroit NAACP, of which J.J. McClendon remained president, had committed money to the Committee, yet the feeling remained among unionists that, despite McClendon's official support for the UAW, the branch remained reluctant to act fully and decisively regarding workers' economic rights. As a result, Charles Hill challenged McClendon for the presidency and despite receiving backing from Lebron Simmons and Gloster Current, Hill was defeated by McClendon who retained the support of many on the board as well as pro-UAW activists such as Prince Clarke and Horace White. Hill's defeat did not represent the end of his protest efforts, but it did mean the end for the Citizens Committee and with it, an effective vehicle through which protest efforts could be coordinated and maintained.[116] The NAACP did continue its growing acceptance of the need to include workers' issues as part of its agenda, and following his re-election McClendon brought unionists Prince Clarke and Walter Hardin onto the board.[117] The split between Hill and the NAACP had, however, shown that despite a widespread acknowledgement that black workers needed to participate in interracial unionism, coordinated and collaborative protest efforts proved difficult to sustain. This reality was obscured by the Ford strike where the unifying desire to avoid the outbreak of racial violence tended to override continuing divisions and make the pro-union local leadership appear more solid than it actually was.

Others on the left, through both the NNC and from within the labour movement itself, remained committed to black participation in organized labour and recognized the

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[115] Quotation from Bureau of Intelligence Report, Office of War Information, 3 December 1942. Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* pp. 114-116.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Hill's political platform was seemingly less susceptible to the ups and downs of the Popular Front, as he was able to sustain a position as a leading figure in local protests. Dillard, *Faith in the City,* p. 114.

problems being faced by multi-directional discrimination in the defence industries, but most often their efforts had to operate within the existing structures offered by union and government. In August 1940, for instance, the NNC had attempted to organize a committee to work towards integration of black workers in defence jobs, with representative from the NAACP Youth Council, Local 306 of the UAW at Budd Wheel, the Conference of Negro Trade Unionists and the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. As Lebron Simmons put it, '[i]t is becoming apparent to all, that if the Negro is to benefit from any of the job opportunities which will develop as a result of the National Defense Program, it will be necessary to organize our efforts to attain the opportunities'.[118] But despite sporadic rhetorical attacks on discrimination, at no stage did the NNC, despite the increased personal role of its President Charles Hill, assume a larger position of leadership that would have allowed it the power and influence necessary to fully address the various sources that were responsible for the problems they were so aware of.[119] At a national level, after 1939 the NNC underwent internal divisions and splits that seriously weakened its efforts to operate as coordinating umbrella group to bring together black protest organizations to fight for shared economic goals.

After 1941, of course, various efforts were undertaken by activists on the pro-union left of black politics, but in the main, they operated within the protest mechanisms of the union and government. The outcomes of protest conducted by pro-union local leaders was often determined not by their willingness to fight or by the level of their 'militancy,' but by the bureaucratic structures of union and government fair employment procedures through which groups had to operate. As the USA entered the Second World War, black unionists had become particularly vocal activists in their own right, but frequently encountered frustrations and remained constrained, not just liberated, by the measures of the union to address issues of discrimination. Shelton Tappes, for instance, played an influential role in securing a non-discrimination clause in the collective bargaining contract drawn up between Ford and the UAW, while in his role as shop steward at Ford Local 600, Tappes had also successfully led an interracial committee of workers that won improved conditions and the reinstatement of Henry

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[118] *Detroit Tribune,* 10 August 1940.
[119] *Detroit Tribune,* 19 October 1940; 'Ford Facts,' 23 April 1941, Box 54, CRC Papers.

Wortinger, Fred Bell, Williams Ware, Veal Clough, Joseph Billups, Gabriel Bishop Alfred Dalle and Sam Carlan.[120] Yet the internal tensions that hampered the effectiveness of the pro-union were again demonstrated when Tappes was subsequently forced to relinquish his position as an officer of Local 600 as a result of his refusal to join the Communist Party.[121] Other black trade unionists attempted use the UAW's Inter-Racial Committee, a group set up by the International leadership to address instances of inequality, but despite achieving some successes, activists such as William Bowman, Oscar Noble and Tappes found it a less than useful protest mechanism and found that their actions were limited to organizational work among black workers, rather than launching sustained efforts on these workers' behalf. At the very moment black pro-union leaders had finally achieved their longstanding goal of organizing Ford, the new structures being erected by a combination of unions, government and management served to stymie their efforts to belatedly mobilize large groups of unionized black workers in a coordinated and concerted fashion.

Many national-level developments took distinctive local courses, with no location proving more popular for historians seeking to celebrate the success of wartime militancy than Detroit.[122] Yet when measured by the extent to which genuine improvements were made, rather than upon a less tangible assessment of an increased 'rights consciousness' and an increase in 'militant new crowd protest politics,' achievements in the early 1940s appear more limited. Not only did events in Detroit play a role in derailing the efforts at collaboration of the MOWM at a national level, local protest coalitions also met with problems. Important collaborations were made between local black protest leaders inside and out of the labour movement and white leaders of the UAW regarding non-economic issues, including the campaign to combat black exclusion from the Sojourner Truth housing project and in response to the Detroit

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[120] 'Ford Facts,' 5 April 1941, found in Box 54, CRC Papers; Korstad and Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost,' 795-796.

[121] Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW,* p. 115.

[122] Bates says that, '[o]nce the genie was out of the bottle, black workers drew from the formula to demand changes in race relations, particularly within the CIO. When management, government, or union officials dragged their feet over issues involving discrimination in workplaces, black workers expressed their impatience by initiating wildcat strikes and work stoppages, applying the lessons of new-crowd protest politics on the shop floor.' Bates, *Pullman Porters,* pp. 174-175; Beth T. Bates, '"Double V for Victory" Mobilizes Black Detroit, 1941-1946', in Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

riot in 1943.[123] Economic opportunities for black men and women increased in the war years, but this did not necessarily mean that the war brought about unmitigated positive developments, as the perception of inequality increased too.[124] The most successful and best-designed protest vehicle in wartime Detroit was the Citizens Committee for Job in War Industry, organizing at one stage a demonstration of 10,000 in Cadillac Square. Yet rather than constituting a decisive turning point, this group soon split as a result of internal political differences between its leader, Charles Hill, and other more cautious members of the local NAACP branch with whom he sought to collaborate.[125]

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[123] Dominic J. Capeci Jr., *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Bates, *Pullman Porters,* pp.179-182.

[124] Sugrue suggests the, 'cumulative effect of economic forces, activism, and government assistance was that blacks made significant gains in Detroit's industrial economy during the war.' Thomas J. Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 27; Yet far from being an unmitigated positive development, this increase in economic opportunity could also worsen problems of discrimination and inequality - as James Sparrow has recently written, '[t]he opening of opportunity only made persistent discrimination all the more galling.' T. Sparrow. 'Freedom to Want: The Federal Government and Politicized Consumption in World War II', in Kruse and Tuck, eds., *Fog of War,* p. 19.

[125] Bates, *Pullman Porters,* pp.179-182.

Conclusion to Chapter 4.

The increased number of supporters of black participation in organized labour has not been questioned by Chapter 4. Nor, for the most part, has the willingness of these 'new crowd' local leaders to adopt more direct protest strategies on behalf of black workers been under dispute. These developments in outlook have been among the best documented elements of black political life in the 1930s.[126] Instead, the central goal of this chapter has been to reassess the careers of pro-union leaders by looking at tangible achievements rather than political principles alone. In particular, this chapter has sought to conduct this assessment against the framework of issues illuminated by the preceding study of workers' experiences during the rise of unionism. Set against a backdrop where workers' experiences were marked by interconnected opportunities and new challenges, the key issue for pro-union leaders was the renewed importance of maintaining coordinated protest strategies in order to make gains extending employment opportunities. With this in mind, Chapter 4 has shown that pro-union supporters' careers tell a story of much more limited successes during the formative period between 1933 and 1941 than in dominant civil rights unionism narratives.

Beneath the surface of increased union support lay significant and enduring problems which hampered these black leaders from providing consistent and effective leadership on behalf of the workers they often clearly desired to help. In New York, as indeed in Detroit, black church leaders retained tremendous influence in the wider community, and high profile leaders like Adam Clayton Powell Jr. came to support unionism as part of a wider emphasis on economic, material and employment concerns. Yet even though Powell played a leading role in the formation of protest coalitions formed on behalf of workers in 1934, 1938 and 1941 which achieved some successes in increasing job opportunities, these coalitions proved unable to become a lasting and powerful force. Divisions tied to organized labour and the left, as well as regarding the nationalist HLU described in the previous chapter, hampered attempts to apply concerted and coordinated pressure on the increasingly jointly responsible labour, management and government groups in power in New York City. Frank Crosswaith and the NLC were

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[126] See in particular, Bates, 'A New Crowd.'

particularly notable absentees from the 1938 Coordinating Committee, and in general, despite the fact that no group was more consistently committed to organizing workers across interracial lines, the NLC achieved only limited success on behalf of workers.

In part, the failure of the NLC to go beyond coordinating and supporting the organizational efforts of white-led unions related to personal differences between the Socialist Frank Crosswaith and nationalist leaders in the HLU and others on the left in the Communist Party and the NNC. But in addition to personal and political differences, which continued during the Popular Front era of relative cooperation between 1936 and 1939 only to be exacerbated after the Nazi-Soviet pact, the limited extent of coordinated protest also reflected more fundamental problems for local pro-union protest leaders. The rise of labour, and trade unions' increasingly interrelated ties with management and government groups, meant that pro-union protest alone was not enough to solve the multifaceted and multidirectional forms of discrimination limiting economic advancement. Just as black workers often struggled to accurately identify which of the various responsible groups was the source of their grievances, so too did pro-union leaders struggle to adequately adapt to both the complexity and immensity of the problems relating to equal employment opportunities.

In Detroit, the growth of local activists who supported the increasingly powerful UAW has underpinned narratives which depict the unionization of Ford in 1941 as the culmination of the successful formation of local protest coalitions with a working class focus. Although the formation of the Ford Organizing Committee's black subsection represented an important departure for local protest, this actually represented an all-too-brief moment of relative unity, beyond which the diverse leaders involved found it difficult to agree on future strategies to address the continuing problems of discrimination where both unions and company management were implicated in the war years. The rise to prominence of a vocal group of committed black trade unionists was an important development of the period. These activists had a clear sense that, despite their belief in the benefits of membership, unions continued to require constant and powerful pressure to uphold their promises of racial equality. Not only did the

failure to organize Ford in 1937 mean that black workers remained separated, both institutionally and politically, from the black unionists most committed to addressing their problems, even the most militant and able trade unionists were unable to tackle the size of the problems facing black workers on their own from within the UAW. As a result, the most successful protest efforts undertaken on behalf of black workers in the early 1940s were those which allied the increasingly restive black workforce and unionists with other community leaders such as Charles Hill and the local NAACP. The Citizens Committee for Jobs in War Industry which operated briefly in 1942, demonstrated that coalitions fusing Detroit's pro-unions groups could attempt to undertake broad-based protest that tackled employers, the UAW and government employment regulators in tandem. The subsequent failure of these coalitions was partly related to personal divisions between the locals involved, but as in New York, the problems encountered by pro-union groups also said much about the scale and complexity of the issues these leaders were attempting to address.

The less positive reading of pro-union leaders offered here is not just an attempt to set unrealistic standards on black protest nor to deny the importance of these ultimately frustrating protest efforts outright. Many of the reasons for the relative failures of coordinated protests were not unique to the 1930s. Often combinations of personal antipathies, organizational issues, ideological disagreements, and most notably, the scale of the problems they sought to address, hampered pro-union leaders' effectiveness. In particular, the potential for unionism to present black workers with both contradictory opportunities and problems had placed a greater burden on coordinated strategies of protest that tackled the various parties responsible for employment – unions, government and management – in an appropriate, balanced, fashion tailored to the specificities of local circumstance. That local community leaders largely struggled in this regard speaks not to their inadequacies but to the difficulties that underpinned strategies of labour-related civil rights activism. The implications of this finding do not require a rejection of the importance of pro-union leaders per se. Instead, it is the conclusions of leader-centric accounts of 1930s protest strategies which need to change to characterize the potential inherent in labour-based civil rights strategies in a much more limited way. Leaders who were part of the 'proletarian turn'

should not be positioned front and centre, but understood in the context of the wider developments of the period as seen from the multiple perspective of black workers. As a result of this approach, the foundations of 1930s civil rights protest appear not uniquely successful, but limited and fragile.

Chapter 5: National Organizations' Response to the Rise of Organized Labour and the Fragile Foundations of Labour-Based Civil Rights Protest

Chapter 5 switches from a local to a national focus by exploring the responses of three major national civil rights groups to the rise of organized labour. A conscious effort is made to go beyond focusing solely on the opinions of political leaders and their rhetorical support for organized labour; a focus which has led to 1930s protest being portrayed as having undergone a 'proletarian turn' which successfully advanced a working-class civil rights agenda. Instead, it is argued that the crucial yardstick to measure the effectiveness of national groups' response to the rise of labour must be the extent to which they successfully tackled the issues of concern to black workers. These issues, as Chapters 1 and 2 explained, were determined by the importance of local employment arrangements related to the distribution of black workers and the interconnected control of employment by unions, management and government. Both facets which marked workers' experiences played contradictory roles, offering the potential for progress to be made by harnessing the power of labour activism while presenting unique challenges which often proved problematic. Crucially, as shown by the growing numbers of complaints made by black workers to various parties, a premium had been placed on strategies of protest that identified and tackled sources of discrimination – whether from organized labour, management, government or in combination - in a direct and coordinated fashion.

In the process of assessing three national civil rights groups – the National Negro Congress (NNC), the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – this chapter will highlight several problems with existing readings of the period. Not only have many accounts exaggerated the amount of change in the national institutions by conflating groups into the 'proletarian turn' narrative, the impact and effectiveness of national-level protest has also been overstated. Representing a wider historiographical trend, Thomas Sugrue, for instance, has written that the NNC embodied the 'culmination of the proletarian turn in black politics,' that the Urban League was similarly a 'bellwether of change,' while the shift to

the proletarian style was 'most pronounced' in the NAACP. The successful shift towards workers' concerns, within which support for organized labour was a crucial element, meant that, according to Sugrue, the proposition that 'race and class were linked moved to the center of the black freedom struggle'.[1] Yet when each group's career is measured by tangible achievements alongside rhetorical statements, a much more limited and fragile impression of labour-based civil rights begins to emerge. The limitations of national-level civil rights protest become particularly apparent when considering the importance of coordinated and direct protest strategies, an imperative demonstrated by the experiences of workers outlined in Chapters 1 and 2 and in the occasional instances of successful local protest examined in Chapters 3 and 4.

The NNC, at a national level, proved relatively ineffectual in launching and maintaining, or even participating as a part of, effective protest efforts on behalf of workers. Scholars have devoted much time and energy to rescuing the reputation of the NNC from earlier accounts which portrayed it as a mere front for Communist Party activity. The work of scholars including Lawrence Wittner, Beth Bates and others has performed a valuable service in this regard. Even positive appraisals of the NNC rightly recognize that at a national level the NNC was a relatively weak institution; poorly staffed and improperly equipped to perform as a powerful national political voice, remaining in the words of Sugrue, a 'paper organization'.[2] Thus sympathetic readings attempt to promote the NNC's record by pointing to its local dynamism, its contribution to anti-fascism, or its vicarious impact on the NAACP. The first part of Chapter 5 shows that during the rise of unionism, the NNC managed to bring together a diverse group of organizations and individuals during its first meeting, while making loud pronouncements about the

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[1] Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2009), pp. 36-37; Beth T. Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941', *American Historical Review,* 102 (1997), 340-377 (pp. 363-364).

[2] Sugrue concedes the organization was 'weak at the top,' but argues that the NNC, 'represented the culmination of the proletarian turn in black politics,' which pulled the entire civil rights movement leftward and defined the politics of the decade. Bates argues that the NNC's main impact lay at a local level, through its ability to coordinate militant local civil rights strategies within which support for interracial unionism was a fundamental principle. Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty, pp. 36-37; Beth T. Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941', *American Historical Review,* 102 (1997), 340-377 (pp. 363-364.); Stephen Tuck agrees the NNC's importance 'lay in its wider impact,' and that its 'extraordinary show of commitment to black workers and to confrontation altered the complexion of mainstream protest politics.' Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 196.

importance of unionism to black economic progress. This vocal support did not, however, translate into successful protest actions on behalf of workers, beyond offering support for the unionization drives of CIO unions in some locations, even during the heyday of the NNC during the Communist Party's Popular Front era of coalition participation between 1936-39. After 1939, the influence of the NNC decreased further following the internal divisions opened up by the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact.

One reason that the NNC struggled to maintain a consistent and effective political presence was due to the fact that it was formulated as a coordinating group which brought together other organizations in pursuit of common goals. As a result, the middle part of this chapter, which discusses the role of the Urban League, sheds light on why these coordinated efforts proved difficult to maintain. Despite its representation at NNC meetings and its growing acceptance of the increased importance of workers' issues and trade unionism, the efforts of the Urban League towards this end, notably the Workers' Councils set up by the Workers' Bureau under the direction of Lester Granger, had only limited impact. Although the Urban League has, on occasion, been lumped into 'proletarian turn' readings of the 1930s, the Workers' Councils were better at illuminating the complexities of black decision making regarding unionism. Dependent on local initiative to succeed, the Workers' Councils were unable to provide an effective national level source of coordination for labour-based protest.[3]

The final part of this chapter offers a reinterpretation of the changes wrought by the impact of the Depression and the rise of industrial unionism on the NAACP. Much has been built upon the work of Beth Bates who traced the emergence of a more militant, local, pro-union 'new crowd,' embodied and strengthened by the NNC, who helped reorient the agenda of the NAACP away from 'old guard' gradualist protest methods.[4]

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[3] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty,* p. 35; Nancy Weiss argues that 'despite the rather short-lived radicalism of the Workers' Councils, most people continued, justifiably, to place the League at the conservative end of the spectrum of organizations working in behalf of blacks. Nancy Weiss, *The National Urban League, 1910-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 295.

[4] Bates, 'A New Crowd'; Thomas Sugrue wrote of the war years that, '[m]ore than at any time in its history, the NAACP became a mass membership organization with a populist orientation. 'Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, p. 40; Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein acknowledge the NAACP became 'more friendly' to organized labour during the 1930s, but place most emphasis on the involvement of local radicals and

To be sure, the NAACP's national leadership and its strategic direction were profoundly affected by the events of the 1930s, but rather than undergoing its own 'proletarian turn,' it will be argued here that continuities marked the NAACP's response to the rise of labour, both in terms of protest methods and in relation to its broader underlying political priorities. The organization's national leaders moved to make the NAACP more responsive to the experiences and problems of black workers, but it continued to apply its longstanding liberal political principles – which called for black inclusion in all aspects of the USA's political democracy – to these problems.

That elements of political continuity abounded was no bad thing, for of all national institutions in the 1930s, the NAACP arguably displayed the surest grasp that groups held interrelated control over black economic prospects, and consequently the organization challenged organized labour (particularly the AFL), government departments and officials, as well as company management, to live up to their oft-stated promises of racial equality. The NAACP struggled, however, to maintain consistent and effective protest methods to address these issues. The NAACP did have a somewhat increased appetite for more direct strategies. This was evidenced by its decision to picket the national conventions of the AFL and defence industry employers, and meant the organization played a part in the successes of the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) in 1941. This movement was led by black unionist A. Philip Randolph who had been recently added to the NAACP's national board. Yet rather than constituting a watershed moment, in important ways the MOWM represented a brief moment of successful organizational collaboration, beyond which efforts on behalf of black workers continued along more traditional lines. Most notable was the NAACP's incorporation of cases of workers' discrimination as part of its legal protest agenda, the successes of

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organized labour in creating a labour-oriented civil rights movement, but still cites increase in membership statistics. 'Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement', *Journal of American History,* 75 (1988), 786-811 (p. 787.); Manfred Berg, however, argues that although the NAACP came to support organized labour and the liberal social policies of the New Deal in general, it did so 'without sacrificing its identity on the altar of working-class unity, and it retained its character as an integrationist African American civil rights group.' 'Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War', *Journal of American History*, 94 (2007), 75-96 (p. 80); Steve Valochi argues that, 'Integration emerged as the outcome of a dialectical process of interaction between [the...] political environment of urban liberalism, New Deal reforms, and insurgency on one hand, and the internal dynamics of African American protest thought and action on the other.' Steve Valocchi, 'The Emergence of Integrationist Ideology in the Civil Rights Movement', *Social Problems,* 43 (1996), 116-130 (p. 119).

which have been emphasized by Risa Goluboff, who has argued that the fact that 'NAACP leaders and their lawyers saw the problems of [... black industrial] workers as invitations to legal action represented a sea change in the association's approach to both its economic agenda and its litigation strategy'.[5] Though legal protests achieved success for some, these approaches did not represent an outright reorientation in the NAACP protest agenda. The NAACP tried to influence key developments of the rise of unionism, for instance by lobbying for the inclusion of non-discrimination clauses in the New Deal's labour legislation, but it proved unable to achieve this goal. The difficulties experienced by the NAACP lay not in the failure of its leadership to reorient to class-based strategies of civil rights protest, however. Like the NNC and Urban League, the failure of effective national-level protest lay, instead in the complexity and contradictory nature of the problems of black workers they sought to address. In particular, the key theme running through this chapter is that a demand for coordinated action was being placed upon groups ill-suited to undertake the wide-ranging mass protests shown to be most effective in sporadic examples of success like the 1941 MOWM.

The relative failure of the national groups discussed here to offer a truly effective and coordinated response to the complex dilemmas associated by the rise of organized labour is not altogether surprising. The 1930s was not unique in presenting challenges that often overwhelmed black protest leaders, nor in witnessing debates within black political circles which proved divisive. The more critical interpretation of the success of national groups' successes should not, therefore, be read as offering an overly harsh nor anachronistic criticism of these leaders' opinions and actions. Instead, the key contribution of this chapter is to take up the wider challenge called for by this dissertation to build studies of labour-based civil rights protest upon the experiences of black workers. Their experiences, while complex and contradictory, highlighted that distinct challenges were being presented by the rise of unionism which, in turn, were placing new requirements for coordinated and direct strategies of protest upon those who sought to lead. Indeed in the opening quote of this project, black steelworker Emcy

[5] Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 196-197.

Hightower from Warren, Ohio, wrote to the NAACP speaking of his personal dilemma, saying that, 'I believe you as a helper of our race could give me some helpful advice of my problem'.[6] It is argued here that 'helpful advice' on the program of the CIO was often not enough to constitute the leadership demanded by black workers. Rather than chastising civil rights leaders for failing to offer a comprehensive and effective coordinated response, it is historians' expectations of this era of black protest which need to change. Instead of concentrating on the apparent enthusiasm of growing numbers of black leaders for black participation in organized, a more measured assessment built upon an examination of the tangible success made on behalf of black workers allows a clearer view of the fragile foundations of this era of civil rights protest to emerge.

[6] Letter from Emcy Hightower to NAACP, 31 May 1940, Box II: A335;1, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

The National Negro Congress

In the early years of the Depression, a range of black spokesmen and women began to argue that economic aspects of racial inequality had become of primary importance. As a result, many began to advocate new strategies of protest. Often political voices on a national stage advocated support for black participation within the influential, and in some cases accommodating, labour unions beginning to make organizational gains after the New Deal began in 1933. Some new strands of black political opinion began to operate outside of traditional organizations like the NAACP and National Urban League. Prominent among these was John P. Davis, a graduate of Harvard University, who along with Robert Weaver, set up a Washington-based organization, the Joint Negro Committee on Recovery (JNCR), in 1933 to monitor the impact of New Deal policy on black Americans. The JCNR foreshadowed many of the ideas and principles that found larger expression in the National Negro Congress, of which Davis was a founder and initial national secretary. The JCNR also highlighted that though the primacy of economic issues was clear, coming up with effective solutions was much more difficult.[7]

That economic issues and a corresponding support for labour organization were central to the outlook of Davis, Weaver and the JNCR, was demonstrated by their written statements of the early New Deal years. According to Davis, the JNCR had:

> but one cause to plead, and that cause is the economic advancement of colored people. It is responsible to but one interest, and that interest is the masses of Negro citizens of this country.[8]

This emphasis on economic issues was shared by a variety of would-be national leaders. For this reason, the JCNR initially made common cause with the NAACP, who also desired to gather information on the impacts of both the Depression and New Deal on black America. For Davis, the importance attached to economic issues corresponded with a class-inspired analysis of the problems facing black America, an outlook which

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[7] Weaver himself wrote of the gradual accommodation of black workers to the CIO, in Robert C. Weaver, 'Negro Labor Since 1929', *Journal of Negro History,* 35 (1950), 20-38 (p. 24.).
[8] *Crisis,* December 1933.

correlated with support for participation in interracial organized labour. To this end, in a memo written in February 1934, Davis wrote of the need for a new study of black workers in unions, which he hoped would, 'serve as a starting point to make Negro workers and Negro organizations conscious to the need of labor organization'. Alongside the aim of educating black America, Davis was also conscious of the need to challenge the exclusionary practices of the white-led unions affiliated with the AFL. Davis hoped that a new academic study of black experiences in unions would serve as a 'basis for propaganda and persuasion' with which to challenge the AFL and to convince black workers to join.[9] As Davis wrote elsewhere, black workers were undeserving of the labels frequently attached to them by white labour as strike breakers, arguing that they 'are more often scabbed against than scabbing'.[10] Davis was not ignorant of the problems of racial discrimination in organized labour, but believed that educating white and black workers would provide a means through which to solve black workers' economic problems.

Having identified the need for enlightenment on behalf of workers that would lead to racial equality through organized labour, it was perhaps not surprising that the efforts of the JCNR did little to advance this monumental goal. The JCNR did not engage directly with organized labour of workers. Instead, Davis worked in Washington D.C. to monitor the impact of New Deal policies on black Americans while also seeking to personally lobby individuals within government departments to shape policies to be favourable to blacks. The fact that Davis and Weaver were able to gain even some hearings in the federal government reflected the comparatively responsive attitude of the New Deal administration towards black interests. The work of the JCNR in the early years of the New Deal eventually became part of the 'black cabinet' of informal advisors who sought to lobby on behalf of black interests at a federal level.

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[9] Memo from John P. Davis to Ross M. Coe, 10 February 1934, Papers of the National Negro Congress, Part 1, Reel 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York. [hereafter NNC papers]
[10] John P. Davis, 'The Negro in Labor Struggle Since the New Deal'; John P. Davis 'A Brief Note on the Negro and the New Deal,' Reel 1, NNC Papers.

During the short career of the JCNR between 1933 and 1935 Davis managed to raise the ire of other black political leaders, demonstrating a propensity for inter-organizational conflict that recurred throughout the 1930s. Initially the JCNR cooperated with and drew funding from the NAACP, but national secretary, Walter White, remained wary of collaborating too closely with Davis because of his position outside of established civil rights bureaucracies and his agitative style.[11] White allowed NAACP funds to be used to fund the conference at Howard University in 1935 which issued the call for a National Negro Conference, but was annoyed at the tendency of the leftist activists present to criticise the established leadership programs of the NAACP. White wrote to Charles Houston that, '[t]he feeling, as I gather it, is that John has simply proved again that he is inclined to use anybody and anything'.[12] This reflected not just a difference in personality and style but actually cut to the heart of questions regarding the fundamentals of civil rights protest.

The formation of the National Negro Congress, which further illustrated these political divisions, has been seen by some as being emblematic of the wider 'proletarian turn' occurring during 1930s black politics, within which support for industrial unionism became a political principle that helped unite the NNC's diverse participants. It is easy to overstate the actual level of cooperation and agreement. As subsequent discussions of the Urban League and NAACP will describe, even positive verdicts on the NNC concede that at a national level the organization's influence was only ever slight.[13] The call for a National Negro Congress was the product of a conference in 1935 at Howard University where Davis, alongside many of the 'Young Turks' within the NAACP who had become frustrated by their organization's failure to adopt more direct, economically-focused strategies, called for a new national civil rights coalition to be formed. Despite the involvement of various academics, including Abram Harris and Ralph Bunche in initiating the drive for the NNC, it fell to Davis to do the majority of organizational work. Davis authored the leaflet issued in 1935 to rouse support for a conference to be held at the start of 1936, after a foreword by black trade unionist, A. Philip Randolph. Entitled,

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[11] Kenneth Robert Jancken, *Walter White: Mr NAACP,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), p. 237.
[12] Letter from Walter White to Charles Houston, 22 May 1935, quoted in Jancken, *Walter White: Mr NAACP,* p. 240.
[13] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty,* p. 37.

'Let Us Build a National Negro Congress,' extensive coverage was given to the economic issues affecting black workers. The pamphlet contained a whole section on 'The Negro Industrial Worker,' which included subheadings such as 'sweating Negro workers in the tobacco factories,' 'Longshoremen have little work,' 'Slow death in steam laundries,' and '"Jim-Crow" Unionism'.[14] As in the platform previously outlined in the JCNR, the support for unionism as a fundamental question of political principle did not mean that Davis shied away from acknowledging the problems that frequently attended black workers' involvement with white-led unions. The NNC's leaflet described how some 'white union officials have taught the white union member that the Negro was only fit to be a scab,' while '[m]isguided Negro leaders have drawn Negroes away from the labor movement by pointing to instances where Negroes have not been treated fairly by unions'. According to Davis, where blacks were organized on an equal basis, they became solid supporters of union principles, giving examples of miners in Alabama and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.[15] These problems were viewed not as large-scale roadblocks which needed to be tackled and addressed via means of protest, however. Implicit throughout the platform of the NNC was the idea that education would solve problems of inequality and that once white labour and black leaders had been shown the error of their ways, progress regarding black participation would result.

Reflected in the official stance of the NNC was a view that membership of trade unions was part of the natural interest of all workers, and that black workers' problems were a result of class inequality as much as racial discrimination. This outlook was reflected in the official resolutions of the NNC's first national meeting, held in Chicago in February 1936. One resolution offered a full endorsement of the principles of interracial unionism and offered support to the industrial unionism being advocated by the newly formed CIO.[16] Yet if this emphasis on economic issues in general and on unionism in particular placed the NNC, at an official level, partly in line with issues of genuine concern to black working communities, its organizational structure meant the NNC was unable to operate as an effective national force in ensuring black interests were best served as organized labour rose to power in the second half of the 1930s.

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[14] 'Let Us Build a National Negro Congress,' 1936, NNC Papers, Part 1, Reel 2.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty* p. 34.

First, the organizational set-up of the NNC was small. Though its national president until 1940, A. Philip Randolph, was the most nationally influential figure regarding blacks and trade unionism, he continued to devote the vast majority of his time and energy to working within the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. It was left to Davis, therefore, to act as the main salaried national leader of the NNC throughout the highpoint of the organization's popularity, before the Communist Party retreated from its Popular Front-era of coalition participation in 1939. Although historians have emphasized the effective local work conducted by the NNC, most notably the cooperation between the Chicago NNC and the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee of the CIO in organizing black workers in 1936, the impact of the NNC in other northern cities like New York and Detroit, as noted in Chapter 3, was more limited. Historians who offer generally supportive verdicts of the NNC's activities which seek to challenge earlier accusations that it was merely a Communist front organization, concede its relative lack of national level impact.[17]

The NNC's failure to act as a truly effective coordinating leader in the field of black relations with organized labour was not solely down to structural problems. The ideologically-inspired support offered for the principle of workers organizing across interracial lines also meant the NNC was ill-prepared to challenge organized labour to fulfil its promises of racial equality. The initial call for the NNC offered no solutions to discrimination in labour beyond noting the misapprehensions of black leaders and white unionists, while the occasional brief engagements of Davis in the field of unionism after 1936 also displayed more of a willingness to cultivate close relationships with labour leaders rather than to challenge these leaders to tackle instances of discrimination in their ranks. For instance, writing to Wyndham Mortimer of the UAW in 1937, Davis extended the NNC's 'sincerest congratulations for its brilliant fight being carried on to win automobile workers decent working conditions,' and described the NNC as a 'consistent friend of the C.I.O.'. When it came to reports that segregated locals were being set-up in the effort to organize Ford, in contrast to other leaders such as Roy

[17] See, for example, Lawrence Wittner, 'The NNC: A Reassessment.'

Wilkins of the NAACP who demanded assurances of equality from UAW leaders, Davis spoke only of the need to quash the rumours of segregated unions that were circulating during the UAW's early attempts to organize Ford rather, seemingly accepting that such reports were necessarily false.[18] Two years later when the UAW's organizational drive was renewed at Ford, Davis wrote to UAW President R. J. Thomas with another unadulterated message of support, saying the NNC would 'continue as in the past to give you the united support of the Negro people of America who see in a strong auto workers union another ally in their struggle for democracy and citizenship rights'.[19] Davis thus provided an illustration of the tendency among those supportive of unionization to equate labour rights with the wider struggle for citizenship.

Assessing the overall contribution of the NNC in the field of labour during its relative highpoint of political influence, Davis gave a somewhat predictably positive verdict on its successes. Davis wrote to Frank Crosswaith in New York that despite lack of time and funds, 'we have the right to say that our trade union resolutions have not remained on paper,' highlighting the achievement of union charters for domestic workers in several cities, and the NNC's organizational work among black communities in Chicago and Cleveland and work recently begun in St. Louis.[20] Yet at no stage did the NNC manage to elicit a substantial change in the race-related policies of either government, unions or management, even before the events of the Nazi-Soviet Pact served to further limit its effectiveness. Although never a mere Communist Party front organization, the NNC had undoubtedly benefitted from CP support and rode on a wave of Popular Front-era coalition-building that proved fleeting. The Communist Party's strategy had begun in earnest in the summer of 1935 after the Communist International decided that the importance of the fight against fascism required national party units to cooperate with other leftist groups, especially organized labour. But after the Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed in August 1939 and the Communist Party retreated from Popular Front coalition participation, the NNC, in turn, retreated from its anti-fascism. As a result, the NNC lost whatever influence and power it had at national level, with socialist A. Philip Randolph

[18] Letter from John P. Davis to Wyndham Mortimer, 3 April 1937 , Part 1, Reel 11, NNC Papers.
[19] Letter from John P. Davis to R. J. Thomas, 25 March 1939, Part 1, Reel 17, NNC Papers.
[20] Letter from John P. Davis to Frank Crosswaith, Part 1, Reel 4, NNC Papers.

resigning the presidency during its April 1940 meeting.[21] Ralph Bunche, himself a firm support of the principle of black union participation, argued that the election of Communist Party member Max Yergan, a 'rank neophyte,' to succeed A. Philip Randolph meant that the NNC 'dug its own grave.' Yet Bunche also argued that the NNC had never had a 'mass following even before this meeting,' beyond some local councils in some urban centres in the North.[22]

The NNC's susceptibility to the vagaries of political decision making of Soviet Russia and the Comintern were not the sole reasons for its inability to fully address and solve the priorities of importance to black workers regarding the labour movement. The NNC's programmatic alignment (if not wholehearted attachment) with the political principles of the left did not mean that Davis and other national political leaders were ignorant of or uninterested in problems of discrimination in organized labour. While statements offered militant support for labour, much less was said regarding the problems that faced black workers; problems that abounded even within the comparatively accepting unions of the CIO. Workers' experiences demonstrated that though the origins of discrimination varied according to circumstance, unions gained increasing joint power in shaping black employment prospects and, as such, needed to be tackled and engaged with in harness with these other powers. Despite an awareness of the acute nature of economic problems and its attempt to put forward a rights platform that addressed the crucial questions surrounding unionism, the NNC was constrained by both its structural composition and an intellectual outlook that made it difficult to challenge labour. The NNC proved unable to maintain coordinated pressure that challenged the varying combinations of management, government and union groups who together set limits on, as well as having the power to extend, black workers' economic opportunities.

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[21] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, pp. 38-39.

[22] Ralph J. Bunche, 'The Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations, Book 1 – June 1940,' pp. 368-369, Reel 1, Carnegie-Myrdal Study: The Negro in America Records, Schomburg Center. [hereafter Carnegie-Myrdal Study].

The National Urban League

Part of the reason why the NNC has been portrayed as a stronger and more effective group than its actual influence regarding economic issues and unionism warrants was related to its broad-based composition. The Urban League sent representatives to national gatherings of the NNC who spoke positively of the meetings' achievements, yet the League continued to conduct its own activities in the field of labour independent of the NNC.[23] Before the 1930s, the League had garnered a reputation as an unreliable ally of labour, both through the role of some branches in placing black workers in work that crossed picket lines after the First World War and also as a result of many branches' cultivation of ties with management groups.[24] The foundation of local Workers' Councils in 1934 has been portrayed as a sign that the Urban League was undergoing the broad-based shift to the left of Depression-era politics.[25] The principles and strategies that underpinned the activities of the Workers Councils revealed a more complex stance towards labour. The Urban League did not endorse cooperation with labour because of an attachment to leftist political principles. Instead, the League's actions incorporated partial recognitions and pragmatic adjustments to the altered status of unionism in the New Deal and it offered mixed advice to workers.

In some senses, the leaders of the Urban League demonstrated a grasp of the dilemmas facing large parts of the black workforce. Under the direction of the League's Department of Industrial Relations, led by T. Arnold Hill, a Workers' Bureau was set up in 1934 under the direction of Lester B. Granger. Between 1934 until around 1938, Granger attempted to set up Workers' Councils in various locations across the country

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[23] Lester Granger of the Urban League wrote of the NNC's first meeting: 'There were representatives of New Deal departments and agencies. Old line Republican wheel horses and ambitious young Democrats exchanged arguments; Communists held heated altercations with proponents of the Forty-ninth State Movement; and Garveyites signed the registration book immediately after the Baha'ists.' Lester Granger quoted in Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, p. 33.

[24] A resolution of the NUL in 1919 conference, held in Detroit, actually said that: "We believe in the principles of collective bargaining, and in the theory of cooperation between capital and labor in the settlement of industrial disputes and the management of industry, but in view of the present situation, we advise Negroes in seeking affiliation with any organized labor group to observe caution. We advise them to take jobs as strike breakers only where the union affected has excluded colored men from membership,' Folder, 'Cayton, Horace R. 1934,' Part I: D2, Papers of the Urban League, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

[25] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, p. 36.

with the aim of advising, educating, and supporting black workers in the field of labour. The purpose of these local councils, according to their literature, was:

> To promote the interest of Negro workers within the organized labor movement. To eliminate racial barriers that prevent the free admission of Negro workers into organized labor groups. To promote increased cooperation and understanding between white and Negro workers. To acquaint Negro workers with the need for collective action, and the history and methods of labor organization.[26]

Such a list of goals thus suggested that the Urban League was undergoing a reorientation in outlook to address the issues of workers, not only by advocating unionization but also by offering further help to ensure the fair treatment of workers within labour groups.

It is important to draw a distinction, however, between the Urban League's growing awareness of the need for blacks to participate in unions and the endorsement of unionism offered by those energized by the principles of the left. Discussing the achievements of the Workers Bureau at the end of 1935, Granger emphasized that in 1936 there would be 'a definite attempt to adopt a progressive point of view without becoming entangled in the doctrinaire position of so-called "left-wing" groups and without closing avenues of sympathetic approach to the leaders of organized labor'.[27] Granger was wary of positioning the Workers' Councils too closely to the left, even though some explications of the rationale for the Workers' Councils employed class-based analysis. The second leaflet produced for distribution to workers argued that although blacks had 'common racial interests,' black workers needed to 'remember that 90% of them are members of a working group first of all, and members of a race second'. The councils aimed, therefore, to help 'to show the real interest of black labor, [and] to create friendship and cooperation between white and black workers'.[28] At the

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[26] 'Fools and Cowards Cut Their Own Throats' Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports, 1935.'Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.
[27] 'Final Report' of Workers' Bureau 1935,' Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports, 1935,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.
[28] Labor Leaflet No. 2, 'Where the Trouble Really Lies,' 1936, Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports 1936,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.

same time, Granger remained keen to draw a distinction between the actions of the Urban League and leftist groups. In order to avoid a clash over competing interests, Granger secured dispensation from the National Advisory Committee of the Workers' Councils to hold their meeting in Chicago at the same time as the first meeting of the NNC. As Granger explained, this was done 'in order to offset the danger of duplicate workers' organization growing out of the Congress which might set itself up as a "rival" of the Negro Workers' Councils'. Granger remained hopeful that the 'indications are that the arrangement will be a harmonious one,' but the NNC and Urban League continued to approach the same issues thrown up by the rise of organized labour in different ways.[29]

The fact that the League rejected the line of the hard left was not necessarily a bad thing, for in its written publications and private statements, the majority authored by Granger, the Workers' Councils arguably displayed a firmer recognition than the NNC that labour retained potential to hamper as well as help black employment prospects. This was felt, with much justification, to be a particular problem in the unions affiliated to the AFL. The Workers Bureau organized several protest activities at the AFL's national convention in 1935 in Atlantic City in a move similar to that undertaken by the NAACP in San Francisco the previous year. At the conference, activities included lobbying union locals to adopt anti-discrimination resolutions, seeking support in these efforts from government officials and conducting a letter writing campaign seeking equal treatment from the AFL's leaders. Granger noted that many unionists were supportive, but that others remained 'evasively non-commital [sic]'. Despite their frustrations, the campaign reflected the growing desire to hold organized labour to account regarding questions of equality.[30]

For Granger and the Workers' Councils, as indeed for many other groups traditionally wary of organized labour, by the mid-1930s the key question was no longer whether or

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[29] 'Final Report, Oct 16 to Dec 31 1935,' Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports, 1935,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.
[30] Memo from Lester B. Granger to T. Arnold Hill, 21 October 1935, Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports, 1935,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.

not to support organized labour. Instead, the key issue was which strategy should be adopted in order to best serve black interests. For this reason, the League came to offer support for black membership of organized labour and repudiated overt oppositional activity such as strike breaking. An educational leaflet entitled 'Can We Afford to Strikebreak?' argued that despite the undoubted hostility that had often been shown towards black workers by unions, it would be 'no comfort [...] to "get even" with an enemy and then to know that you have to watch him for the rest of your life to keep him from "getting even" all over again'. Instead, argued the leaflet, it would be better for workers 'to use a strike emergency as a means of persuading a union to abolish discrimination'.[31]

When the organizing drives of the CIO began in 1936, the League remained supportive of labour in principle. The League retained, however, a belief that organized labour still had the potential to negatively impact black workers, despite the comparatively inclusive policies of the CIO. Summarizing developments, a leaflet issued in October 1935 wrote of efforts to set-up company unions in the steel industry in Pittsburgh and Ohio. Rather than rejecting this measure as a mere ploy to deter unionization, the leaflet suggested that, 'Negro workers who are members of these unions should be wide awake and strong in their support to make these employee groups real effective bargaining instruments,' adding that although a 'chief weaknesses of the company union is the fact that it has no strength outside of the plant in which it is organized [...] This new development bids fair to do away with this chief weakness'.[32] During the campaign of the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee some months later, which enjoyed much support from the NNC in Chicago especially, a Workers' Bureau bulletin had to weigh up the varying benefits of black workers allying with either the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) or the company unions being formed by steel companies. The bulletin eventually concluded by advising workers not to join the 'company unions because they had 'thus far failed to secure a satisfactory living wage for the average worker'. While it was noted the SWOC's leaders had promising records of fighting for

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[31] Labor Leaflet No. 6, 'Can We Afford to Strikebreak?' 1936, Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports 1936, Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.
[32] Bulletin No.6 of Workers' Bureau, 30 October 1935, Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports, 1935,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.

equality, these same men needed to be 'watched carefully' to ensure guarantees were held.[33] Around the same time, writing of the split between the CIO and AFL, a Council leaflet was wary of making an overly committal statement, writing that, '[f]or the present, we will say only this, that the greatest hope of Negroes for complete removal of color bars in unions lies in the extension of industrial unionism'.[34] The qualified endorsement of industrial unionism offered here stood in marked contrast to that offered by those aligned with the NNC. Company unionism was not rejected out of hand, but was assessed for its potential to bring benefits to black workers.

The influence of this somewhat ambivalent approach to questions surrounding unionism on the actual success of the Workers' Councils is difficult to assess. In some senses, the more flexible and pragmatic range of advice put forward by the Urban League placed it in line with the variety of courses of action being followed by black workers in local settings. Yet any partial alignment did not mean the Workers' Councils offered a truly influential or effective force through which black workers could pursue their interests regarding labour. Lester Granger gave a positive verdict on the success of his project, writing in 1936 that the Councils had 'reached the point where they are not only recognized as a movement of real permanence, but they are also conceded by many earlier critics to play an important part in shaping the attitudes of Negro labor toward the new and puzzling problems which have arisen under our so-called "New Deal Recovery"'. Detailing some successes of the Councils, including the successful incorporation of tobacco workers in North Carolina into unions, Granger argued that small local impacts of the Councils, when added together, indicated 'a new mass mind existing among the Negro workers of America [which had been] dissatisfied with the middle class leadership of the past, [and] which is seeking to develop new worker leadership'.[35] In this sense, the League had come to recognize the need for new strategies, suggesting that the wider limitations of the Workers Councils did not lie in a completely static or ideologically wrong-headed appraisal of the political situation.

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[33] Bulletin No. 12, August 7, 1936, Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports 1936,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.
[34] Bulletin No. 7, 11 Dec 1935, Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports, 1935,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.
[35] 'The Negro Workers Councils Show Progress,' Folder, 'Workers' Council Bulletins, 1934-1935, Correspondence and Memoranda,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.

More significant was that the Councils were dependent on local initiative to succeed. The Workers' Bureau's records capture a sense that most progress was made in southern areas, possibly by coincidence of these containing a handful of more willing participants. This also suggested the Councils faced competition in northern locations from union groups and other activists, while finding it easier to operate in southern areas by conforming to separatist arrangements. In 1937 successful activity was reported in the Memphis Council, which had helped to organize black brick layers into a separate union and placed 45 of these on a federal housing project. Patterns of racial separatism were also reinforced in another southern branch in Atlanta which helped a separate local of black painters achieve a charter from the AFL-affiliated International Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paper Hangers. Reinforcing the sense that the Councils were achieving more 'successes' in the South, the report for 1937 said that in St. Louis, 'close to the ideal set-up has been achieved' with the local council bringing together eight union representatives and five other community groups, allowing the Council to represent a wide range of the black working community.[36]

In the industrial North, however, local conditions required a response that adjusted to the increased necessity of interracial organization. There were particular problems encountered setting up Workers' Councils in New York and Detroit. The Workers' Bureau had some presence in New York, mainly as a result of the personal efforts of Granger himself who, like the NUL, was based in the city. An education program for workers was set up in Harlem which gave courses in Economics, English, Drama and Music, but in terms of direct activity of a Workers' Council in the field of labour, the League ran into problems. Granger blamed the travails of the New York Council on the negative influence of 'definitely Communist leadership which has alienated a good part of the community'.[37] Individual leaders of the League played roles in labour activism in New York, such as Charles Collier, the Executive Secretary of the New York Urban League, who mediated for striking workers in the Spring Products dispute in 1939.

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[36] 'A Brief Summary of the activities of the Workers' Bureau during 1936 and plans for 1937.' Folder, 'Workers Bureau Reports, 1937,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.

[37] 'Report on the activities of the Workers' Bureau, National Urban League for the period May 24, 1935 – October 15, 1935,' Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports, 1935,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.

While Granger himself worked with the Retail Pressers Union to organize black workers, no Workers Council was set up, leaving leadership in organized labour to be fought over by the nationalistic opponents described in Chapter 3 and divided leftist groups discussed in Chapter 4.[38]

Although local conditions were different in Detroit, the Workers' Councils struggled to gain a foothold there too. Granger spoke at a conference in Detroit organized by the local sponsoring committee of the NNC on behalf of the Workers Councils on the subject of, 'Labor Unions and the Negro – What Do They Offer?', and plans for a Detroit Council were begun, with early membership being drawn from black workers in the building and auto trades.[39] The success of the Workers Councils was dependent, among other things, on the initiative of local leaders, but the head of the Detroit Urban League, John C. Dancy, had acquired a reputation for being anti-labour as a result of his branch's close ties to management groups dating back to before the Depression. Though Dancy was accused of being opposed to unionism he actually adopted the view during the UAW's big victories in 1937 that black participation was inevitable and opposition would be foolhardy. Dancy wrote that though, 'there is discrimination against Negroes even after they are in the union, this can be controlled [...] only by getting into the union and fighting it out from within [...] It is one of the most controversial matters at this time and Negroes must give thought to it'.[40] The Workers' Council planned for Detroit never developed into a noticeable force, likely as a result not only of Dancy's own personal ambivalence on labour questions but also of the competition such a group would have received from the other pro-labour groups described in the previous chapter.

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[38] Workers' Bureau report for the Period Jan 1 1935 to May 23 1935, Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports, 1935,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.; Collier's involvement referred to in Telegram from WW to LaG, 15 Feb 1939,, NAACP Box I: C-414; 14.

[39] 'Final Report' of Workers' Bureau 1935, Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports, 1935,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.; 'Final report, Oct 16 to Dec 31 1935', Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports, 1935,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.

[40] John C. Dancy to Sneed, 8 March 1937, Box 3; 33, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan; Meier and Rudwick highlight the Detroit Urban League's endorsement of strike breaking at Timken Axle during a strike in 1921, the failure of Workers' Councils in Detroit in 1934 because branch leader John C. Dancy argued they would serve no purpose since Detroit was an open shop town, and Dancy's criticism of racial discrimination within the A.F.L. in a letter in 1934. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 19-20.

The problems experienced by the Urban League in general, and the Workers' Councils in particular, were the result of practical rather than ideological failures. This, in turn, reflected the scale and complexity of issues facing workers which they sought to address. The success of Councils was dependent on the support of local leaders taking the initiative in setting up units, usually as a sub-division of existing Urban League branches. 52 branches were originally created in 1934, but by 1935 only 39 of these remained active. These 39 included branches in the west in Los Angeles, in the South in Louisville, Jackson and Atlanta, in the industrial mid-west in Detroit (even though it had a negligible impact) and in east coast cities including Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.[41] A continuation of a decline in the activity of the Councils was also reported in 1937, saying that only 25 continued to 'show evidence of some type of activity.' Granger attributed this marked decrease to a lack of field work conducted by the national Workers Bureau to energize their local units. Granger argued that the 'correspondence and records of the Bureau strongly indicate a widespread interest and need for the services of a Workers' Council program [but there was need for...] personal consultation with Council officers if their efforts are to be directed into intelligent application of the possibilities of this program'.[42] The decline of the Councils to the point where almost all petered out by 1938 reflected numerous flaws in their design, but as Granger correctly pointed, not the irrelevance of their intended purpose.

Most of the Councils' activities at a national level consisted of Granger's personal letter-writing campaigns and production of advice leaflets; actions which provide a useful window on feelings towards unionism but proved less effective at galvanizing local groups into action. Ralph Bunche wrote in 1940 that during the 1930s the Urban League did not alter course to pursue strategies of working class unity, but pursued policies of 'expediency and conciliation toward organized labor, for it [...] realized that the Negro could obtain work more readily if he did not win the hostility of the labor unions'.[43] Bunche's apt characterization suggests the outlook of the Urban League

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[41] 'Report on the activities of the Workers' Bureau, National Urban League for the Period May 24, 1935 – October 15, 1935,' Folder, 'Workers' Bureau Reports, 1935.' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.
[42] 'Brief Summary' Oct 16 to Dec 31 1937, Folder, 'Workers Bureau Reports, 1937,' Part I: D9, Papers of the Urban League.
[43] Ralph J. Bunche, 'The Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations, Book 1 – June 1940.' pp. 269-270.

regarding organized labour was markedly different from groups like the NNC, and did not fit into the 'proletarian turn' readings employed by some historians: the ultimate frustration of the Urban League to provide successful, lasting and decisive leadership for black workers in the field of unionism was not due to their ideological inadequacies, however, but rather reflected the complexity of the problems presented to black America by the rise of organized labour, and the inherent difficulties facing groups who sought to pursue strategies in response that were national in scope.

The NAACP

The national leaders of the NAACP had to adopt distinct stances towards the interrelated changes affecting workers in the 1930s. This included the labour legislation of the New Deal in 1933 and 1935, the split between the AFL and CIO in 1935 and the role of government in controlling the US economy as the nation geared up for entry into the Second World War in 1941. Much recent scholarship has emphasized the scale of the programmatic shift undergone by the organization in the 1930s, but when the changes of the 1930s are set in the context of the NAACP's long term strategy, some important continuities come to light. This continuity actually meant the NAACP's national leaders appeared to recognize that labour, government and management all needed to be held to account to treat black workers on an inclusive basis. The continuing preference for legal protest and legislative lobbying proved, in the final analysis, unable to bring about a truly effective reorientation to successfully address the complex problems of black workers regarding organized labour.

The principles that shaped the NAACP's stance on labour issues had been in place since its founding after the Springfield, Illinois, race riot in 1909. Founded by an interracial group of liberal leaders, the NAACP reflected wider Progressive-era political and cultural values common to elements of both black and white America and drew the majority of its financial support from white philanthropic sources. The NAACP saw the full integration of black Americans into 'mainstream' US society as its ultimate goal.[44] Drawing upon Progressive-era political currents of reform which advocated moralistic and voluntarist solutions to social problems, the NAACP was led from the outset by a set of leaders whose own relative rise demonstrated the potential for countering and dismantling segregation and extending the benefits of American democracy to all US

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[44] According to Kevin Gaines, from the start the NAACP adopted a 'liberal' program, centred on campaigns against lynching and legal protests against segregation that followed 'the assumptions of [racial] uplift, (and) relied on class distinctions to claim both legal standing and evidence of discrimination or injury.' Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 11; Manfred Berg sums up the NAACP's initial and subsequent main ideology as predicated upon a 'democratic nationalism that combined the universalist American creed of freedom, equality, and democracy with traditional patriotism.' Manfred Berg, 'Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War', 78.

citizens.[45] Within this liberal reformist agenda that focused heavily on racism and its associated problems, there was little room for ideas geared towards left-wing radicalism. More fundamentally, economic issues were peripheral to the NAACP's focus on 'racial' issues such as segregation, lynching, and disenfranchisement via reforming existing systems rather than radical attempts to re-order political and social structures.[46] This commitment to reforming existing systems to include blacks, as opposed to agitating for a substantial reworking of these political and social structures, continued to serve as a guiding principle throughout the NAACP's twentieth century career.

A brief survey of the policies of the NAACP regarding unionism before the New Deal highlights that the organization was never straightforwardly anti-labour. After the first large-scale wave of South to North migrations spurred by the demand for industrial labour in the North during the First World War, occasional pronouncements made by its leaders discussed the principles of interracial unionism. On the whole, it was agreed that black interests were best served by cooperating with white-led unions. William Pickens, a future field secretary of the NAACP, exemplified the dilemmas of black workers in his publication the *New Negro*, in 1916:

> The relation of the Negro to trade unionism shows that he is either a help or a hindrance to industrial freedom in America: he must be in the union in terms of equality, or, if out of the union, he will be a strike-breaker and wage-reducer, a weapon of the employer against the white employee.[47]

Though the concerns of black industrial workers were not central to their programme and many were quick to point out that organized labour had an incredibly patchy record on racial equality, observers in the early NAACP were aware of the dilemmas which

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[45] On how the Niagara Movement foreshadowed the formation of the NAACP, see Angela Jones, 'The Niagara Movement, 1905-1910: A Revisionist Approach to the Social History of the Civil Rights Movement,' *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 23 (2010), 454-500.
[46] Kevin R. Anderson, *Agitations: Ideologies and Strategies in African American Politics,* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010), pp. 33-34, p. 47, p. 54.
[47] Sheldon Avery, *Up From Washington: William Pickens and the Negro Struggle for Equality, 1900-1954,* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), p. 44.

unionism presented black Americans and of the need for equality within unions long before organized labour made its substantial advances in the 1930s.

The NAACP was sporadically involved in labour issues in the 1920s. In 1919 following the wave of unionization and the anti-labour backlash that accompanied the end of the First World War, the NAACP came to the defence of black workers facing recriminations for having tried to organize into a union in Arkansas. Most of the clients involved in the NAACP's legal cases in its first two decades and beyond were black professionals, though the organization involved itself in legal efforts to stop the practice of agricultural peonage in Arkansas and across the South. The NAACP offered some rhetorical support for A. Philip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) in the 1920s, and at the request of New York trade unionist Frank Crosswaith, made some efforts to protest discrimination against black workers in the International Upholsters Union.[48] The main thrust of the NAACP's work in the 1920s, however, remained directed towards legal challenges to various aspects of segregation, particularly attempts to secure the vote, and protests over lynching. The national leadership, led by executive secretary James Weldon Johnson, was largely content to leave economic and employment issues to either black trades unions like the BSCP or the Urban League. Despite its lack of close involvement, the NAACP was never 'anti-union' at an official level, nor did it encourage strike breaking.

A desire to achieve equality for blacks within the political democracy of the USA remained intact throughout the 1930s. Younger activists within the NAACP who advocated a fundamental reworking of the organization's agenda met with relatively little success. In the first half of the 1930s, at national conventions, in specially convened conferences such as the Second Amenia Conference and the Rosenwald Conference in 1933, and in the Harris Report which followed, a number of younger activists challenged the NAACP to reorient its program. Led by a small group of academics including Abram Harris, E. Franklin Frazier and Ralph Bunche, who collectively became known as the 'Young Turks', the problems facing black America

[48]Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, p. 252; Jancken, *Walter White: Mr NAACP*, pp. 234-235.

were publicly debated.[49] The preponderance of Young Turks who were schooled in the social sciences was related to their use of class as a primary analytical tool in their discussions. It also reflected their status as the first generation of would-be leaders in the NAACP who were not so closely wedded to Progressive-era commitments to reformist civil rights strategies.[50] From a shared agreement on the importance of workers and economics flowed an ideological and intellectual endorsement of black participation in the labour movement; this support differed markedly from the more limited endorsement of unionism previously offered by the NAACP.

The fundamental premise that economic issues needed addressing was not the sole preserve of these younger activists on the left; nor was the idea entirely new to the 1930s.[51] Part of the disagreement between the younger activists at Amenia and established leaders of the NAACP like Pickens and Du Bois was questions of how militant any tactics to address a new economic agenda would be. Du Bois did not, therefore, wholeheartedly reject the ideas of these younger activists, and wrote of the Young Turks at Amenia that:

> On the whole, they were inspiring [...] Their difficulty was mainly the difficulty of all youth. Inspired and swept on by its vision, it does not know or rightly interpret the past and is apt to be too hurried carefully to study the present.

Du Bois pointed out that several of the suggestions made by the younger delegates on the need to study the racial impacts and policies of unions and the government were already receiving attention from the NAACP.[52]

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[49] On importance placed on class in their outlooks, see Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 9-15.

[50] On the Rosenwald Conference, see *Crisis*, July 1933; On Amenia, see *Crisis*, October 1933.

[51] As Shelton Avery wrote of the debates at the Amenia Conference, 'Neither Pickens nor [W.E.B.] Du Bois, both of whom were singled out for criticism at Amenia, disagreed with the young blacks' emphasis on economic concerns. There was nothing new in the "Young Turks'" contention that it was impossible to improve the "status and security of white labor without making an identical improvement in the status and security of Negro labor." Sheldon Avery, *Up From Washington*, p. 131.

[52] *Crisis*, October 1933.

The resolutions adopted at Amenia in 1933 reflected the increased tendency to conceptualize the problems of black workers in class terminology redolent of Marxism. The first resolution thus began:

> *The primary problem is economic.* [...] the whole system of private property and private profit is being called into question [...] Heretofore there has been slight recognition by Negro labor or Negro leaders of the significance of this exploitation in the economic order.[53]

This class-infused analysis provided an effective analytical tool both to explain the problems being experienced by black workers during the Depression, and to challenge the failure of established leaders to fully realize and address economic issues. The principle of labour organization was central to the proposed solutions. The resolutions of the Amenia Conference thus continued:

> The Negro worker must be made conscious of his relation to white labor and the white worker must be made conscious that the purposes of labor, immediate or ultimate cannot be achieved, without full participation by the Negro worker. The traditional labor movement as based upon craft autonomy and separatism which is non-political in outlook and centering its attention upon the control of jobs and wages for the minority of skilled white workers is an ineffective agency for aligning white and black labor for the larger labor objectives [...] *These objectives* can only be attained through a new labor movement.[54]

While the younger delegates responsible for the adoption of this resolution partly acknowledged the problems associated with racial discrimination in the labour movement, their belief in unionism on grounds of political principle overrode any hesitations. A reformed version of interracial trade unionism was seen as a necessary starting point for the achievement of other desirable reformist aims including pensions, unemployment insurance and the removal of child labour.

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[53] *Crisis*, October 1933.
[54] *Crisis*, October 1933.

In its officially adopted form at Amenia, support for organized labour rejected an outright alliance with the far-left politics of the Communist or Socialist Parties.[55] Instead, the principles espoused at the Amenia Conference, and in the subsequent Harris Report written the following year in 1934, adopted the more limited but still radical goal of refocusing the goals of the NAACP towards an agenda that employed conceptions of class in order to address the problems of black workers. Commissioned by NAACP President Joel Spingarn and authored in the main by Abram Harris, the Harris Report advocated a reorientation of the NAACP's priorities to work for the inclusion of black workers in an interracial labour movement. The report also recommended that, as Jonathan Scott Holloway put it, that the NAACP transform itself to become 'something akin to a politically active workers' university'.[56] Entitled, 'The Negro Worker: A Problem of Progressive Labor Action,' Harris advocated '[v]igorous efforts to organize Negroes as well as white workers in all trades and industries' as well as a:

> thorough-going and persistent workers' educational movement among Negro workers [which would...] seek to break down the influence of opportunistic, middle-class leaders among the Negroes who are trying to build up a Negro petty capitalism, and who teach Negro workers that their economic interest lies on the side of the employer rather than that of their fellow workers.[57]

The failure of the NAACP to adopt the recommendations of the Harris Report has drawn much comment from historians, with Beth Bates, for instance, arguing that it meant that 'the old–guard approach and tactics of White strongly influenced the NAACP agenda,' in subsequent years, with lynching chosen as a unifying cause for the organization to pursue.[58] Walter White, however, rejected this platform of interracial labour unity as an 'untenable' proposition given the lack of interest from the AFL before the formation of

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[55] *Crisis,* October 1933.
[56] Holloway, *Confronting the Veil,* p. 98.
[57] *Crisis,* March 1930.
[58] Bates, 'A New Crowd,' 356-357; Simon Topping said of the Harris Report that, '[n]either Walter White nor the majority of the Board of Directors were supportive of the proposed shift to the ideological left, and frustrated Harris resigned the next year.' Simon Topping, '"Supporting Our Friends and Defeating Our Enemies": Militancy and Nonpartisanship in the NAACP, 1936-1948,' *Journal of African American History,* 89 (2004), 17-35 (p. 19.); Meier and Bracey, however, afford the report a more significant role, arguing that it did at least 'sensitize the NAACP leadership to the importance of the relationship between black and white workers (which meant it had)... long-range consequences for the organization,' but they provide no specific evidence for this. August Meier and John H. Bracey, Jr., 'The NAACP as a Reform Movement, 1909-1965: "To Reach the Conscience of America,"' *Journal of Southern History,* 59 (1993), 3-30 (p. 18.).

the CIO.[59] The failure to adopt the recommendations of the Harris Report did not mean that the policies of the NAACP at a national level remained in stasis. Those who led the organization in the important period between the mid-1930s and early 1940s, including White, Wilkins, Marshall and Houston, oversaw an important shift to attempt to address the concerns of workers, but the methods and principles with which these issues were tackled remained based on the principle that all groups – including labour, management and government groups – needed to be held to account to live up to their statements of racial equality.

It was entirely logical for the NAACP, through its executive secretary Walter White, to reject racially separate locals and advocate black inclusion in mainstream unions on equal terms. Commenting on the attempts of Sufi Abdul Hamid to achieve a charter for his nationalistic Afro-American Federation of Labor in New York in 1935, White wrote that, 'a jim-crow federation of labor is not the wisest approach'.[60] When confronted by a similar instance where the President of the Roanoke NAACP branch asked his opinion on whether black rail workers should seek to combat discrimination by lobbying for recognition as a separate group in impending legislation, White argued such a move would be 'exceedingly unwise'.[61] When the CIO, which promised to organize across racial, ethnic and religious line, began to make organizational inroads in 1936 and 1937, White extended these earlier principles and sought personal assurances from the CIO's leader John L. Lewis that black workers would be treated on an equal basis in its locals. Regarding the United Automobile Workers (UAW), White personally appealed to its leader, Homer Martin, to clarify the UAW's position on racial equality. The response from Martin, who said 'our program comprehends the elimination of prejudice as well as discrimination and proposes to protect the Negro workers with the full strength of our union,' was much-publicized by the NAACP, and was seen to constitute a welcome change to the prevarication of the AFL's national leadership.[62]

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[59] Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, p. 91.
[60] Letter from Walter White to Elmer Carter, 17 July 1935, Box I: C-322;2, NAACP Papers.
[61] Letter from J.A Reynolds to Walter White, 18 December 1936, Part I; Box C-283, Folder: 'Unions 1936-1939, General,' NAACP Papers.
[62] Jancken, *Walter White: Mr NAACP,* p. 244; Homer Martin's response was reported in, *Crisis*, May 1937.

White appeared to become more comfortable regarding the prospects of black participation in unions after the formation of the CIO. White's primary focus remained on securing guarantees of equal treatment rather than accepting the principle of a labour-aligned, working-class oriented civil rights movement. Demonstrating a command of the available literature on the topic, White wrote in 1939 that he believed black workers benefitted by union membership, provided 'the union is honest in its attitude towards Negro workers and workers generally and [...] the Negro workers themselves understand fully the implications of organization'. White argued there had been a 'growth of what may be termed class consciousness on the part of Negro workers,' and accepted there was a 'very marked difference in regard to Negro labor in the policies of the A.F. of L. and the C.I.O.'. But the overriding concern, as his letter concluded, was to achieve equality for blacks within existing democratic systems:

> As to the political objectives which Negro labor unionists should have, my opinion is that they should be the same as that of trade unionists and citizens generally. Either we are going to build in America a true democracy without stupid lines of race, creed or color, which shall be for the benefit of all citizens, or else we are going to have a broadening of the gaps between various racial and other groups which will mean disaster for democracy as a whole.[63]

White's stance on unionism was predicated on liberal reformist principles rather than left-wing approaches that called for a reworking of societal and economic structures.

Through this application of liberal political principles which called for the inclusion of black workers on equal terms in all areas of US political life, the NAACP national branch engaged in a range of activities: they lobbied the government for the inclusion of anti-discrimination clauses in labour legislation, challenged unions to outlaw discriminatory practices, occasionally exhorted the management of influential firms to employ on a racially equitable basis, and, when required to, condemned black strike breaking and advocated black union participation.[64] An early instance where the NAACP had to

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[63] 'Biennial Convention and Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration of BSCP, New York City, Report and Minutes,' Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Collection, Box 2, Folder 7, Schomburg Center.

[64] Another part of these efforts, the NAACP briefly collaborated with the Joint Committee on National Recovery (JCNR) to monitor the racial practices of the National Recovery Administration's (NRA)

respond to the changed status of organized labour in the New Deal was in relation to section 7 (a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in 1933. The provisions of 7 (a), which legally accommodated systems of collective bargaining, were a source of concern to the NAACP not because leaders like Executive Secretary Walter White opposed the principles of organized labour per se, but because he and others feared that discrimination in local unions would lead to the exclusion of black workers in employment.[65] Walter White had attempted to personally engage with the early labour legislation of the New Deal being drafted. Writing to Labor Secretary Frances Perkins in March 1933, White wrote that 'we strongly urge inclusion of the Negro in the conference called by you for Friday to discuss immediate relief measures and permanent improvement of industrial standards'. Perkins politely but firmly replied that the conferences on these issues would be 'limited to presidents and representatives of organized labor'. White replied explaining he was not seeking for the NAACP to take part, but merely wanted the 'inclusion of a spokesman who could tell of the Negro's acute problem,' relating to the exclusion of blacks in many unions by practice and custom.[66] The guarantees sought by White were not forthcoming, however, and the National Recovery Administration, a creation of the NIRA, subsequently drew complaint from the NAACP's leaders for its failure to guarantee equality for black Americans as part of its attempts to create industrial codes. An editorial written by Du Bois' replacement at the *Crisis,* Roy Wilkins, who was generally favourable to organized labour in principle, commented upon the departure of NRA chief General Johnson that '[t]here will be few, if any, tears shed by colored people over the resignation.' Wilkins argued that the 'maneuvers [sic] of union labor in shutting out Negro workers while taking advantage of the collective bargaining clause of section 7A brought no frown to his brow'.[67] Wilkins thus held discriminatory unions and government inaction jointly responsible for the exclusion and mistreatment of black workers in early New Deal measures that dealt with organized labour.

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industrial codes, see Dona Hamilton Cooper, 'The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and New Deal Reform Legislation: A Dual Agenda,' *Social Service Review*, 68 (1994), 488-502 (p. 491.); *Crisis,* December 1933.

[65] Cooper, 'The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and New Deal Reform Legislation: A Dual Agenda,' 492.

[66] Telegram from Walter White to Frances Perkins, Frances Perkins to Walter White on 29 March, and Letter from Walter White to Frances Perkins, 30 March 1933, Box I: C-321;10, NAACP Papers.

[67] *Crisis*, November 1934.

Two years later, when the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA, frequently known as the Wagner Act) was tabled to replace the NIRA, similar concerns remained. The NRLA provided legal support for the right to organize under systems of collective bargaining and gave federal-level backing for closed-shop arrangements between unions and management. The NAACP feared black workers would be excluded from many of these arrangements because of discriminatory practices from local unions, and that 'closed shops' would become 'white shops'.[68] In order to tackle these problems, White personally attempted to lobby Senator Robert Wagner, sponsor of the bill, as well as Michigan Senator James Couzens. Having failed in these attempts, primarily because the bill required the support of the AFL who opposed a non-discrimination clause, the goal of amending the Act to include a non-discrimination clause became part of the NAACP's official program. A resolution adopted at the NAACP national conference in 1939 included this platform as part of its conditions for endorsing black union support.[69] Another concerted but unsuccessful attempt to amend the bill was made in 1940 by targeted lobbying of representative Tom Hennings of St. Louis.[70] The failure to secure these guarantees lay not only through the ineffectual nature of these lobbying efforts of the NAACP but with the recalcitrance of sections of organized labour and the unwillingness of federal legislators to jeopardize their projects for the cause of racial inclusion.[71] The failure of federal legislation to secure guarantees of equality in its employment legislation, at the same time as it opened up potential new avenues for black union participation also placed significant obstacles in the path of black economic progress that continued to vex civil rights activists well into the post-war period.

The failure to ensure anti-discrimination measures in key legislation relating to labour was a critical, if unsurprising, blow to the NAACP and the workers whom they sought to

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[68] Cooper, 'The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and New Deal Reform Legislation', 493.
[69] *Crisis*, September 1939.
[70] Jancken, *Walter White: Mr NAACP,* pp. 241-242.
[71] Senator Wagner, architect of the NLRA, responded to protests from the Kansas City Urban League saying, 'nothing would shock me more than to find a measure which I have introduced to protect all working men used as an instrument to discriminate against some of them.' Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 190.

help. The resistance of labour leaders of the AFL had been partly responsible for the failure of these measures, and for this reason as well as the general discrimination that continued to be practiced in various locals of affiliated unions, the NAACP began to engage in some direct protests against the AFL. Although traditional protest methods of personal lobbying and letter writing continued to dominate, the decision to picket the conventions of the AFL represented a departure in terms of tactics. The NAACP organized pickets of the AFL's national convention in San Francisco in 1934 to draw publicity and attention to the issue of labour union discrimination. As White wrote to newspaperman Ludwell Denny, '[p]icketing the picketers should have some news value, don't you think?' and press releases covering the picketing were sent by the NAACP to the major press associations. In order to achieve a 'dramatic and effective stroke for twelve million Negro workers,' the national branch advised the San Francisco branch to recruit, 'well-dressed, but not too well-dressed, and level-headed, intelligent persons representing both sexes, manual workers, professional men'. The idea for the pickets had been John P. Davis's, an idea White described as 'a capital one [which it was hoped would...] focus attention at this critical moment on the dire plight in which Negro labor is'.[72] This moment of collaboration between Davis and the NAACP was relatively brief, however, and though the NAACP continued to picket the AFL's conventions after 1934, the views of the national leadership and those towards the left of black politics continued to diverge after 1935.

This divergence was demonstrated by a resolution adopted at the NAACP's national conference in 1935. This resolution encapsulated the widely held belief among the NAACP's leaders and many of its members that although organized labour should not be opposed in principle, unions should be directly challenged to reform their discriminatory practices:

> We welcome the growth of labor consciousness but we again warn the leadership of organized white labor, especially American Federation of Labor and railroad brotherhoods, they can never attain freedom for their groups by

[72] Letter from Walter White to Ludwell Denny, 25 Sep 1934, Telegrams from Walter White to Associated press, United Press and International News Service, 4 October 1934, Letter to Leland Hawkins, 25 Sept 1934, Letter from Walter White to John P.Davis, 26 Sept 1934, Box I: C-413;5, NAACP Papers.; On picketing of San Francisco convention, see *Detroit Tribune*, 20 October 1934.

> climbing on the backs of black labor. We urge all workers, white and black, to speed industrial as against craft unionism.[73]

According to left-wing activist Loren Miller, the critical reference to the AFL was inserted against the wishes of the pro-union delegates at the conference.[74] Whereas those on the left of black politics, broadly defined, including Miller, Davis and the Young Turks within the NAACP, came to be more enthusiastic supporters of labour, especially after the formation of the CIO in 1935, the official pronouncements of the NAACP and the actions of its national leaders remained focused on challenging labour leaders over discrimination rather than advocating unionism to its larger black constituency.

The frustrations that resulted from attempts made to personally lobby influential labour leaders were captured in several written exchanges. In October 1933, White urged the head of the AFL, William Green, to go on record 'as unequivocally opposing wage differentials based on race and color and geographical differentials which [constituted] racial discrimination,' but achieved a typically non-committal answer that attempted to abdicate any personal responsibility, with Green writing he felt sure the issue would be 'given consideration and attention at the earliest possible date'.[75] Four years later, White took the same approach when rumours hinted at a rapprochement between the AFL and CIO, writing to the heads of both to solicit guarantees for equal treatment for black workers.[76] Yet the NAACP, and White in particular, remained frustrated with the lack of action by the AFL in particular. One particularly high profile case, involving the exclusionary practices of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Ship Builders and Helpers who had been given a defence contract in the Tampa, Florida, shipyards in 1938, drew particular attention from the national branch, and White became personally involved in the case making numerous unsuccessful appeals to both Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt to order a change in union policy.[77]

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[73] *Crisis,* August 1935.
[74] Loren Miller, 'How "Left" Is the N.A.A.C.P.?' *New Masses*, Vol. 16, 16 July 1935.
[75] Telegram from Walter White to William Green, 3 October 1933, Box I: C-322;1, NAACP Papers.
[76] Telegrams from Walter White to William Green and John L. Lewis, 27 October 1937, Box I: C-323;1 NAACP Papers.
[77] *Crisis,* September 1939; Jancken, *Walter White: Mr NAACP*, pp. 242-243.

Other leaders at the top of the NAACP, in particular Roy Wilkins, had a slightly different emphasis. Wilkins gave a more positive verdict on the promise of industrial unionism through the CIO while challenging discriminatory employers in a more direct fashion. Wilkins' more positive verdict on the CIO was reflected in several editorials in the *Crisis,* which he edited following Du Bois' resignation in 1934.[78] An editorial in the December 1935 *Crisis*, entitled 'Some Hope for Negro Labor,' mentioned the relatively favourable racial record of the CIO's early leaders, John L. Lewis, David Dubinksy and Sidney Hillman.[79] In 1936, discussing how the developments in labour might impact black Americans, the *Crisis* argued that despite histories of antagonism, black and white workers shared a 'common enemy [...] that has too long played the one against the other for the exploitation of both,' suggesting that though labour was a far from perfect ally, employers represented an even more serious impediment to black economic progress.[80]

Wilkins' support still corresponded with challenges to the leaders of the CIO regarding reported instances of discrimination. One such high profile case occurred in April 1937 over reports that the UAW had set up racially separate locals at Chrysler and as part of the effort to organize Ford Motor Company. Wilkins wrote directly to Homer Martin, President of the UAW asking him to verify the truth of these reports and to lay 'down the general policy in as much detail as you care to make it of the UAW and the CIO on Negro workers'. The reply from Martin, which denied the rumours and said the UAW's policy was to organize without regard to race, creed or color, was well-publicized by the NAACP.[81] Despite the caveats placed on the national branch's endorsement of the UAW, the perception that the organization had become too friendly to the UAW caused stormy rows between delegates when the NAACP's national conference was held in Detroit in July 1937. Responding to criticisms made by Reverend Daniel who lambasted Wilkins,

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[78] As a founding member and editor of its official monthly publication, the *Crisis,* Du Bois had, before the 1930s, offered support to unionism. But in May 1930, Du Bois wrote that he had 'entirely lost faith in the American Federation of Labor and its attitude toward Negroes.' Du Bois cited the refusal of AFL leader William Green to deal with discriminatory affiliated unions as having led to his disillusionment, alongside the fact that, in his opinion, most unions had continued to discriminate against and exclude black workers. The influence of Du Bois on the NAACP decreased in the early 1930s, to the point where he left the organization in 1934 following a disagreement with Executive Secretary Walter White over the issue of self-segregation. *Crisis,* July 1912; *Crisis*, May 1930.

[79] *Crisis,* December 1935.

[80] *Crisis,* September 1936..

[81] Letter from Roy Wilkins to Homer Martin, 1 April 1937, and Homer Martin to Roy Wilkins, 22 April 1937, Box I: C-322;9, NAACP Papers.

though not by name, for 'sitting in a swivel chair in New York' and attempting to interfere with local employment arrangements, Wilkins moved to defend his and the national branch's stance on organized labour. Wilkins responded to Detroit's pro-Ford clergy that these 'local arrangements of various situations are a hangover from the paternalism of antebellum and post Civil War days,' and argued the NAACP could not have ignored a topic of such critical importance as unionism and that pro-Ford supporters in Detroit would be wise to study and visit the company's other plants where discrimination abounded.[82]

Wilkins' interventions had not signalled a marked shift in the overall opinion among leaders of the NAACP towards the principles of organized labour. Instead, they signalled a recognition that the NAACP needed to appear more responsive to the concerns of black workers. Among the more savvy of the NAACP's national leaders in this regard, Wilkins wrote to White in April 1939 and endorsed the need to put in place active Youth Congresses in the NAACP, writing, 'I think we ought to get wise to the fact that nothing is so important to our young people and their adult friends than job opportunities and security'. In the same letter, as part of this strategy, Wilkins outlined his plans to get Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP's legal department to take up the cause of black firemen in Tuscambia. Wilkins had personally met with seven of them who wanted both the advice and support of the NAACP in their attempts to get the Southern Railway and the firemen's union to uphold a contract which stipulated a certain percentage of black employees which were not being met. Having sent a copy of the contract to Marshall, Wilkins wrote, 'I vote for taking an interest in this thing. If we can turn one of these tricks, the labouring groups over the country will be for us 100%. Now they think we are all right, but not able to help them much'.[83] Following this up with a letter to Marshall in May 1939, Wilkins said he believed some 5000 jobs were at stake in the case, and that 'if we can do a good job with these men we will make a reputation for the Association and win a lot of substantial supporters [but warned] If we make a flop with them, then we lose their support'.[84] A press release issued by the NAACP the same month suggested Marshall had attended a convention of the

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[82] *Crisis,* September 1937.
[83] Letter from Roy Wilkins to Walter White, 26 April 1939, Box C-284;1, NAACP Papers.
[84] Letter from Roy Wilkins to Thurgood Marshall, 12 May 1939, Box C-284;1, NAACP Papers.

International Association of Railway Employees and agreed to provide legal assistance for the firemen, brakemen, switchmen, porters and others in keeping with the association's plan to broaden its activities in the field of job security.[85] These activities had been spurred to a large extent by the demands being placed upon the organization by the reports it was sent from around the country.

The NAACP began to direct its existing resources in the late 1930s to address the challenges being placed upon it by workers' cases of discrimination. Marshall's efforts in the case of southern rail workers exemplified the NAACP's attempts to apply legal as well as moral pressure on discriminatory labour groups. The formation of the Workers Fund within the Legal Department of the NAACP represented the organization's most obvious attempt to retain its relevance and maintain support in the face of an array of competing dissatisfied voices in black politics. There were three main areas of legal protest undertaken on behalf of black industrial workers. First, the actions taken in protest over the discrimination of black workers in closed shop arrangements in boilermakers' unions in San Francisco; second, in the legal protests pursued though the creation of the State Commission Against Discrimination (SCAD) in New York after 1945; and third in the protests against the discrimination against black workers in railway unions.[86] According to Goluboff, the very fact these cases were taken up at all represented a 'sea change' in the NAACP's programme, yet as this discussion has demonstrated, a distinction needs to be made between the issues which were addressed and the tactics and ideas which informed these decisions.[87] Although the very fact the NAACP sought to attempt to pursue cases and causes of black workers was an important development in its legal strategy, there was no 'sea change' in the overarching principles which underpinned the strategic orientation of the organization. The NAACP did not reject an alliance with the federal government in favour of an alliance with organized labour. The emphasis remained on challenging all participant groups – unions, employers, and government – to live up to principles of racial equality. Furthermore, the NAACP's legal department was interested in cases of workers where

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[85] Press Release, Atlanta, 19 May 1939, Box C-284;1, NAACP Papers.
[86] Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights,* pp. 195-196.
[87] Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*, pp. 196-197.

the grievances were not common to all workers regardless of race, but where racism had created specific problems for black workers.[88]

Some caveats need to be applied to temper narratives which position the altered policy as evidence of a successful reorientation to a labour-based protest agenda. The victories achieved by the Legal Defense Fund on behalf of workers in the 1940s represented important achievements for the workers concerned, but for the most part these victories, like the other areas of legalistic protest which continued in areas including school segregation and equality of teachers' pay, proved to be frustratingly slow and patchy. A crucial factor that limited the effectiveness of these strategies was the fact that their existence was largely dependent on the existence of legislative decisions made during the New Deal-era. Some questioned whether legal protests were the best way to tackle workers' grievances at all. C.W Rice, editor of the *Negro Labor News* in Texas, said although he personally believed in the benefits of this approach, his experience suggested that 'Negro workers generally, do not have faith in lawsuits especially when they are against such powerful [groups] as the major labor unions of government agencies. Therefore, they are reluctant in paying the amount required to carry on'.[89] Prosecuting legal actions against discriminatory unions, or indeed government departments, was a costly and uncertain process. Thurgood Marshall's preferred strategy to resolve the growing number of discrimination cases of workers relating to unions, management and government in the late 1930s, understandably sought to mediate with the relevant parties. Thurgood Marshall wrote letters to unions implicated in cases of discrimination, as to Joseph P. Ryan of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) regarding the failure of locals in Texas to abide by agreements on racial quotas, while Marshall was also involved in mediating with the ILA's CIO-affiliated rival, the National Maritime Union (NMU), where delegates at a meeting, including leaders of the NMU, attempted to combat discrimination stopping

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[88] Goluboff writes: 'The most common melding of racial discrimination and economic hardship was also the most obvious: because of racial discrimination, the complainant was unable to support him- or herself [...] When discrimination took the form of segregation, the economic impact of segregation garnered far more complaints to the NAACP than the principle of segregation itself. For some African Americans, especially those active in the NAACP, the essence of the harm of segregated unions was segregation per se. For others, the problem was both segregation and discrimination.' Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*, p. 105.

[89] Letter from C.W Rice to Thurgood Marshall, 15 June 1939, Box C-284;1, NAACP Papers.

black workers working in shipping in New York, who agreed to lobby Congress for action over workplace discrimination.[90]

The NAACP was, in many ways, ill-equipped in organizational terms to take up the coordinated and concerted methods of protest often required in order to solve workers' complex problems. Marshall wrote that he saw these efforts as 'a most important phase of our work and one which we should do something about,' but the resources for doing so were limited, lamenting the fact that, 'I simply cannot do anything about it until after the primary cases and the teachers' salary cases are out of the way. We can do just so much and no more'.[91] The attempts of the NAACP's legal arm to address the problems of workers represented a somewhat belated and partial adjustment to address the concerns of black workers, but it was a far from perfect weapon with which to shape the interlocking structures being erected in the 1930s whereby organized labour, government and management became drawn into arrangements within which they held joint control in shaping black economic prospects. When Marshall stated that problems facing 'discrimination extends from the most conservative A.F of L. Unions to the most radical C.I.O. Unions', he demonstrated a sound grasp of problems being experienced by black workers, but on the eve of the USA's entry into the Second World War, the NAACP's two main engagements on behalf of black workers in 1941 – during the Ford strike in April and in its participation in the March on Washington Movement – demonstrated that it continued to find it difficult to adopt appropriate tactics to address these problems.[92]

In the lead up to the strike at Ford, the NAACP's national leadership engaged in a letter writing campaign which attempted to lobby the managers of companies in Detroit, in

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[90] Memorandum, 16 November 1938, Box I: C-284; 3; Letter from Thurgood Marshall to Joseph P. Ryan, 23 January 1939, Box I: 284;2; Memo from Thurgood Marshall to Walter White, 27 July 1939 and Letter from Ferdinand Smith to Walter White, 20 Sept 1939, Box I 284;4, NAACP Papers.

[91] Thurgood Marshall wrote of the problems facing black union members in the ILA in New York that, '[o]n the Jersey side it has reached the point that if a Negro Union man applies for work he is beaten up by members of his own Union.' Marshall predicted that efforts to pursue legal challenges against the ILA 'should make a marvellous scrap and I think we are all in favour of having a good scrap on this question of the right of Negroes to work.' Thurgood Marshall to William Hastie, 19 April 1940, Box II: A128;4, NAACP Papers.

[92] Letter from Thurgood Marshall to William Hastie, 19 April 1940, Box II: A128;4, NAACP Papers.

particular General Motors, to expand job opportunities on a racially equitably basis during conversion and expansion to war production. Writing to General Motors Executive William Knudsen in February 1940, Wilkins wrote in relatively polite fashion that, 'General Motors, we regret to say, suffers by comparison with some other firms in field in the matter of the proportion of Negro employes and the opportunities for advancement accorded them [General Motors...] has the prestige and power to enlarge the opportunities for Negro workers by simply disregarding color as a factor in employment'. This appeal was given short shrift by the company official tasked with replying, who wrote to Wilkins that, 'For your information, in the employment of people in the plants of the Corporation there is no discrimination due to race, creed or color [...] I am quite confident that if you should ever have occasion to visit some of our larger plants, you will find interspersed a large number of Negro employes'.[93] The problems facing traditional tactics of letter writing in the face of the unique and problematic joint forces limiting black employment in Detroit were revealed in complaints of a member of the local branch. The member wrote that on the question of jobs, 'General Motors has been decidedly evasive on the issue. We are still receiving complaints from colored sitizens [sic], most of whom [state] that Personnel Directors at both Cadillac and Chevrolet invariably will not accept their application'.[94]

The next year, Walter White made a similar appeal, to General Motors President William Knudsen, arguing that, 'discrimination against Negroes as far as employment is concerned in the General Motors plant is more widespread now than it has ever been before. This is especially true with respect to skilled and semi-skilled work and supervisory and executive positions'.[95] This letter was part of a lobbying campaign covered with interest by Detroit's black press.[96] While union leaders often, with at least some justification, blamed company management for continuing employment discrimination, while company management occasionally correspondingly attempted to

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[93] Letter from Roy Wilkins to William S Knudsen, 29 February 1940 and Reply from H W Anderson to Roy Wilkins, 22 March 1940, Box II: A333; 9, NAACP Papers.
[94] Letter from Troutman and Hawkins to Walter White, 16 Nov 1940, Box II: A333;9, NAACP Papers.
[95] Walter White to William Knudsen, January 8 1941, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, 1940-1955, Series A: Subject Files on Labor Conditions and Employment Discrimination, 1940-1955, Reel 3, Papers of the NAACP Microfilm Edition.
[96] *Detroit Tribune,* 15 February 1941.

blame union locals for the lack of progress on racially equitable hiring.[97] Although it indicated an increased willingness towards the end of the Depression among leaders of the NAACP like Walter White to personally intervene to attempt to address the employment problems of black workers, the campaign regarding GM met with little apparent success.

White's intervention during the strike at Ford in April 1941 has been positioned as a significant indicator of how far he and the association had come in reorienting to address the concerns of workers. However, important continuities could be found in the principles that underpinned his decision.[98] White initially sought to lobby individuals in the federal government in order to influence the situation, writing in a telegram to Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, on April 4 that, 'we urge you immediately to certify strike to national mediation board in order to prevent riot and settle strike justly and amicably.' White also telegraphed President Roosevelt the same day asking for his intercession to prevent the outbreak of a riot.[99] This attempt to lobby influential individuals also manifested itself in White's attempts to organize a conference after the strike where various interested parties could meet to discuss the place of black workers in the newly enfranchised UAW-CIO at Ford. Over the period between April and May 1941, White wrote to Michigan Governor Murray Von Wagoner, Circuit Court Judge Ira Jayne and CIO leader Philip Murray in an attempt to organize a conference between these influential men.[100] A particular concern of White's in this

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[97] Observations on Conditions Among Negroes in the Fields of Education, Recreation and Employment in the Selected Areas of the City of Detroit, Michigan', Box 74; Folder: 'Observations on Conditions Among Negroes', Detroit Urban League Records.

[98] The title of this chapter in White's autobiography, 'Turn Left at Detroit,' constitutes a misleading representation of the stances and guiding principles adopted by the national branch of the NAACP. Bates sees the Ford strike and White's role as being a culmination of a substantive change in the NAACP's agenda, arguing that: 'In shepherding the association from an organization that in 1933 largely ignored the interests of black workers to one that by 1941 had adopted a labor-oriented agenda and made demands by employing the power of collective organization, White had come a long way, and so had the NAACP.' Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941', p. 375; Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (Athens, GA.: Brown Thrasher Books, 1995), p. 206.

[99] Telegraph from Walter White to Frances Perkins, April 4, 1941, NAACP Strike File; Telegraph from Walter White to Franklin D. Roosevelt, April 4, 1941, 'Ford Strike File 1941', Part 13, Series A, Reel 3, Papers of the NAACP Microfilm Edition.

[100] Letters from Walter White to Philip Murray 12 April, 5 May, 1941; Letter from Walter White to Judge Ira Jayne, 15 April 1941; Letters from Walter White to Murray Von Wagoner, 24 April, 5 May, 1941, 'Ford Strike File 1941', Part 13, Series A, Reel 3, Papers of the NAACP Microfilm Edition.

campaign was the desire to maintain the NAACP's influence over proceedings in Detroit and to marginalize the role of other activists, especially John P. Davis of the NNC. Following Von Wagoner's suggestion that Davis be included in the conference, White wrote frustratedly to Detroit branch leader J. McClendon that, '[f]rankly, I am just a little annoyed at the Governor's action. We invited him to sit in as a conferee and not to dictate what should be done and with whom we should or should not work'. In the same letter, White referred to black state senator Charles Diggs' additional endorsement of Davis' involvement, asking, '[d]oes Diggs know of the widespread belief that John Davis and the National Negro Congress are reputed to be Communists? [...] how would that fit in with the recent action of Reuther and Frankenstein to deny official jobs in the UAW-CIO to Communists, Nazis or Bundists?'.[101] White's political manoeuvring over the proposed conference reflected an attempt on his part to secure and maintain the NAACP's position as the leading spokesman for black civil rights regarding the powerful and important role of trade unions.

White's intervention in the Ford strike was a more direct attempt among the NAACP's national leadership to position themselves as spokesmen for issues affecting black workers. In his well-publicized statement on 9 April, White offered a detailed view of both his stance on labour and his reasoning:

> The Ford strike faces the Negro with the toughest decision he has ever had to make in the matter of jobs and his relations with his fellow workers and employers. Widespread discrimination by some employers, even in national defense industries financed by taxation of Negroes as well as whites, has driven the majority of Negro workers to the ragged edge of existence. Henry Ford has not only hired more Negroes than any other Detroit employer but has given some of them the chance to rise above the menial ranks which contrasts sharply with Knudsen's General Motors. The attempt to use Negroes as a club over the heads of those who wish to organize themselves in unions in the Ford plants, however, is a dangerous move in times like these [...] I regret that a few colored

[101] Letter from Walter White to J. McClendon, 5 May 1941, 'Ford Strike File 1941', Part 13, Series A, Reel 3, Papers of the NAACP Microfilm Edition.

> workers, in their desperation for jobs have lent themselves to staying in the River Rouge plant. They are not helping themselves, the cause of the Negro, not labor relations generally [...] Gratitude of Negro workers to Henry Ford for jobs which other plants have denied them is understandable. But I want to remind Negro Ford workers that they cannot afford to rely on the personal kindness of any individual when what the worker wants is 'justice.' [...] If the UAW-CIO wins the right to represent the Ford workers, as now seems inevitable, it has a golden opportunity to demonstrate to Negro workers everywhere in the country that some labor unions are straight on the race question.[102]

Although White's statement finished by saying he was confident that greater equality would be achieved, there were clear limits to his support for the union. White's reservation may have reflected the fact that he was attempting to appeal to persuade the still substantial constituents in Detroit, both local leaders and Ford workers, who had deep reservations about the UAW-CIO, while accommodating the many pro-union voices in Detroit's labour-civil rights community. Yet White's key messages were not only clear but consistent: first, that remaining outside the ever-growing and ever-more legally and politically secure ranks of organized labour was, by 1941, an untenable position for black workers to take, but second in a continuation of a position adopted throughout the 1930s, that both management and organized labour must still be held to account in order to address their longstanding problems regarding racial discrimination.

The NAACP's engagement with the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) in 1941, demonstrated an increasing willingness to act as an advocate on behalf of black workers; it also evidenced the limited impact of the solutions and tactics with which it pursued this goal. Although A. Philip Randolph, leader of the BSCP, led the MOWM, the NAACP's leadership had been attempting to increase work in defence contracts since the previous year. Writing in September 1940 to 67 firms who held government contracts, White explained that, 'In order to get the maximum of support behind the program,' they had instructed local branches to 'work closely with industrial service

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[102] NAACP Papers, Microfilm edition, Reel 3.

organizations, labor unions and other bonafide organizations in their communities'.[103] As suggested by White's comments, the fight to win employment in defence industries seemed to have finally convinced the NAACP of the need to adopt more direct protest methods in concert with other groups, including those affiliated to organized labour.

Attempts were made by the national branch to induce local branches to orchestrate pickets of defence plants in coordination on 26 April 1941. The impact of these pickets was modest, however. J.J. McClendon of the Detroit branch replied to the initiative by saying that the committee of the Chamber of Commerce has been 'working on the manufacturers' and 'felt that if this picketing was carried out it would injure the progress they claimed to have made so far'. McClendon argued that, as a result picketing should be postponed, a decision with which Wilkins in the national branch agreed. The Baltimore branch replied that the ideas was good but that defence plants were too far away to organized a large enough protest, while the Pittsburgh branch said they were too busy to find time for an effective picket. The New Orleans branch said it had not enough money for the protest, while the Columbus branch respondent, Edward Cox, said though he had been informed of the plan in an article in the *Pittsburgh Courier,* he was not sure over the extent to which local industries discriminated. The Chicago and New York branches seemingly stood alone in their successes, with 40 individuals picketing in Chicago, and Eardlie John, Chairman of the Committee on Labor and Industry relating the efforts of 200 members who picketed the offices of the Sperry Gyroscope and Curtis-Wright Aircraft Corporations.[104]

The NAACP's actions in opening up opportunities for black workers in defence industries were more successful when conducted within a wider protest coalition during the MOWM. The movement was originally the idea of veteran black labour organizer A. Philip Randolph. Randolph had personally been appointed to the NAACP's Board of Directors in 1940, a move which represented an increased willingness among

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[103] Letters from Walter White, September 1940, Box II: A335;2, NAACP Papers.
[104] Various letters in same folder, and Memo 'To All Branch Presidents and Youth Councils,' Box II: A333; 6, NAACP Papers.

the NAACP's leadership to be seen to cooperate with labour.[105] The alliance formed between Randolph and the NAACP over the demands for federal action to prevent discrimination in war production industries represented an important and visible demonstration of the extent to which the NAACP had become willing to take visible and direct actions in pursuit of workers' rights. It also represented, through its participation in a growing coalition, one of the NAACP's most successful actions regarding labour, which stood in marked contrast to the earlier failures to gain a non-discrimination clause in the NLRA and force a change of policy within the AFL. In a memo sent to its local branches in May 1941, the NAACP described the MOWM as 'one of the most militant actions ever planned by Negroes of this country and should be the largest mass movement in their history. It is vitally important to the future well-being of the race that the March be a success'. Signed by a range of leaders, the memo concluded by arguing that, '[t]he success of this March on Washington may mean a job for you and thousands of other colored Americans. The time to act is now!'.[106]

The NAACP's participation in the MOWM represented a unique highpoint in its sporadic and partial attempts to address the issues of concern to black workers. Legal protests on behalf of some workers continued throughout the 1940s, but the MOWM did not represent the start of more sustained and continuous protest coalitions being coordinated and led at a national level on behalf of black workers. Rather than representing the successful reorientation of civil rights protest to the agenda of the black working class, 1941 also represented a comparative endpoint of the frustrating attempts made to coordinate protest efforts at a national level on behalf of black workers. The comments of Ralph Bunche in 1940, a continual critic from within the

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[105] Bates argued that the placement of Randolph on the NAACP's board, 'sent a message to the black community about the association's interest in linking labor issues with civil rights.' Bates, 'A New Crowd,' 372; White made a speech at a BSCP dinner in 1940 where he said: 'we are proud of the fact that your able leader, Mr. Randolph, is now a member of the national Board of Directors of the N.A.A.C.P. in which position he has helped formulate our national policy on labor and other phases of the so-called race problem in America.' But White quickly moved to emphasize the ongoing problems of union discrimination, citing the Tampa boilermakers case, concluding that, 'Thus, the Negro workers has his life-blood squeezed out between the upper and nether millstones of employer and labor union discrimination.' Box 2, Folder 7, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Collection.

[106] Signed by Walter White, William Imes, Lester B. Granger, Frank Crosswaith, Rayford Logan of Howard, Henry Craft of Harlem YMCA, Richard Parrish a youth group leader, Layla Lane of American Federation of Teachers and A.Philip Randolph. Memo 'To All Branches,' 12 May 1941, Box II: A333; 6, NAACP Papers.

NAACP, continued to resonate despite the brief involvement of the NAACP in the MOWM, as he wrote:

> In an era in which the Negro finds himself hanging ever more precariously from the bottom rung of a national economic ladder [...] the Association clings to its traditional faith, hope and politics.[107]

[107] Ralph J. Bunche, 'The Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations, Book 1 – June 1940' p. 167.

The March on Washington Movement

The March on Washington Movement brought together a great many of the diverse cast of characters covered in this dissertation. In many ways, however, the MOWM actually represented an endpoint in coordinated protest efforts rather than a foundation that led to a subsequent period of a successful working-class rights movement. Having brought together a large number of national and local activists in pursuit of the shared goal of challenging the discriminatory hiring practices that frequently accompanied the nation's conversion to war production, the MOWM coalition subsequently fractured at both national and local levels. Part of this split was caused by A. Philip Randolph's decision in 1942 to attempt to transform the MOWM into a permanent, all-black protest vehicle. This decision produced a negative reaction from various other quarters of the coalition, including from the NAACP where Walter White continued to favour protest strategies that built interracial alliances, and also from the radical left, with the Communist Party's wartime strategy once again emphasizing cooperation in the fight against fascism and subordinating black grievances to this overriding goal.[108]

Randolph's decision to retain the MOWM as an all-black protest vehicle reflected his view that maintaining black autonomy over protest strategies was vital to the aim of achieving political and economic parity with white America. These ideas also corresponded with the reasons for Randolph's repudiation of the National Negro Congress in 1940. Randolph was publicly keen to blame Communist Party influence over the NNC for informing his decision, writing that he was 'convinced also that until the stigma of the Communist Front is wiped from the Congress, it will never rally the masses of the Negro people'.[109] Though Bates emphasizes the tactical motivations that underpinned this stance, Randolph's rejection of the Communist Party was also an expression of a longstanding and deeply held aversion to the radical left, and reflected the transitory nature of coalitional efforts.[110] When set against the problems that beset

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[108] Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 150.
[109] Randolph said he was also opposed to the majority of the NNC's funding coming from CIO, and declared that '[t]he American Negro will not long follow any organization which accepts dictation and control from any white organization.' *New York Age,* 18 May 1940.
[110] Bates, *Pullman Porters,* pp. 168-171.

the attempts of black leaders from across the political spectrum to agree on appropriate methods to address workers' problems, the fracture of the MOWM coalition after 1942 does not appear particularly surprising. The complexity of questions surrounding issues such as interracial cooperation and direct protest continued to split black political opinion just as they had done in the formative years before 1941.

In its short life the MOWM did achieve one notable victory, however: the granting of Executive Order 8802 by President Roosevelt which ordered against discrimination in the implementation of government defence contracts and which set up a federal Fair Employment Practices Committee to further that goal. Though not directly aimed at reordering race relations in organized labour, these developments in June 1941 represented a tangible achievement.[111] In his eventual agreement to take some visible action to promote equal employment, President Roosevelt had been forced to act as a direct result of the coordinated and concerted pressure brought to bear by the leaders of the MOWM and their threat of mass action. Although Executive Order 8802 and the creation of a wartime Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) were not groundbreaking in their design, their creation did create mechanisms that led to some workers' grievances being adjusted, providing the most visible proof of the efficacy of coordinated and collective protest, while also reflecting the growing extent to which economic rights had become more central to the political agendas of both the federal government under the New Deal, and within a majority of black protest organization involved.[112]

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[111] Patricia Sullivan called Executive Order 8802, 'a singular if highly significant development. Overall, federal policy reinforced the racial status quo – from segregated blood banks to segregated armed forces.' Patricia Sullivan, 'Movement Building during the World War II Era: The NAACP's Legal Insurgency in the South.' chapter in Kruse and Tuck, eds., *Fog of War,* p. 71.

[112] Bates characterizes the establishment of the FEPC in entirely new terms, but in many ways, it built upon ideas and methods common to the New Deal. Kryder, for example, argues that although Executive Order 8802 and the FEPC looked new to some observers and to some scholars, 'the document was in reality an appropriate if unprecedented product of the prewar American political scene, in that it drew on well-established norms of complaint adjustment.' Bates, *Pullman Porters,* p. 16; Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State During World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 4, p. 53.

The FEPC at a federal level had a brief and rather tortuous career, however. First, the FEPC was beset by political wrangling at the top of the federal government, as Roosevelt sought to balance the competing interests of mobilizing manpower, responding to liberal demands for action on equality, while trying to negate opposition from opponents, primarily in the southern wing of his electoral coalition. Originally placed under the Office of Production Management, Roosevelt moved the FEPC into the War Manpower Commission in 1942, partly as a result to retain closer control over the group following political opposition.[113] Despite the fact that its investigations into instances of discrimination continued, the FEPC never had any direct enforcement powers, and by 1945 it was granted only limited funds by Congress in a move which caused the federal FEPC to be ceased in 1946. Despite the fact its career had lasted only five years in which 'it languished in political and legal limbo,' the FEPC had a broader political impact by creating, in the words of Anthony Chen, a 'sprawling bloc of liberal interest groups,' including black civil rights groups such as the NAACP and several industrial unions who continued to lobby for government intervention regarding fair employment practices in the post war period.[114]

Yet in addition to its politically precarious position in the wartime state, a more fundamental problem that hampered the effectiveness of the FEPC was that as it sought to engineer bureaucratic solutions to the discriminatory problems facing black workers, it standardized and routinized the complaints of black workers. The FEPC showed the extent to which rights issues had become more central to wartime politics and it represented an evolution in the federal government's involvement in economic regulation by attempting to promote equality, unlike the key labour legislation of the New Deal like the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933 and the National Labor Relations Act in 1935. These improvements did not necessarily translate into tangible gains for black workers, however.[115] The initial impact of Executive Order 8802 and the FEPC was to cancel the March on Washington and to bring black protest within routinized systems of complaints procedures that often proved ineffectual. For black

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[113] Kryder, *Divided Arsenal,* pp. 90-93.
[114] Anthony S. Chen, The Fifth Freedom: Jobs, Politics, and Civil Rights in the United States, 1941-1972 (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 39-41.
[115] James T. Sparrow, 'Freedom to Want: The Federal Government and Politicized Consumption in World War II', chapter in Kruse and Tuck, eds., *Fog of War,* pp. 15-16.

protest groups like the NAACP who had, to an extent, become more interested in the rights of workers and more willing to participate alongside a wider variety of other groups in the MOWM, protest methods soon shifted to making demands *to* rather than *upon* authorities; authorities within branches of government, management, and parts of organized labour who came to hold joint-responsibility to control employment.[116] As a combined result of the changes in government that accompanied the New Deal and Second World War, 'public policy [...] evolved into a bewildering labyrinth of federal and state statutes, administrative regulations, and executive orders'.[117] Such complexity, combined with the various parties interested in the success of FEP legislation, including black advancement groups, religious groups, liberal politicians and industrial unions, created a problem of coordination for successful action from the various federal and state governments involved.[118] Crucially, though industrial unions like the UAW supported the FEP in principle, not only were many other union locals hostile to extending workplace equality, the very nature of wartime industrial relations - with decentralized methods of hiring continuing and interrelated sources of responsibility that afforded opportunities for obfuscation as well as improvement - meant that discrimination took many forms that were difficult to precisely diagnose and successfully treat.[119]

It seems reasonable to agree with Anthony Chen when he suggests that, '[e]ven if fratricide [among liberal, leftist and labour groups] had been averted [...] it is hard to see how such a bloc could have done more than simply serve as a font of contrapuntal ideas'.[120] After 1941, a range of issues surrounding black employment that had first been thrown to light during the rise of organized labour became channelled toward a focus on employment equality that remained part of the broader civil rights agenda. Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act finally achieved what advocates in the NAACP had demanded since the beginning of the New Deal, as the Federal Government enacted

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[116] Kryder, *Divided Arsenal,* pp. 88-89.
[117] Chen, *The Fifth Freedom,* p. 6.
[118] Chen also notes, 'The liberal bloc did not always and everywhere act with complete unity. Its political strength and capacity for collective action was diminished from time to time by internecine conflicts and organizational rivalries, which were inevitable in a bloc of such size and diversity.' Chen, *The Fifth Freedom,* p. 13.
[119] Kryder, *Divided Arsenal,* pp. 103-105; Chen, *The Fifth Freedom,* p. 38.
[120] Chen, *The Fifth Freedom,* p. 18.

legislative measures that mandated equal treatment for black workers. Pointing out the relative failures of protests undertaken on behalf of black workers should not imply a direct or unfair criticism of the range of groups who had become concerned with these issues, for their difficulties spoke as much about the immense difficulties of the goals they sought rather than their own failures of ideology or strategy.[121] With most of the key legislative and organizational stages in organized labour's rise to power largely complete by the time of the USA's entry in the Second World War, the course of black workers' economic rights had, therefore, shifted down a somewhat altered course that would follow the path of fair employment practice protests in the post-war years, before shifting again into the divisive debates that surrounded affirmative action in the 1960s and beyond. Protests by, and on behalf of, black workers continued in war years, therefore, but many of the key interconnected problems and opportunities which determined the terrain on which these battles were fought had been put in place around 1941, as the complex dual faceted issues surrounding the rise of organized labour became part of the wider related task for civil rights strategies to address inequality in employment and disparities in economic opportunity.

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[121] Eric Arnesen draws the reasonable conclusion that the fact that, 'FEP fair employment advocates failed to win federal fair employment legislation, that they succeeded in some places and not others, and that the laws that did pass were often weaker than they preferred—these speak volumes about the strength of the forces arrayed against them, not their own ideological inadequacies.' Eric Arnesen, 'Civil Rights and the Cold War at Home: Postwar Activism, Anticommunism, and the Decline of the Left', *American Communist History,* 11 (2012), 5-44. (p. 32).

Conclusion to Chapter 5

Chapter 5 has concluded this dissertation's examination of the impact of the rise of organized labour on black civil rights by assessing the achievements of national civil rights groups. This assessment would not have been possible, however, without building upon the methodological propositions and findings of the four preceding chapters. The concern has been to first recover the experiences of black workers in as much detail as allowed by the fragmentary historical record, to draw meaning from these complex localized examples, the findings of which have formed the interpretive backdrop for a fresh assessment of successes and failures of first local and then national protest leaders. Specifically, the contradictory importance of pre-existing patterns of employment and the joint-role of organized labour in setting the boundaries of job opportunities played crucial roles in defining the experiences of black workers. The developments which offered opportunities for advancing black workers' rights - relating to the potential of concentrated unionized groups of black workers who could challenge management, labour and government groups alike - often had negative side effects. This meant, in turn, that a fresh set of demands were placed on black protest leaders for coordinated, direct and sustained activism. The relative failures in this regard are not intended to inflate the inadequacies of these leaders but, instead, necessitate a change in the the expectations previously placed by historians on this era of labour-based protest.

The increasing prominence of those on the left of the political spectrum demonstrated at a local level in Chapter 4 was best reflected at a national level through the formation of the National Negro Congress. Indeed the most significant impact of the NNC was that it reflected wider political tendencies and local developments, as opposed to being able to decisively intervene to shape these outcomes to the benefit of black workers. Even positive appraisals in the secondary literature acknowledge its weakness at a national level. Despite displaying a strong awareness of the primacy of economic issues facing black communities during the Depression, the actions of the NNC's national secretary, John P. Davis, suggested that the organization was better ideologically equipped to offer support to industrial unions, but was less able, and less willing, to challenge its allies in

the labour movement. In addition, any influence the NNC may have been able to bring to bear was greatly diminished after its internal problems, precipitated by the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939.

Even during its relative high-point of influence between 1936 and 1939, the NNC was primarily a coordinating group that sought to bring together interested parties to discuss the problems facing black America, demonstrating both the increased willingness of a variety of groups to talk about labour issues and also embodying the problems frequently encountered in coming up with effective coordinated solutions. The response of the National Urban League was a case in point, for it too sought to address questions surrounding black union participation, demonstrating that the left did not have a monopoly on these increasingly mainstream issues. The inauguration of the Workers' Bureau which set up Workers' Councils in various locations, demonstrated a reasonable grasp of the problems facing black workers, including the increasing impossibility of opposing unions outright, as well as the need for organized and concerted pressure to tackle unions to treat their black members on an equitable basis. The Workers' Councils were only of limited impact, however, due to practical rather than ideological problems. Dependent on local initiative to succeed, the Councils petered out in the late 1930s, overtaken in many places by other organizations.

Often positioned as the biggest 'winner' of the changes of the period in terms of increased membership, the NAACP's growth has been deployed as evidence of its successful reorientation towards a mass-based agenda geared towards the concerns of the black working class and the support of industrial unionism. This chapter has suggested, however, that the NAACP's partial incorporation of the concerns of workers was not driven by a substantive shift in political principle that favoured working-class political activism or the agenda of the left, but by the application of longstanding political principles that demanded equality for blacks in all areas of mainstream political life. As organized labour was brought into the fold of the New Deal, it was a logical corollary for the NAACP to extent its liberal-focused agenda to include demands for equality in organized labour. This distinction did not, however, mean the NAACP's

efforts to address workers' problems were irrevocably doomed. Indeed in many ways the actions of the NAACP during the New Deal showed it retained awareness that all groups –labour, management and government – played crucial roles in shaping black employment conditions and needed to all be engaged with as part of protest efforts. White captured this sentiment in 1939 when he wrote that though he believed black workers stood to gain from participation in organized labour, there were 'many instances of not only segregation in work but of discrimination against Negroes by federal, state and municipal agencies, by labor unions themselves and by employers in the North and in the South'.[122] Yet in terms of matching these accurate diagnoses of the problems facing black workers, ample evidence of which was piling up daily on the desks of the national office in New York, with effective protest efforts, progress proved to be much more frustrating.

A glimpse of the potential benefits to be gained by employing direct and coordinated protest methods was provided by the March on Washington Movement in 1941. As the organizational period of the New Deal drew to a close on the eve of the USA's entry into the Second World War, the NAACP played a part in the most significant protest action undertaken on behalf of black workers during the period, which precipitated Executive Order 8802 and the wartime FEPC. It was no coincidence that this concession had been won not just at a time when national and international developments were conducive to achieving a concession from government. The MOWM demonstrated the tremendous value of activism that coordinated and mobilized a broad range of workers, local and national leaders, in the pursuit of a widely shared economic goal. Yet set against the continuing problems of these coordinated protest efforts in the war years, the MOWM represented a belated culmination and endpoint of successful, national-level protest, rather than the start of a new era of effective working class-oriented civil rights activism.

Taken together, the problems faced by the national organizations in the period leading up to 1941, highlighted several of the key reasons why so many black leaders of varying

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[122] Letter from Walter White to Dorothy Goldstein, 10 March 1939, Box I: C-323; 7, NAACP Papers.

political stripes found it incredibly difficult to launch and sustain effective strategies to help black workers. National organizations' story demonstrate that it was the renewed priority placed upon multifaceted, broad and connected protest called for by the associated impacts of the rise of organized labour that need to be the focus for attention. Thus in this sense, this dissertation draws to a close by returning to its starting point: the contradictory, complex and dichotomous effect of unionization on black workers. Pre-existing concentrations of black workers and labour's powerful role in the wartime economy not only afforded opportunities for labour based-activism that engaged with union, government and management groups alike. The same developments that had caused this activism, so central to existing positive accounts of the period, also contained internal problems and contradictions related to the overt and subtle attempts to limit employment by an interconnected bureaucratic network of officials. Placing workers' experiences regarding these problems in a more central role does deny the existence of labour-based activism. Instead, it requires greater emphasis on the inherently fragile foundations of labour-based protest.

Conclusion: Beyond the 'Proletarian Turn:' The Fragile Foundations of Civil Rights Protest During the New Deal and a New Framework for Understanding Labour-Based Civil Rights.

This dissertation offers a new approach to understand the impact of the rise of organized labour on black rights during the New Deal. Instead of focusing on the racial practices of unions and the political debates stirred among black protest organizations, this project has built its study upon the experiences of the black workers who experienced the effects of unionization in personal but often contradictory ways. From this new approach has sprung a new interpretation; one that places greater emphasis on the fragility of efforts to advance black rights in harness with organized labour.

Three particular related problems have been put forward regarding existing literature that argues that the era of the New Deal and Second World War era constituted a 'decisive first phase' in the long civil rights movement. First, this narrative's reading of the postwar decline of the left-labour-liberal alliance has come under convincing scrutiny from scholars whose empirical research has revealed that, at the very least, the impact of the Cold War was not always straightforwardly negative for the labour-based rights movement. Implicit in these findings is the need for a reassessment of the initial promise contained in the alliances formed between black workers, liberal and left-wing protest groups and organized labour in the foundational period of the 1930s and early 1940s. Thus a second historiographical issue of concern has been labour history's highly divided and controversial engagements with issues of equality in the industrial unions of the CIO and within organized labour more generally. The highly eclectic picture of unions' race relations produced by labour historians – and the frequently explosive confrontations that have resulted when attempts have been made to draw larger interpretive meanings – sit awkwardly alongside a narrative in civil rights history that, while allowing for some regional diversity in its story, forcefully emphasizes that progress was made by black workers in concert with organized labour. Related to these problematic readings of unions' varying racial practices, the third issue highlighted with existing civil rights unionism narratives was the sidelining of the black workforces who were supposedly the main beneficiaries of the rise of labour. The central protagonists

of many existing accounts have been the most militant and committed, but not necessarily representative, activists on the trade union left of local protest. What is required, it has been suggested, is for understandings of New Deal-era protest to move beyond the paradigm of the 'proletarian turn.'

As a start in this direction, it is suggested that a set of contradictory themes marked black workers' experiences with organized labour. Chapter 1 showed that in both New York City and Detroit, workers' responses did not represent a noticeable shift to the left, which triumphed against a legacy of mistrust and following of conservative leaders. Rather than revealing a shift in identity or political ideology, workers' actions, experiences and attitudes tell a more coherent story about who had power to control, limit, and advance employment prospects. The concentration of black workers by geography and occupation in Harlem meant that the rise of labour presented its inhabitants with a powerful new vehicle to assert their rights as workers. At the same time, this confinement was also occasionally reinforced by white union leaders. Harlem's black locals continued to serve as symbols of the limits as well as the opportunities of achieving advances in harness with organized labour. In similar fashion, the minority position of black workers in the majority of concerns organized in Detroit's first wave of unionization in 1937 meant they remained understandably aloof from the labour movement, with the result that the comparative concentration at Ford Motor Company, not organized until 1941, became the most high profile opportunity where black workers were able to address their grievances through the UAW.

Probing workers' experiences uncovered a second related issue across both comparative case-studies: Chapter 2 suggested that the new arrangements of shared labour market control provided avenues to redress grievances at the same time as these systems placed new burdens on those seeking to guarantee fair access to work. The complex network of those who controlled employment meant that discriminatory employers could be challenged by appealing to sympathetic trade unions, while discriminatory labour unions could be challenged by appealing to government. At the same time, however, these relationships also served to obscure the sources of

discrimination. Black workers' complaints also demonstrated that the complex arrangements of wartime regulation of the labour market had created a new requirement for sustained and coordinated protest among black protest groups.

Chapter 3 began the assessment of the extent to which leadership groups were able to take up the complex challenges of protest shown to be necessary by the experiences of workers outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. Assessing their achievements as well as the political leanings, Chapter 3 argued that local leaders who continued to oppose black participation in interracial organized labour need to become a more central part of our understanding of the period. In many cases, nationalist activists in Harlem and church leaders in Detroit displayed a clear awareness that the economic problems of workers had become of central importance during the Depression. Despite the continuing resonance of many their ideas among the wider working population, however, nationalists in Harlem proved largely unable to translate their criticisms into meaningful and productive activism which wrested tangible concessions from the various interrelated parties who had come to hold power to set the limits of black economic potential. Similarly, opponents in Detroit's black churches finally attempted to mould their support for Ford to advocate black participation in the company-endorsed UAW-AFL in the NLRB elections of 1941, but beneath this veneer of adaptation, proved unable to match their criticisms with practical solutions.

The discussion of local union supporters' limited achievements in Chapter 4, however, ran more directly in contrast to largely positive readings in the secondary literature. Crucial to a reassessment of pro-union leaders' successes was an assessment of the extent to which this activism was able to produce tangible solutions to the problems of workers evidenced by Chapter 1 and 2. In both New York City and Detroit, the biggest successes in this regard occurred when supporters of unionism put aside their personal and political differences and engaged in coordinated efforts that tackled the range of groups concerned. This was demonstrated during the Bus Strike protests in New York led by Adam Clayton Powell Jr., in April 1941 and in the activities of the Citizens Committee for Jobs in War Industry in Detroit led by Charles Hill in 1942. As a result of

the increased complexity of the problems they sought to address and their own inability to work consistently and productively together, however, these coordinated efforts were limited. Groups including the Communist and Socialist Parties, local NNC branches, the Negro Labor Committee in New York and trade unionists in the UAW in Detroit, were limited in their ability to shape the outcomes of the momentous changes affecting their communities to the interests of black workers.

Chapter 5 concluded the assessment of leadership groups' achievements by examining the changing outlooks and activism of national-level groups including the National Negro Congress, National Urban League, and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The NNC provided a visible demonstration of the increasing importance placed on the 'class' related aspects of racial discrimination, but as even its more positive assessors agree, it did not operate as a powerful national-level force that pushed forward the interests of black workers. Part of the NNC's weakness related to the fact that it was only designed to coordinate rather than lead protests, and was therefore reliant on the willingness of its member organizations. One such group, the National Urban League, underwent a change of focus by setting up a Workers' Bureau and organizing some local Workers' Councils. These groups achieved only modest success in their brief activity between 1934 and 1938, illuminating many of the dilemmas presented to black workers by the rise of unionism but often proving powerless to decisively shape events to the benefit of black workers. The NAACP, meanwhile, did move to offer more support for the principles of black participation in organized labour, but these changes were not driven by a shift to the left or a fundamental change in political principle, but by a desire to adapt its longstanding liberal principles to the mainstream position of organized labour in the nation's economic life. Continuities in its principles actually allowed the NAACP to retain an awareness that all groups –labour, management and government – needed to be held responsible to treat black workers on an equitable basis, yet despite its efforts to incorporate some workers' grievances in their legal protests, the NAACP did not reorient to function as the leader of mass-based national working-class activism.

That national-level, broad-based and direct protest strategies were best equipped to deal with the issues of the day was aptly demonstrated by the all too brief career of the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) in 1941 which managed to temporarily unify many of the diverse cast of characters covered in this dissertation. In many ways, however, the MOWM's successes represented a belated and partial endpoint, rather than a triumphal start of a successful, coordinated working-class rights movement. At the same time as the MOWM coalition fractured at both national and local levels in 1942, many of the issues raised in the 1930s by the rise of organized labour were exacerbated: the debate shifted towards securing equal employment opportunities in the defence industries and the mechanisms of government responsible for fair employment issues became ever-more tangled and complicated. Protests continued during the war years and beyond, but these efforts, which continued to involve organized labour as a powerful stakeholder, were played out within, and often limited by, arrangements that were largely in place in 1941 at the end of main organizational period.

The cumulative impact of this study therefore necessitates a shift away from interpretations that herald the era as one where a successful labour-based civil rights movement took hold in the urban centres of the North. Just as persuasive question marks have been raised about civil rights unionism's treatment of its Cold War decline, the initial strength of this movement in the formative period of the 1930s and early 1940s also needs to be reconsidered. Whether the problems built into the altered landscape of black relationships with organized labour in the 1930s and early 1940s could have been successfully surmounted in the post-war period is not this project's central question. Instead, this dissertation has suggested that a less value-laden conception of the relationship between black America and organized labour is required altogether.

Studies need to integrate the political ideas of those on the left who came to view 'class' inequality as fundamental to racial discrimination alongside those who opposed interracial organization among business and nationalist groups. In particular, studies of

leadership groups need to pay closer attention to the extent to which they were able to accurately identify and speak to the varying priorities, attitudes and problems being experienced by the constituencies of black workers they sought to serve. Uncovering the experiences, actions and attitudes of black workers will always be limited by the lack of direct evidence. In this study the result has been a complex and frequently contradictory account where the rise of organized labour held the potential to bring benefits to black workers at the same time as many of these features brought with them damaging side effects in terms of efforts to advance.

Complexity, contradictions and dilemmas: these three words have recurred repeatedly throughout this thesis and may not be to the satisfaction of those looking for clearer messages from this era of black protest. Two responses can be made to this: first, this project *has* sought to identify coherent patterns through the untidy local experiences recounted. Three related themes – the importance of concentrations of black workers, the interrelated networks of labour market control enacted between management, government, unions, and the resultant demand placed upon coordinated protest strategies – have helped serve to navigate this dissertation's interpretation of the fragile foundations of labour-based protest. These themes do not provide final or definite answers, but suggest productive ways in which the diverse experiences of African Americans during the rise of labour can be situated and interpreted. Thus the second, and more fundamental, response is to reiterate that an emphasis on contradictions and problems is a necessary corrective to interpretations which have come to position labour-based civil rights in a foundational role within a long civil rights framework. Placing workers in a more central role calls for a reinterpretation of the successes of pro-labour protest leaders and provides a way of moving beyond the limitations of characterizing the 1930s in terms of a 'proletarian turn.' The findings of this project do not, however, call for a return to the pre-revisionist state of the field which largely neglected protest movements before the 1950s. On the contrary, the conclusion calls for renewed attention to be placed upon the economic aspects of the black freedom struggle in general and, in particular, on the experiences of black workers to the momentous changes associated with the rise of organized labour during the New Deal.

This, it is suggested, will lead to more complicated but ultimately more satisfactory understandings of a crucially important aspect of the African American experience.

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