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“Fascism with a Jim Crow Face: The National Negro Congress and the Global Popular Front”

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Clayton Vaughn-Roberson, B.A., M.A.

Presented by \_\_\_\_\_

History

Accepted by the Department of \_\_\_\_\_

Readers	Nico Slate	4/16/19
	(Director of Dissertation)	Date
	Joe William Trotter, Jr.	4/16/19
		Date
	Wendy Z. Goldman	4/17/19
		Date

Approved by the Committee on Graduate Degrees

Richard Scheines

4/18/19

Dean

Date

FASCISM WITH A JIM CROW FACE:  
THE NATIONAL NEGRO CONGRESS AND THE GLOBAL POPULAR FRONT

by

CLAYTON VAUGHN-ROBERSON

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the College of the Marianna Brown Dietrich College of  
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## **Abstract**

This dissertation documents the central contribution made by African Americans to the transnational anti-fascist movement known as the Popular Front. The Popular Front refers to a coalition of various leftist organizations and individuals spread throughout the globe who coalesced in 1935 in order to halt the spread of fascism and its imperial designs. Under the leadership of the National Negro Congress, black activists insisted that the overthrow of Jim Crow, labor exploitation, and extralegal violence was vital for halting the spread of fascism in the United States. Black Americans, thus, joined the anti-fascist movement in order to globalize their own demand for equality. Organizers for the NNC determined that fascism masked capitalism's deficiencies by scapegoating racial, ethnic, and religious minorities as the true culprits of workers' bleak material conditions. To combat such tactics during the Great Depression, the NNC determined to bridge these divisions by appealing to the self-interest shared by all minorities as well as the working class. By forming a black popular front, the NNC argued that racial egalitarianism, industrial democracy, and human rights were the key instruments to defeating fascism at home and abroad.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgments	1-4
Introduction	5-16
Chapter One	
“Africa for Africans!”	
Black Nationalism, Socialism, and the Building of a Global Congress, 1935-1936	17-74
Chapter Two	
“Premature Anti-Fascists”	
The Spanish Civil War and Local People’s Global Humanitarianism, 1937-1938	75-144
Chapter Three	
“The Yanks are not Coming”	
Factionalism, Persecution, and the Origins of Cold War Civil Rights, 1939-1941	145-207
Chapter Four	
“Make Philadelphia A Workers’ Town”	
Building a United Front in the City of Brotherly Love, 1935-1940	208-264
Chapter Five	
“Defeat Hitlerism in Maryland”	
Building a United Front in Baltimore’s Heavy Industry, 1936-1941	265-319
Conclusion	320-326
Bibliography	327-333

## **Acknowledgments**

The process of writing a dissertation (not to mention the countless hours researching in lonesome archives and editing in suffocating cubicles) is best described as isolating. The mental and physical confinement one feels when embarking on such a long and arduous process is part-in-parcel to the training of young historians. While I have no regrets and would not do anything differently during my time as a Ph.D. candidate, there were taxing moments. Indeed, I underwent existential crises during various stages. What is the point of earning a Doctorate of Philosophy when capitalism seems to have no use for the humanities? Why does the value of research far exceed that of teaching? How could I ever consider myself an expert in my field? Why would anyone want to read my work? Can universities actually make a positive impact on society, or is higher education merely a means to an end? These were the questions I routinely asked myself.

One of the primary reasons why I came out on the other side of graduate school relatively healthy is the intense interest and passion I have for my project. I for one believe that studying history serves much more than one's own self-interest. I am convinced that history can make a difference in building a more just world. While some might consider this arrogant and self-righteous, I remain firmly convinced that today's causes for social justice (whether in the field of race, class, or gender equality) can only succeed if one looks to the past. The scope of today's resurgence of fascism has induced a great sense of fear and dread for people far less privileged than myself. Like a virus, fascism destroys everything it touches before it eventually cannibalizes, leaving nothing but death and destruction in its path. While my study of anti-fascism and the black Popular Front during the Great Depression does not necessarily provide answers for our current geo-political climate, it does provide a model that we can learn from and build off of. For me, this is time very well spent.

Intellectual curiosities and political convictions, however, are not sufficient for surviving graduate school. Only through solidarity with my cohort was I able to express my feelings. My colleagues David Busch, Mark Hauser, Susan Grunewald, and Anna-Christine Grant are some of the most wonderful people I have ever met in my life. We have been through everything together for six years. Watching them evolve into the wonderful scholars that they are has been an absolute joy. In particular, my affection for David and his partner Alli cannot be overstated. Spending time with them has been nothing but joyful. Not doubt my eccentricities drove them crazy (though mostly it was a source of entertainment for them), I truly appreciated the time we have spent together. Not having Amund Tallaksen and Cassie Miller to talk to the last two years has been difficult. They were the ones who welcomed me to Pittsburgh with open arms. I miss the hilarious conversations with Amund and discussing our glory days in Austin. I greatly miss the intermittent but loving conversations and moments my cubicle neighbor Cassie and I shared. I will always treasure those days.

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Working under my committee members Professors Nico Slate, Joe William Trotter, Jr., and Wendy Z. Goldman was an absolute privilege. A primary motivation for writing this

dissertation was my deep desire to emulate them. I want to possess the knowledge that they do. I want to achieve the things that they have. I want the respect that they worked so hard to earn over years and years of work and dedication. I am in awe of who they are and what they have accomplish throughout their respective careers. During Dr. Goldman's transnational seminar, I underwent the greatest maturity (outside of the dissertation) as a writer. My ability to synthesize arguments improved exponentially because of her instruction. Though I read a few essays on Marxism prior to coming to Carnegie Mellon, she was the one who revealed to me the breath of knowledge that this school of thought possesses. This completely altered my way of thinking about not only my own work but about the world. This was reinforced during the transnational ghetto seminar led by her and Dr. Trotter. For them, this was a long process in the making, ultimately leading to an outstanding and timely book *The Ghetto in Global History*. For me, the seminar was by far the greatest intellectual exercise I undertook. I also gained much experience working as Dr. Trotter's research assistant for his magnificent book *Workers on Arrival*. He is the epitome of a gentleman. I have never met someone who carried themselves with more kindness and grace. His financial support through his Center for Africanamerican Urban Studies and the Economy (CAUSE) was instrumental in my research as well. His assistant and program coordinator for CAUSE Hiakari Aday could not have been more kind and helpful throughout the years.

As for Nico Slate, no words are sufficient in describing what he has meant to me. I came into this program, along with David Busch, as his first advisee in 2013. Thus, this was a learning experience for him as much as it was for David and I. He is the reason why I came to Carnegie Mellon and also the reason why I stayed. There is no advisor who could've been more supportive. I came to this university with the expectation of writing a dissertation on black

international activism of the 1970s. A year later, I decided to go back further and research the 1930s and 1940s. When I told Dr. Slate this, his response was nothing short of encouraging. No doubt there were times when I made his life a little more difficult. And yet, his support and respect for me never wavered. To watch him emerge as one of the most gifted historians of his generation is something that very few graduate students witness. I am amazed of his dedication to the craft of writing and teaching. I only hope that, one day, I can accomplish half of what he has.

Last but not in any way the least is my family. My mother Courtney, father Glen, sister Misha, niece Lucy-Ann, and step-mother Fran are the most loving individuals. My mother and father know what graduate school is like, and my conversations with them have provided me with much needed therapy. They were the ones who taught me to think critically at a young age. They were my initial teachers and the number one reason why I chose this career path. No question my moving to Pittsburgh produced an emotional adjustment, but their pride and love for me runs so deep. For Misha and Lucy-Ann, the times we have spent laughing together have given me a great sense of relief from the stress of work. For Fran, the love and care she has provided my father means the world to me. This dissertation is dedicated to them.

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## Introduction

The battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear. The challenge must be taken up. Time does not wait. The course of history can be changed, but not halted. Fascism fights to destroy the culture which society has created; created through pain and suffering, through desperate toil, but with unconquerable will and lofty vision.

– Paul Robeson, speaking at the Albert Hall in London, June 24, 1937<sup>1</sup>

On February 14, 1936, what would have been Frederick Douglass's 118<sup>th</sup> birthday, approximately eight hundred civil rights activists, trade unionists, intellectuals, public servants, and workers representing twenty-six states gathered on the Southside of Chicago for a three-day convention. The purpose, as one delegate described it, was to "build a platform for the liberation of a great race." A reporter noted the preponderance of younger men and women within the delegation. The conspicuous absence of the "older leadership" and in their place "newer, younger voices" clamoring for a "militant program" marked a "new phase" in the black freedom struggle. Like previous conferences, the delegates paid tribute to judicial activism, black-owned business, and race solidarity. What stood out, however, was the delegates' demand for the "unrestricted admission" of African Americans into the trade and industrial unions. Also indicative of the youth's influence was the attention given to the "world-wide fight against war and fascism." They condemned fascist Europe as well as Japan's occupation of Manchuria, the Roosevelt Administration's "Good Neighbor Policy" toward rightwing dictators in Latin America, and all forms of colonialism. In the face of the growing threat of fascism and economic depression, the reporter noted, the delegates spoke "not with despair" but rather with "hope and

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Robeson, "The Artist Must Take Sides," in *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974*, ed. Philip S. Foner, 118-119 (New York: Citadel Press, 1978), 118.

militant determination to struggle for the achievement of their ends.” This new generation of radicals described themselves as a National Negro Congress (NNC).<sup>2</sup>

The National Negro Congress was the leading African-American organization in the global anti-fascist movement. The idea for such an organization was first debated in June 1935 at Howard University’s Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall. Under the chairmanship of political scientist Ralph Bunch and Harvard-trained lawyer John P. Davis, the “Joint Committee on National Recovery” invited more than twenty organizations to discuss the status of the black working class. Representatives of New Deal agencies, National Urban League, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, American Communist Party, American Socialist Party, and the Workers’ Party all seemed to agree on enforcing racial equality within the economic recovery programs. The means for achieving that end was, however, hotly contested. While some insisted on working within the confines of the New Deal framework, others desired on more militant action. As Bunch stated, “the ruling class of large land-holders in the South and industrialists in the North” were determined “to keep the Negro in servile condition and as a profitable labor supply” whose efforts are “often heightened by the New Deal.”<sup>3</sup>

Pointing to Europe, Bunche and the left faction at the Howard meeting warned of the dangers of Jim Crow’s persistence. Fascism, they believed, was the logical consequence of the West’s inability to provide adequate economic relief. Fascist rulers, Ralph Bunche further outlined in his *World View of Race*, masked capitalism’s inadequacies by stoking fears of racial,

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<sup>2</sup> Lee Moon, “Leadership of Youth Shapes Negro Confab,” *New York Amsterdam*, Feb. 22, 1936, 1 and 2 and “Other Papers Say,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 22, 1936, 16 and “For Roosevelt in Brazil,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1936, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Bunche, “The National Conference on the Economic Crisis,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 1 (Jan., 1936), 1-2 and 62.

religious, and ethnic minorities. “What could better aid the false purposes of the rulers of Nazi Germany than the opportunity to shield the weaknesses of their national policies by invoking the emotions of the German people against the scapegoat Jewish ‘race?’” In Italy, “Mussolini blandly rationalizes the rape of Ethiopia by shallow but telling appeal to the ‘mission’ of the ‘superior’ Italian race to bring light and civilization to the ‘inferior’ African race.” Jim Crow similarly blinds the “brutally exploited poor white masses” with “illusions of grandeur in their traditional ‘superiority’ over the ‘inferior’ and even more severely exploited Negro.” African American’s emancipation was, thus, critical to the successful overthrow of fascism. Only by building cross-racial working class alliances—backed by a Popular Front—would anti-fascists emerge victorious. By enforcing racial egalitarianism within the workers’ movement, “the oppressed racial groups may win the support of oppressed, though previously prejudiced, working-class groups.”<sup>4</sup>

The NNC emerged from the Howard conference as what historian Martha Biondi described as a “black Popular Front.”<sup>5</sup> The purpose of such a coalition, as demonstrated at the Howard conference, was to promote a shared purpose among leftist partisans. In order to achieve this goal, the NNC’s founders had to ameliorate the trepidation many felt towards allying with the American Communist Party (CPUSA). In reality, African-American communists played vital roles in the NNC’s creation though hardly at the behest of the CPUSA. Figures such as James W. Ford, Edward E. Strong, and many others sincerely believed the NNC was the key instrument for rallying the black masses behind the Popular Front. African-American women in the party such as Thyra Edwards and Louise Thompson found the NNC empowering for its militant conception

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Bunche, *A World View of Race* (Washington, D.C.: Negro Folk Education, 1936), 25-26.

<sup>5</sup> Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6.

of feminism. In the struggle against the “three-fold exploitation” of black female workers, Edwards and Thompson took on leading roles in the black Popular Front. CPUSA Executive Secretary Earl Browder acknowledged that the NNC had “found the correct road to a broad unity of the varied progressive forces among the Negro people and their friends.” Taking a firm back seat to the black Popular Front, Browder stated, “Communists and all progressives can well continue to give it their energetic and steadfast support.” African Americans—communist and non-communist—developed their own strategy.<sup>6</sup>

Nor was the Communist International the architect of the global Popular Front. After the burning of the Reichstag in February 1933 and the subsequent crackdown on the German Communist Party (KPD), Joseph Stalin and the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) refused overtures from European party officials to reevaluate the ultra sectarian policies of the Third Period. Defying Stalin and the ECCI, local French communist and socialist organizers coalesced in order to form a wall of resistance to fascism. The *Baltimore Afro-American's* William N. Jones, a vociferous propagandist for the NNC, witnessed the electoral victory of this anti-fascist coalition in June 1936. For Jones, the new government marked a clear demarcation between “radical parties on one side and the...fascist and royalist groups on the other.” The success of the French Popular Front, Jones concluded, provided a novel method for overthrowing Jim Crow. In an Popular Front, “color and race lines do not count as much as that of socialism against fascism.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *The Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress* (Washington, D.C.: National Negro Congress, Feb. 14-16, 1936), 22, Papers of the National Negro Congress (“NNC papers” hereafter), part I, reel 2, frame 248-270 and Earl Browder, *The People's Front* (New York: International Publishers, 1938), 47.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 120-142 and William N. Jones, “Jones Finds France Red,” *Afro-American*, June 27, 1936, 2.

Numerous observers still expressed anxiety towards the NNC's "spirit of radicalism." "As a mass movement, expressive of unformulated dissatisfaction and unrest," academic Kelly Miller described the Chicago confab, "the Conference was a great success, unequaled by any undertaking since the heyday of the Garvey movement." On the other hand, the NNC's position towards religion, philanthropy, and patriotism—"the three pillars upon which the life and hope of the race have been built"—were either "ruthlessly flouted or tepidly tolerated out of a sense of salutary prudence." George S. Schuyler similarly described the congress as a moment of hubris among young radicals destined to fade away. "A few months from now," he wrote, "most Negroes who have heard of the Congress will have forgotten all about it." Many on the Left held equally disdainful positions. W.E.B. Du Bois characterized the Chicago congress as a "narcotic" for the masses due to its "incoherent and impossible resolutions." C.L.R James described the NNC as a "stooge organization" for Stalinists. The born-again anti-communist Claude McKay dismissed the NNC as a collection of "irresponsible little leaders who have not won their position by positive performance and achievement, but have had greatness thrust upon them by powerful forces seeking to influence the colored group...for ulterior purposes."<sup>8</sup>

Historians reached similar conclusions during the Cold War. Many characterized the NNC—and much of the 1930s labor movement in general—as an appendage of the CPUSA's strategy of fomenting anti-fascism within black communities.<sup>9</sup> In their study of the American Communist Party, Irving Howe and Wilson Record characterized the NNC as the main "front in

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<sup>8</sup> "George S. Schuyler, "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 7, 1936, 10; Kelly Miller, "Kelly Miller Calls Negro Congress A 'Leftward Drift,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 7, 1936, A2; W.E.B. Du Bois, "Forum and Facot of Opinion," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 28, 1936, A2; J.R. Johnson, "Negroes, We Can Depend Only on Ourselves!," *Labor Action*, Vol. 5, No. 28, July 14, 4.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1951).

the Negro community during the Popular Front.”<sup>10</sup> By summarily dismissing the NNC’s national leaders and grass-roots organizers as mere servants of the hammer and sickle, historians failed to recognize the true character of the black Popular Front.<sup>11</sup> By the Cold War’s end, revisionists turned to the 1930s and 1940s in an attempt to resurrect the legacy of black radicals and militant unions. Revisionists placed black workers front-and-center in the industrial union movement demanding an equal distribution of the New Deal.<sup>12</sup> As Lizabeth Cohen noted in her seminal study of the working class during interwar Chicago, workers “were joining together to exert more control over their work lives,” as well as “asserting themselves in new ways in the larger political arena.”<sup>13</sup>

It was not until 2012 that Erik Gellman provided the first extensive study of the NNC. By examining five local NNC councils, Gellman untangled the internecine politics of the CPUSA from the NNC. He argued that the congress’s legacy must be understood through “the mind-set

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<sup>10</sup> Irving Howe and Lewis Cosner, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1957), 356.

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence S. Wittner did press upon the need for reassessing the NNC’s legacy by researching its grassroots activism. See Lawrence S. Wittner, “The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment,” *American Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1970): 883-901.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Raymond Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression: The Problem of Economic Recovery* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1970); Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Black* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Mark Naison, *Communist in Harlem During the Depression* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988); Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997); Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*; Robert R. 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); Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2.

of its core group of activists, who crossed lines of class and race within labor, government, and urban communities.”<sup>14</sup> The NNC’s grassroots activism was not determined by the dictates of the CPUSA but rather by the needs of black communities. While offering a much-needed local study, the NNC’s legacy remains conceptually fixed within the African American labor historiography. This dissertation, thus, addresses an import gap in the scholarship by examining the interaction between the NNC’s global and local activism.

Over the last few decades, African-American transnational and international studies have unearthed anti-racism’s global reach by expanding the black freedom struggle geographically and spatially. These studies reveal a movement that sought to dismantle more than segregation. Activists, workers, and intellectuals alike envisioned a global movement fighting for both economic and human rights.<sup>15</sup> As this dissertation aims to show, the National Negro Congress played a vital role in expanding the borders of the black freedom struggle. Throughout the Popular Front, the NNC analogized black Americans’ struggle against white supremacy with those suffering under the Axis Powers. These connections were made through essays, public

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<sup>14</sup> Erik Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 3

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, James Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Jonathan Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land?: World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956-1974* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); and Keisha Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

demonstrations, town hall meetings, conferences, speeches, humanitarian efforts, and industrial factory strikes. By globalizing the early black freedom struggle, members of the NNC—national executive officers and grassroots organizers—encouraged the black working class to assert itself on the world stage. Consequently, the NNC transformed the dynamics of black liberation politics and international protest.

This study places the NNC at the forefront of global Popular Front by detailing the ways in which its anti-fascist protest galvanized the local struggle against Jim Crow, labor exploitation, and extralegal violence. Congress leaders and organizers determined that a coalition of anti-racists and unionists fighting for social policies that advanced racial egalitarianism, industrial democracy, and human rights was vital for halting the spread of fascism in the United States. The history of the NNC demonstrates how the grassroots mobilization of African Americans for economic and political equality was inspired by the struggle against the Axis Powers—and, conversely, how the global anti-fascist élan was influenced by multifaceted local conditions.

## **Chapter Outline**

The first half of the dissertation examines the NNC's engagement in international protest. Chapter One places the origins of the NNC in the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement of 1935 and 1936. While the black working class confronted the segregationist policies of the New Deal programs, activists analogized fascism with Jim Crow in the political economy. John P. Davis, Harvard trained lawyer and lobbyist, codified this analogy into official civil rights policy. As the founder of the Joint Committee of National Recovery (JCNR), Davis toured the country and studied the depths of black life during the second half of the Great Depression. Intimately familiar with the socio-economic conditions of the working class and enraged by fascist Italy's



invasion of Ethiopia, Davis determined that a permanent and mostly African-American organization fighting for racial egalitarianism and industrial democracy was vital for preventing fascism from emerging in the U.S. Davis and leaders such as communist James W. Ford and trade unionist A. Philip Randolph formed the NNC by the Summer of 1935. As a result, Davis, Ford, Randolph, and many others paved the foundation for the building of the most internationally minded organization for social justice of the 1930s and 1940s.

Chapter Two documents the NNC's contribution to the Loyalist forces in the Spanish Civil War in 1937 and 1938. Youth activists such as Walter Garland and Thaddeus Battle joined the Popular Front by organizing NNC councils in their respective hometowns of Brooklyn and Washington, D.C. As the NNC expanded its anti-fascist activism, Garland and Battle joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (ABL). Black American fighters in the Spanish Civil War such as Garland and Battle routinely analogized their military campaign against Spanish fascism with the NNC's resistance to white supremacy at home. Black women's contributions to the Loyalist cause were equally vital. Louis T. Patterson of the International Workers Order (IWO) and Thyra Edwards of the NNC's National Executive Committee toured Europe and the Soviet Union throughout the late 1930s and promoted the significance of the European crisis to black Americans. Edwards, for instance, acted as a liaison between the NNC and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (NACASD). After touring Spain, Thompson and Edwards attended the 1937 World Conference against Racism and Anti-Semitism in Paris, France. Acting as NNC delegates, Thompson and Edwards jointly outlined before the more than fifteen hundred delegates the shared struggle between the Jewish and African Diaspora.

Chapter Two also explores the NNC's evolution from a civil and labor rights organization to a global humanitarian movement. Under John P. Davis' direction, the NNC

pressured the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration to provide a safe haven for Jewish refugees. They also fought to lift the embargo on the Spanish Popular Front government, to refuse fascist Italy's right to occupy Ethiopia, and to pass an anti-lynching bill in the United States. Thyra Edwards also helped resettle 30,000 Spanish refugees in Mexico. Max Yergan, NNC secretary and co-founder of the International Committee on African Affairs (ICAA), also toured the U.S. in an attempt to educate black Americans on the necessity for supporting the Chinese' struggle against Japanese imperialism.

During this period, the House of Representatives formed the House Un-American Activities Committee. Under the direction of Democratic Congressman Martin Dies, Jr. of Texas, the committee investigated what it deemed subversive organizations. Though nominally interested in both leftwing and righting groups, Congressman Dies spent the vast majority of the committee's resources investigating civil rights activists in the NNC as well as other Popular Front organizations. The human rights campaign was, thus, vastly curtailed due to the Dies Committee's public accusations of anti-Americanism within the Popular Front.

Chapter Three explains the infamous split within the NNC at its 1940 convention in Washington, D.C. After Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed the non-aggression pact in August 1939, the Communist International (Comintern) pressured the NNC's communist faction to abandon its anti-fascist rhetoric. Enraged by the communist faction's rhetorical shift, moderate socialists such as NNC President A. Philip Randolph abandoned the congress. While acknowledging the harm caused by this split, I argue that the NNC continued to engage in militant direct-action in defense industries during this period. Similar to Randolph's March on Washington Movement (MOWM), the NNC pressured defense industries in Boston, Brooklyn, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Baltimore to both higher African Americans as well as

desegregate their entire workforce. With the help of CPUSA-affiliates such as the American People's Mobilization (APM), the NNC also fought for the continuation of government-sponsored jobs programs as well as the enforcement of civil liberties. While Randolph's MOWM has been closely examined by historians, the NNC's campaign during this era remains understudied.

The second half of the dissertation details how anti-fascism mobilized the NNC's local councils. Chapter Four documents the NNC's Philadelphia council under the leadership of Benjamin D. Amis. Though largely unknown today, Amis was one of the most significant advocates for workers' rights and racial justice throughout the 1920s and 1930s. By 1935, Amis chaired the Philadelphia Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia (PCDE) as well as another organization that raised funds to support the Loyalist forces in the Spanish Civil War. His leadership in the anti-fascist front galvanized Philadelphia's black community into a broader movement of the working class. In 1936, he was named head of the Labor Committee of the NNC's Philadelphia council and worked for the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). In just two years, he organized fifteen groups of black and white steelworkers into either unions or lodges and negotiated union contracts. By interpreting fascism in ways that suited the local conditions of Philadelphia Jim Crow, Amis encouraged black industrial workers into joining the burgeoning militant workers' movement waged by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

Chapter Five discusses the NNC in Baltimore. The Baltimore council consisted primarily of local activists such as communist Frank Scott, the Baltimore Urban League's (BUL) Executive Director Edward S. Lewis, CIO official Arthur Murphy, and renowned Baptist minister David E. Rice. These community leaders coalesced in response to the Italian-Ethiopian

War as well as white supremacy in the craft unions of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Consequently, the Baltimore NNC fused the black freedom and industrial unionist movements by proselytizing anti-racism on the shop floor. In the notorious Bethlehem Steel Company in the working class suburb of Sparrows Point, the NNC council fought and won union recognition for the company's steel workers by 1941. The council also forced the Glenn L. Martin Aircraft Company to hire skilled and semi-skilled black workers in 1942, the first integrationist initiative in the company's history.

African Americans were vital contributors to the global Popular Front. Through the NNC, activists analogized black Americans' struggle against Jim Crow and labor exploitation with those suffering under the Axis Powers. These connections were made through essays, public demonstrations, town hall meetings, conferences, speeches, humanitarian efforts, and industrial factory strikes. By globalizing the early black freedom struggle, members of the NNC—national executive officers and grassroots organizers—encouraged the black working class to assert itself on the world stage. Consequently, the NNC transformed the dynamics of black liberation politics and international protest.

**Chapter One**  
**“Africa for Africans!”**  
**Black Nationalism, Socialism, and the Building of a Global Congress, 1935-1936**

On a boisterous evening in March 1935, thousands of Harlem residents congregated at Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s Abyssinian Baptist Church after the world's first fascist head-of-state Benito Mussolini ordered troops to surround the Ethiopian border. In response to Italy's military maneuvers, the speakers at the church called for the removal of all Italian soldiers from the border, an intervention by the League of Nations on Ethiopia's behalf, and a declaration of unwavering support to Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. In light of these demands, the *Afro-American* wrote in wonderment of the “increasing crystallization” of anti-fascism expressed in this house of worship. Espousing a Pan-African solidarity, numerous protestors waved the flag of Marcus Garvey's imagined African empire. Arthur Reid of the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia (PCDE) declared “the time is at an end when the white race can continue to ride on the backs of the darker races.” Calling attention to the shared struggle of Abyssinians and black Americans, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. warned that both fascism and Jim Crow were the “fingers of which are daily digging deeper into the vitals of our people.” Interjecting a United Front outlook into the Pan-African ambience, James W. Ford of the American Communist Party (CPUSA) proclaimed that only the white and black working class organizing in unison could “combat the fascist butcher.” In a remarkable act of harmony, the entire gathering—Pan-Africanists and communists alike—chanted the most globally recognized battle cry in the history of Garveyism—“Africa for Africans!”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Pro-Ethiopian Feeling Welding in New York,” *Afro-American*, March 2, 1935, 2; “3,000 Strike at Mussolini,” *New York Amsterdam*, March 9, 1935, 1 and 15; and “Ethiopian Flag Waves in Big Harlem Demonstration,” *Afro-American*, March 16, 1935, 12. The estimation of those in attendance varied. While *New York Amsterdam* estimated a total of 3,000, the *Afro-American* reported 5,000.

Wars of racial subjugation and extermination were fundamental precepts to Italian fascism. Key to Benito Mussolini's mission was to revitalize the Italian empire through *spazio vitale* (living space) in East Africa. With imperial ambitions stretching across the Mediterranean Sea, the fascist statesman looked to Italy's historical enemy—Ethiopia. After suffering a humiliating defeat at Adowa in 1896, Mussolini determined to expand his colonial presence in Somaliland and Eritrea to Africa's sole independent nation once again. A vital supporter to Italy's war was Nazi Germany. In exchange of acknowledging Italy's right to occupy Ethiopia, Mussolini acquiesced to Adolf Hitler's annexation of Austria. Analogous to Italian fascism, German Nazism looked to central and eastern Europe as the rightful property of the Aryan race. In order to secure a descent standard of living for Germany, Hitler considered the European continent and the Soviet Union as *lebensraum* (living space). This could only be achieved through military conquest and the subsequent depopulation of non-German ethnics. Fascist imperialism had begun.<sup>2</sup>

As fascism locked its colonial manacles on the Horn of Africa, African Americans restructured the contours of Ethiopianism—the philosophy that those of African descent share a historic civilization torn apart by slavery and colonialism but destined to re-claim Africa as a sovereign political entity.<sup>3</sup> Composed of black communists and socialists, leftwing Garveyites, radical unions, and civil servants, the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement spoke in a complex vernacular of Black Nationalism and socialism. The emancipation of Ethiopians from fascism and colonialism, the activists determined, was intertwined with the liberation of the black

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Goeschel, *Mussolini and Hitler: The Forging of the Fascist Alliance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 5 and 61-64 and Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Viking Press, 2007), 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 23.

working class from Jim Crow and labor exploitation. This global outlook was the seedbed for the emergence of the National Negro Congress (NNC) in the United States. Occupying key leadership positions in the black Popular Front, the NNC harnessed what Louise Thompson described as the collective black recognition of “that kind of fascism.”<sup>4</sup> With the support of seasoned radicals from the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement, civil rights attorney John P. Davis launched the NNC as the most global black political organization of the 1930s and 1940s.

A number of historians who document the black freedom struggle of the 1930s attribute the strength of its anti-fascism to the Communist International’s (Comintern) adoption of the Popular Front in the summer of 1935. This conclusion has led to the NNC’s characterization as a communist front.<sup>5</sup> Studies of African-American engagement with the Italian-Ethiopian War, in turn, underestimate the NNC’s contribution to the Pan-African élan that defined the global black politics of the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement.<sup>6</sup> While many studies detail the crucial importance of both communism and Pan-Africanism as expressions of anti-fascism and anti-colonialism, the

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<sup>4</sup> Louise Thompson, interview by Linda Burnham, March 2, 1988 and March 9, 1988, regarding Harlem Suitcase Theatre and Spanish Civil War, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers (“Paterson papers” hereafter), box 27, fol. 11, Emory University: Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Jacksonville: University of Mississippi Press, 1998); and William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, William R. Scott, *The Sons of Sheba’s Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1941* (Indianapolis: Indiana University press, 1993); Joseph E. Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia, 1936-1941* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994); James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Clare Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

process through which the founders of the NNC engaged with these various philosophies of protest throughout 1935 and 1936 has not been sufficiently explored.

The creation of the NNC evidences the link between black activists' global protest with their local institutional and coalition building. Its development involved a complex and uneven process that began with the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement in the Spring of 1935 and culminated at its first national convention in February 1936 in Chicago. Throughout this turbulent year, black radicals inside and outside the CPUSA considered the NNC a necessary tool for dismantling racial and economic oppression. The crisis in Ethiopia demonstrated the necessity of uniting all civil rights organizations and labor unions under one meticulously coordinated federation in order to prevent a fascist takeover in the U.S. By harmonizing Black Nationalism with socialism, the NNC articulated a Pan-African solidarity while simultaneously calling for a United Front of the entire working class. Those within the NNC, thus, greatly expanded the Popular Front's anti-fascism in ways that suited their own militant ends.

The NNC was but one organization involved in the global protest against Italian fascism. Throughout the 1930s, the world witnessed the rise of various anti-fascist movements that analogized Ethiopia's fight against colonialism and fascism with their own struggles for justice. In Mobile, Alabama, citizens formed the Friends of Ethiopia Committee in the face of the "lynch forces which seek to prevent Negroes and poor whites from organizing." The Hands-off Ethiopia League of Panama stressed the "dangers to all people of the working class and to small nations throughout the world" of European imperialism. The Frente Negro (Black Front) of Brazil equated Mussolini's bombing of Ethiopia with their "fascist white terror dictator" Getulio Vargas. The British Guiana Labour Union avowed at their May Day celebration an unwavering support for Ethiopians and called for "others races of the world to solemnly struggle against



another Imperialist War.” The London-based Negro Welfare Association compared the status of England’s black citizenry to African subjects toiling under colonialist and fascist rule. Even the War Council of the Chinese Red Army stated “the struggle of the Ethiopian people is the same struggle of the Chinese people.”<sup>7</sup>

Like many anti-fascist organizations, the African-American Popular Front’s global solidarities developed out of an indigenous struggle against oppression. The New York division of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), under the leadership of A.L. King, emerged as a key organization in the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement. As the struggle for Ethiopia flowered into a powerful Pan-African resistance, African-American communists’ stance against white supremacy and colonialism found an intensely receptive audience in the New York UNIA. The crisis in Ethiopia demonstrated to both Garveyites and communists that anti-fascism was a powerful uniting force for all those who wished to combat Jim Crow. Consequently, members of the UNIA and CPUSA coalesced and harmonized Pan-Africanism with the principles of the United Front into the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia (PCDE). The CPUSA and UNIA’s ability to coordinate direct-action as well as build popular support through the PCDE reveals both organizations’ flexibility in developing policy and responding to populist expressions of anti-fascism. “Harlem had never before witnessed such a united front,” the socialist *Liberator* wrote of the PCDE, standing for the “independence of Ethiopia from imperialism.”<sup>8</sup> Black anti-fascism, thus, emerged not from the Comintern but from the PCDE.

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<sup>7</sup> “Organize Ethiopia ‘Friends’ in Ala.,” *Chicago Defender*, Dec. 21, 1935, 24; “Brazil Angry at Bombings in Ethiopia,” *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 23, 1935, 1; Metz T.P. Lochard, “Panorama of World News,” *Chicago Defender*, Apr. 11, 1936, 24; Dan Burley, “Black People Saw the Light,” *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 4, 1936, 24; “Monster May Day Rally in British Guiana,” *The Negro Worker*, July-August, 1935, 28; “Conference of the Negro Welfare Association,” *The Negro Worker*, Dec. 1935, 8-9; and “Soviet China Hails Abyssinia,” *The Negro Worker*, Dec. 1935, 17.

<sup>8</sup> “Ethiopia Unity Rallies Harlem,” *Liberator*, March 15, 1935, 1.

The black Popular Front engaged in direct action against white supremacy and inequality. As the black working class continued to struggle under the segregationist policies of the New Deal programs, activists analogized fascism and Nazism with Jim Crow in the political economy. John P. Davis, Harvard trained lawyer and lobbyist, codified this analogy into official civil rights policy. As the founder of the Joint Committee of National Recovery (JCNR), Davis toured the country and studied the depths of black life during the second half of the Great Depression. Intimately familiar with the socio-economic conditions of the working class and inspired by the PCDE and the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement, Davis determined that a National Negro Congress fighting for racial egalitarianism and industrial democracy was vital for preventing fascism from taking root in the U.S. As a result, Davis paved the foundation for the building of the most global African-American anti-fascist organization in the United States.

The founders of the National Negro Congress aimed to build a broad coalition of all anti-racist organizations and unions for the purposes of fomenting a permanent Popular Front representing all African Americans. While anti-fascism opened the door for new possibilities in building local, national, and global networks of protest, the Popular Front also exposed deep ideological divides among various anti-racist and Left factions. Although congress leaders were able to build on the coalition made during the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement, they were unable to fully engage with more moderate civil rights and organized labor forces. While Davis, Ford, and trade union leader A. Philip Randolph pleaded with all sympathetic groups to build the NNC, their call for militant direct action through a United Front alarmed a number of these groups. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the American Socialist Party (SPUSA), the craft unions in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and the conservative faction of the UNIA felt threatened by these tactics of protest and chose not

to participate in the congress's founding. As a result, the NNC remained marred by what its founders desperately sought to avoid—sectarianism.

### **Garveyism and Anti-Fascism**

“Abyssinia, if pitted against Italy,” Marcus Garvey wrote in the *Black Man* in July 1935, “will demonstrate the unconquerable character of the Negro when put to fight.” Observing the political landscape from London, Garvey saw anti-fascism as the catalysis for Pan-Africa's rise to global preeminence. “The next 50 years will see the Negro a potential power in world affairs,” he declared, “and nothing will hasten this quicker than the invasion of Abyssinia by Italy.” Though the exiled UNIA leader fell into political obscurity by the 1930s, Garveyism provided a critical platform for the expression of anti-fascism through anti-colonial and race-first principles. If fascism was to colonize the sole surviving self-governed African nation (outside of Liberia), Garvey and others reasoned, then Pan-Africanists must articulate anti-fascism through a prism of race.<sup>9</sup>

The world collapse of industrial capitalism, the relentless modes of Jim Crow, and the failure of the League of Nations to both prevent war and liberate colonies produced a renewed alarm within the civil rights community towards the growing threat of white imperialist rule. Italian fascism personified this phenomenon. The pillaging of Ethiopia by Italy awakened both the masses and anti-racist leaders to a world where global power structures had hardened through what W.E.B Du Bois described three decades earlier as the “color-line.”<sup>10</sup> Out of this crisis, as Garvey had accurately predicted, emerged a strong anti-fascist sentiment among Black

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<sup>9</sup> Marcus Garvey, “Italy and Abyssinia,” *Black Man*, July, 1935, in *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, Vol. X, ed. Robert A. Hill et. al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 602-603.

<sup>10</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 16

Nationalist organizations. By linking depression and Jim Crow with colonialism and fascism, the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement inspired black Americans to protest globally.

Louise Thompson—one of the few black members of the CPUSA-allied International Workers Order (IWO)—was an eyewitness to the ways in which the Ethiopian conflict reflected the deep-seated economic tensions in Garvey’s former home of Harlem. Less than two weeks after the PCDE’s inauguration, Thompson noticed a small crowd of Harlemites aggressively pressing into the Kress Five and Ten Cent store. Upon entering, the proprietors informed her that the store manager had assaulted a teenaged black Puerto Rican, Lino Rivera, for stealing. Police gradually entered as protestors refused to leave until the store manager produced Rivera. Defying police orders to leave, one woman began trashing the store with her umbrella. Outside, a gathering swelled to the hundreds when rumors spread that Rivera had died from his wounds. As the police became abusive, the residents vandalized the entire establishment. “We ought to close up every damn store,” a defiant man shouted, “This ought to make the colored people wake up and do something against these high rents and high prices for bad meat and food we are charged.” In an attempt to quell the hostility, a black communist of the *Young Liberators* climbed a ladder placed directly in front of the store and implored the need for “Negro and white solidarity against police-provoked race-rioting.” As Thompson pointed out, however, “Nobody was going to get anywhere by that time...The people were going to have their say and not listen to anybody no matter what color they were.” Before a white *Young Liberator* could make his plea, someone threw a rock through the store window. The Harlem riot began.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Police Condemned by Harlem Inquiry,” *New York Times*, Aug. 10, 1935, box 7, fol. 3; Louise Thompson, “What Happened in Harlem: An Eye Witness Account,” *New Masses*, April 2, 1935, 15-16, box 19, fol. 7; and Louise Thompson, unpublished memoir: chapter 6, “Harlem Riot of 1935,” 1-5, box 20, fol. 5., all found in Patterson papers.

The deliberate targeting of white merchants was symptomatic of the mass unemployment, starvation, and racism that haunted black Harlem throughout the Great Depression. As William L. Patterson pointed out in *The Negro Worker*, however, “The outburst of anger was by no means an expression of mass indignation and hatred against purely local conditions.” Patterson could not help but notice the singling out of Italian storeowners for “special demonstrations of hatred.” Patterson interpreted this precise targeting as a deliberate effort by “the Negro masses...to express their international solidarity with the Abyssinian people.” Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia echoed inequality at home, he reasoned, which intensified racial animosities in Harlem as well as other cities and towns. The correlation between economic depression and fascism, thus, shaped the politics of the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement.<sup>12</sup>

After the riot subsided, community leaders set up a number of street corner meetings, as described by Thompson, to create a “united-front effort to calm the community down.” Harlem’s communists—white and black—insisted that anger be directed towards Italian fascism, not the Italian masses. Harassing petty capitalists, the communists argued, was foolhardy. “Will you kill a giant tree,” one asked “by plucking a single leaf?” Appeals for a United Front against capitalism and racism by the communists fell on deaf ears as Black Nationalists commanded the most attention and enthusiasm. “The Harlem Communists,” one journalist noted, “are raising the usual rumpus” while Pan-African groups multiplied. Anti-fascist Ethiopianism, in fact, became a part of daily public discussions. “Not since the days of Marcus Garvey,” another journalist wrote, “have racialists won so large a following on the streets of Harlem.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> William L. Patterson, “Negro Harlem Awakes,” *The Negro Worker*, June 1935, 24.

<sup>13</sup> “Harlem Ponders Ethiopia’s Fate,” *New York Times*, Jul. 4, 1935; Thompson, unpublished memoir, 6; and “Harlem Quite in African Crisis,” *New York Star*, July 18, 1935, Patterson papers, box 7, fol. 3.

No anti-fascist organization was more audacious in its call for solidarity with Ethiopians than the New York UNIA. Located at the heart of Harlem on Lenox Avenue and 135<sup>th</sup> Street, the local UNIA, led by A.L. King, was draped with a banner declaring “One Thousand Men for Universal African Legion.” Bestowing himself the title of “Captain,” King portrayed the UNIA as the vanguard of a Pan-African army fighting racism, fascism, and colonialism wherever it could be found. Viewed as the exiled Garvey’s rightful successor, King commanded more attention than anyone in his call for anti-fascist Ethiopianism. His day-to-day following and documentation of the Ethiopian crisis was unmatched by any anti-fascist in Harlem, and no American was more audacious in proselytizing the essentialness of Ethiopia’s victory to diaspora empowerment. “The object of the association,” declared King, “is to protect the interests of Negroes in any part of the world.”<sup>14</sup>

The militant resistance to inequality that the Italian-Ethiopian war intensified was expressed in UNIA chapters stretching across the nation. In Mississippi, the Garvey-inspired Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) proclaimed “young men want to volunteer and go and help to fight for that old Mother Land Africa.” “Some of our people,” they stressed, “will do...anything to get out of this depression.” In the town of Priscilla, a PME official quoted a sharecropper, “the whole country is stirred up...and we want to go to our Mother Country Africa.” With thirteen children and ten grandchildren, this family of sharecroppers toiled on a “plantation nearly starved to death and nearly naked and barefooted as we can be. We are suffering down here and we want to go home.”<sup>15</sup> In Chicago, a PME organizer claimed “The

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<sup>14</sup> “Harlem Quiet in African Crisis,” and William R. Scott, “Black Nationalism and the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict, 1934-1935,” *Journal of Negro History* (Apr., 1978), 123.

<sup>15</sup> All above quoted by, “A Digest of Letters Received by the Ethiopian Research Council, Washington, D.C.,” Aug. 13, 1935, part II, reel 30, frame 796-797, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (“NAACP papers” hereafter).

conditions of this country are not getting any better and they are not going to get any better.” The only solution was the “separation of the races” and the return to Africa in order for black Americans to “work out our own Soul-Salvation.”<sup>16</sup> Other Garveyite affiliates such as the Negro World Alliance (NWA) led parades waving the flags of Ethiopia and Liberia along with banners declaring “Down with Mussolini,” “Africa Must Be Free,” and “N.R.A. Means ‘Negro, Return to Africa.’”<sup>17</sup>

The UNIA was keenly adept at speaking to the profound despair shared among black communities stretching from Harlem to Chicago to the Mississippi Delta. From confronting white-owned stores to searching for ways to leave for Africa, industrial workers and sharecroppers identified with Ethiopians through a shared struggle against white supremacy and exploitation. By in large, however, anti-fascist Ethiopianism encompassed more of a spiritual and philosophical Back-to-Africa sentiment rather than a physical one. At a demonstration sponsored by the Pan-African Reconstruction Association (PARA) in Harlem, for example, a protestor suggested “If we help them [Ethiopians] now, some day they’ll help us.” Another audience member demanded that “African” become the new terminology for black Americans. “No more Negroes an’ shines an’ coons. African!”<sup>18</sup>

Tensions between African Americans and Italian Americans occasionally flared into violence. On the corner of 119<sup>th</sup> Street and Lenox Avenue, 200 Harlemites stood before a street corner speaker waving the Ethiopian flag. “Let’s run the Italians out of Harlem,” the orator roared. Standing outside the barricaded front door of an Italian merchant storeowner, Harlemites

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<sup>16</sup> Alberta Spain to unknown [Senator Earnest Sevier Cox], n.d. [1935-1936], Universal Negro Improvement Association Records (“UNIA records” hereafter), Emory University: Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, box 2, fol. 1.

<sup>17</sup> “Colored People Plan parade on Ethiopian Issue,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jun 15, 1935, 10.

<sup>18</sup> “Chicago Negroes Protest Italy’s Policy in Africa,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jun 14, 1935, 2.

ominously guarded the entrance daring anyone to enter. After a police officer drew his gun, the protestors dispersed and proceeded to vandalize other Italian stores writing threats in chalk on the side of the buildings. That same day, black and Italian-American fourteen-year-old students at a junior high school in Brooklyn “fought out the respective claims of their races with their fists.” The following morning, five students were arrested for concealing ice picks and sawed-off billiard cues.<sup>19</sup>

Violence spread North and South. In what began as a series of “verbal disputes” over Ethiopia and African-American boxer Joe Louis’s victory over Italian Primo Carnera, 100 black and Italian-American residents of Jersey City pummeled each other with clubs and bricks. Twenty police officers dispersed the rioters by brandishing machine guns and tear gas bombs. In Birmingham and Jefferson county of Alabama, picketers haunted the proprietors of an Italian-American grocery store from the outside. The enraged crowd assaulted black and white customers as they walked out the door. The local CPUSA implored the picketers to cease the violence. Many Italians, the communists asserted, were appalled by fascism. Local Italians, they pleaded, fled to the U.S. “to escape the exploitation and persecution of the Italian ruling class.”<sup>20</sup>

African Americans in the CPUSA and other proponents of the United Front were troubled by the reemergence of Garveyism. For William L. Patterson, the Back-to-Africa sentiment—whether spiritual or physical—channeled the black masses into “impractical avenues which hold no danger for Italy or for any other section of the imperialist world.” “Yet armed to the teeth,” he warned, “these great bandits are each of them plundering millions upon millions of coloured people.” The destruction of property and occasional acts of violence failed to

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<sup>19</sup> Edward Dillon, “Harlem Drive Upon Italians Stirs Disorder,” *Daily News*, Oct. 4, 1935, Paterson papers, box 7, fol. 3.

<sup>20</sup> “Jersey City Riot Over Ethiopia is Ended by Police,” *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 24, 1935, 5 and “Race Picketers Assault Buyers at Food Stores,” *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 2, 1935, 4.



adequately confront white capitalist rule but, on the contrary, solidified it by failing to acknowledge the shared economic self-interest of the working class. As African-American CPUSA organizer Benjamin D. Amis wrote, “Garveyism preaches hatred of white workers by Negro workers.” Only through a United Front, Amis and others argued, would the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement deal a blow to capitalism and racism.<sup>21</sup>

African-American communists’ critique of Garveyism was partly driven by their own organization’s inability to take a leading role in the initial stages of the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement. While the UNIA’s Black Nationalist message of racial solidarity resonated with large swaths of the black population, the communists’ call for interracial cooperation remained largely shunned. As one communist complained, “The struggle in defense of the Ethiopian people is still too much confined mainly to the Negro masses.” This was primarily the result of the CPUSA’s overwhelmingly white and middle class composition. An officer from the CPUSA affiliate American League Against War and Fascism (AWALF), for instance, noted that the communists’ anti-fascist activism in New York consisted mostly of “professionals, liberal and petty bourgeois [*sic*] elements” who have failed to make “contact with Negro masses and...draw them into the struggle against war and fascism.” Once the prominent African-American communist James W. Ford broke out of the institutional constraints of his party, however, the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement fashioned a more inclusive anti-fascist framework by emphasizing the importance of the United Front.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Scott, “Black Nationalism and the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict, 1934-1935,” 130-131; William L. Patterson, “The Abyssinian Situation and the Negro World,” *The Negro Worker*, June 1935, 16 and Benjamin D. Amis, “Fight Against Garveyism,” *Daily Worker*, June 25, 1930, Benjamin D. Amis papers (“Amis papers” hereafter), box 1, fol. 11, New York University: The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives.

<sup>22</sup> Alex Bittelman, “The United Front Against Imperialist War,” *The Communist*, 681, August 1935 and “Report on Work of the New York City Committee American League Against War and

## Black Nationalism and Socialism

James W. Ford found an unlikely ally in the New York UNIA. Under King's leadership, the New York UNIA, religious leaders, trade unionists, and members of the Harlem CPUSA formed the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia (PCDE). Though King shared many of the conservative Garveyites' ideas, a black Popular Front against fascism triumphed over any other directive. "Our policy of self-help will continue to be the same," King wrote Garvey, "but existing circumstances make it necessary to accept other methods." Despite the non-overlapping goals of the Garveyites and communists, defending Ethiopia was the glue that fused both sides into an anti-fascist force. "Everyone agrees," the PCDE wrote, "that something must be done to weaken the Fascist attempt to enslave the last remaining independent Black territory in Africa." The committee included not just African-American communists such as Ford but white communists such as Allan Taub of the ALAWF. King, in fact, insisted on white radicals' support for Ethiopia in order to pay the "debt owed the black man, who for 300 years has served you in the Americas." Together, the ALAWF and PCDE even publicly praised the participation of the "peace-loving Italians" of Harlem.<sup>23</sup>

Why would Marcus Garvey, a man who for years scolded communism and white workers in general, approve of the PCDE? The answer can be found in his anti-fascist poetry. His most

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Fascism," 3, Oct. 1934-May 1, 1935, Files of the Communist Party of the USA in the Comintern Archives ("CPUSA Comintern files" hereafter), fond 515, delo 3938.

<sup>23</sup> A.L. King to Marcus Garvey, Dec. 19, 1935, quoted by Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 255; Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, "To Join in a United Conference to be Held at St. Philip's Church Auditorium," Sept. 6, 1935, reel 6; Allan Taub to A.L. King, Aug. 5, 1935, reel 5, Allan Taub to A.L. King, Sept. 19, 1935, reel 5; "War! Ethiopia Invaded!," Oct. 4, 1935, reel 5; Allan Taub to A.L. King, Oct. 14, 1935, reel 5, all above found in Universal Negro Improvement Association, Central Division, New York Records, ("UNIA CD records" hereafter); "10,000 Protest Mussolini's War in East Africa," *New York Amsterdam*, Sep. 28, 1935, 3; and "Italians to March in Anti-Mussolini Parade in Harlem," *Afro-American*, Aug. 3, 1935, 16.

politically consequential piece, “Fascist Brute,” depicted a world overrun by barbarism and tumult spawned by the forces of Italy’s imperial machinations. Each stanza illustrates what historian Michael Denning described as the “emblem of insurgency, upheaval, and hope” that defined the political and cultural awakening of the Popular Front.<sup>24</sup> Garvey’s first stanza, for instance, spoke to the political terrorism of fascism:

The gath’ring storm of hell let loose  
Is Mussolini’s way of death:  
But sober men will ask God’s truce  
Before they lose their fearful breath

These “sober men” were not just Ethiopians but all anti-fascists:

A war to-day will but inflame  
A world of thinking, waiting men:  
With white and black its just the same,  
They, all, shall break from out the pen.

In the starkest call for a Popular Front, Garvey declared to Mussolini:

And Communism here and there,  
In Europe’s land, America, too,  
Shall ‘oin the blood march everywhere,  
And make the world a hell for you.<sup>25</sup>

Garvey’s outreach was a momentous opportunity for James W. Ford and other African-American communists. Since the CPUSA’s founding in 1919, appealing to black communities proved challenging. The Party’s initial civil rights initiative, led by the League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR), lagged in its grass-roots mobilization due both to sectarianism and a lack of institutional support. The LSNR and its official organ the *Liberator*, Benjamin D. Amis decried in 1935, “do not reflect the life and daily struggles of the Negro masses.” Throughout the

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Verso, 2011), xiv.

<sup>25</sup> Marcus Garvey, “Fascist Brute,” in nyahbinghi.ca, [http://nyahbinghi.ca/garvey-speeches/view-garvey.asp?word\\_title=Fascist%20Brute](http://nyahbinghi.ca/garvey-speeches/view-garvey.asp?word_title=Fascist%20Brute) (date accessed Feb. 25, 2018).

organizations' existence, Amis struggled to educate white communists on the "peculiar role" black workers play in socialism. According to Amis's successor Harry Haywood, the CPUSA treated the LSNR as a "clearinghouse" for civil rights initiatives that, in the minds of the Party, absolved itself of further action. Organizers such as Amis were adamant in their call for a United Front, but these appeals fell on deaf ears.<sup>26</sup>

Garvey's openness to working with communists as well as the strong anti-fascist impulse among the black masses was an educational moment for the CPUSA. Theodore R. Bassett of the Party's Harlem division wrote King describing Garvey's poem as a "good education for our Party members in the united front" and on the importance of the "Freedom of the Negro People throughout the whole world." By blending Black Nationalism with socialism, the UNIA and CPUSA pioneered an eclectic anti-fascist dialect. Placing the African Diaspora at the heart of the anti-colonial resistance, James W. Ford professed "If Italy attacks Ethiopia, Italian fascism will be buried in the fields of Africa." Conversely, King proclaimed "We must not only issue defiance to Mussolini but of imperialistic countries the world over." Thus, communists such as Ford and Pan-Africanists like King learned the necessity of coalition building as well as the value in embracing various strains of anti-fascism.<sup>27</sup>

For communists such as Ford, the PCDE was his opportunity to harness the growing radical sentiment of the black masses into a broader movement against capitalism. Five years

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<sup>26</sup> Benjamin D. Amis, speech at the XIII Plenum, CPUSA, 1931, in *B.D. Amis, African American Radical: A Short Anthology of Writings and Speeches*, ed. Walter T. Howard (Lanham: University Press of America, 2007), pg. 50; Benjamin D. Amis, "How We Carried out the Decision of the 1930 Communist International Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States," *Communist International*, no. 9, May 5, 1935, 20, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 29; and Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978), 352.

<sup>27</sup> Theodore R. Bassett to A.L. King, Dec. 9, 1935, UNIA CD records, reel 4; "Harlemites State 'Hands Off Ethiopia' Parade," *Chicago Defender*, April 13, 1935, 4; and "Plan Meeting and Parade to Protest Against Italy," *New York Amsterdam*, April 27, 1935, 1 and 5.

prior, Ford co-founded the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW)—an outgrowth of the Comintern—in Hamburg, Germany. Composed of African and black American Marxists, the ITUCNW advocated the United Front throughout the colonized world through its organ *The Negro Worker*, which emphasized the political implications of Nazism for the diaspora as early as 1934. “The German workers are being saturated with the propaganda,” the committee wrote, “that Jews, Negroes and other coloured people are of a lower race to be dominated by the Aryans and if necessary exterminated.” The ITUCNW encouraged its readers to fear not, for the wave of reaction would unleash a global resistance of workers and colonized people. “Behind the fascist, chauvinist propaganda,” they assured, “is the fear of the spectre of the growing united front struggle of the black and white workers and the increasing uprising of the Negro toilers against imperialist domination.” With the Ethiopian crisis in full force by 1935, Ford discovered the opportunity to promote these principles within Black Nationalist circles.<sup>28</sup>

No Marxist—or any proponent of the United Front—codified tenets of Pan-Africanism with socialism into an anti-fascist framework more than Ford. Though now was the time “for all men and women of African descent” to mobilize against imperialism, Ford told a Harlem rally, the movement also required the cooperation of “all allies and sympathizers of the freedom of Abyssinia.” Pushing against the more conservative modes of Ethiopianism, Ford warned, “There are those who may say this is a war of white men against black men. This is not exactly true.” Italian fascism was not only a struggle for the diaspora but for “many working people in Italy and soldiers, too, for that matter.” Additionally, while Pan-Africanists’ desire to fight on Ethiopian soil was “a very noble sentiment,” it was “impractical.” The defense of Ethiopia was

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<sup>28</sup> “Fascism and the Negro,” *The Negro Worker*, July 1934, 3-4.

best served by rallying the “American masses” and “the 20 million men of African descent in the western world.” Only a Popular Front could the movement spark a “world wide protest.”<sup>29</sup>

The PCDE and ALAWF also developed diplomatic initiatives. Under the leadership of historian and high school teacher William N. Huggins, both organizations sent a delegation to the Italian General Council in New York to lobby the Italian government to “temper tyranny by judicious reasoning” and submit the dispute to the League of Nations. Infuriated by Ubald Rocchiri’s, head of the council, refusal to meet with the delegation, the PCDE and ALAWF sent Huggins to the League of Nations directly. Huggins’s trip was, by-and-large, a diplomatic triumph for Pan-Africanism. In Geneva, Huggins spoke for twenty minutes before the League body delivering his petition as the unified expression of “Africans and persons of African descent throughout the world.” Huggins also spent time in London seeking the ALAWF and PCDE’s endorsement from W.S. Martin, Ethiopian minister to the court of Saint James. After securing Martin’s support, Huggins met with Marcus Garvey at his home in Kensington as well as Garvey’s ex-wife Amy Ashwood and C.L.R. James, both founders of the International Friends of Ethiopia (IFE). In Paris, he discussed the Italian conflict with Tecla Hawariate, Ethiopian Minister to France and delegate to the League of Nations. Returning from Europe, Huggins addressed a crowd in New York, “There is no disposition on the part of Ethiopians to deny their kinship with Negroes in the United States and throughout the world.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> James W. Ford, “For Defense of Ethiopia: Extracts of Speech delivered at Mass Protest Meeting, New York, on March 7, 1935,” *The Negro Worker*, May 1935, 5-7.

<sup>30</sup> “Italian Consul is ‘Out’ to Callers,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 27, 1935, 5; “New Yorkers Send Dr. Huggins as Envoy to Geneva,” *Afro-American*, July 27, 1935, 7; “Italian Seek Vast Empire, Huggins Says,” *New York Amsterdam*, Aug. 31, 1935, 1 and 3; “Harlem Has Huge Anti-War Demonstration,” *New Journal and Guide*, Aug. 10, 1935, 1; and W.S. Martin to Friends of Ethiopia in the United States of America, Aug. 7, 1935, NAACP papers, part 11, reel 30, frame 780.

The work of the UNIA and CPUSA far surpassed any Soviet directive in regards to Ethiopia. As historian of the ITUCNW Holger Weiss wrote, “Neither the ECCI [Executive Committee of the Comintern] nor the Kremlin had made any official statements or made official proclamations to the Communist Parties how to proceed on the Ethiopian crisis.”<sup>31</sup> The Comintern, in fact, took its cue from events that already transpired. In a confidential memo to western parties in May 1935, the Comintern imparted the importance of maintaining a United Front critique of the conflict. “We must,” the memo wrote, “still look upon this war as a colonial imperialist war of plunder on the part of Italy, directed not only against the people of Abyssinia but also against the vital interests of the people of Italy.” Finding inspiration from the Pan-African scene in the U.S., the international suggested a United Front in defense of Ethiopia “such as was initiated in Harlem, and developed in large cities throughout the country.” The grass-roots anti-fascist energy of which the Comintern endorsed testifies to the influence of black communists and their Garveyite comrades in the formation of the Popular Front.<sup>32</sup>

### **Building a National Negro Congress**

The Hands-off Ethiopia Movement inspired John P. Davis to build a Popular Front by galvanizing the black political community around the United Front. As one of the most vociferous critics of the New Deal, Davis drew inspiration from the fascism-Jim Crow analogy. As Executive Secretary of the Joint Committee on National Recovery (JCNR) from 1933 to 1936, Davis toured the country documenting the various modes of Jim Crow in black working class life. Placing this in a global context, Davis observed the “deepening of the exploitation of

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<sup>31</sup> Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 650.

<sup>32</sup> “To The Communist Parties of France, England, USA, Spain, Switzerland on the Italian War Against Abyssinia,” May 31, 1935, CPUSA Comintern files, fond 515, delo 3733.

Negro peoples in most of the world.” The imposition of colonial rule in the diaspora by European imperialism was planting “the seeds of future war,” inevitably leading “to the threat of fascism” in the U.S. Radicalized by the Ethiopian crisis and disillusioned with Keynesian economics, Davis concluded that direct action by the working class under the banner of industrial democracy was the only solution for black political empowerment.<sup>33</sup>

As early as January 1935, Davis discussed the possibility of forming a mass movement of workers with James W. Ford at the National Congress for Unemployment and Social Insurance in Washington, D.C. The unemployment councils of the CPUSA, the left faction of the AFL, and social democrats hoping to push the New Deal leftward dominated the conference. Also in attendance were members of the National Urban League (NUL) and the American Socialist Party (SPUSA). Inspired by the wide representation of workers, Davis suggested to Ford the creation of a permanent black congress designed to promote racial egalitarianism in the workers’ movement. As one of the leading spokespersons in the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement, Ford was intrigued with the idea of expanding anti-fascism into a broader struggle for economic equality. Stressing the imperative for further action, a writer for *The Communist* remarked that the congress highlighted “the need of rallying ever broader masses” in the fight against depression, war, and fascism. Consequently, Davis and others expressed the need for a National Negro Congress in global terms.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “Calls NRA Tool for Discrimination,” *Chicago Defender*, Apr. 27, 1935, 9; “National Negro Congress: Report of National Secretary,” 7, June 19-20, 1936, NNC papers, part 1, reel 2, frame 211-240; “Jim Crowism in Steel Industry Rapped,” *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 29, 1935, 11; and Hilmar Ludvig Jensen, *The Rise of an African American Left: John P. Davis and the National Negro Congress* (dissertation, Cornell University, 1997), 1-11 and 309-431.

<sup>34</sup> Jensen, *The Rise of an African American Left*, 478-479, 490-491; Keith Griffler, “The Black Radical Intellectual and the Black Worker: The Emergence of a Program for Black Labor, 1918-1938” (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1993), 217; I. Amter, “The National Congress for Unemployment and Social Insurance—And After,” *The Communist*, 44, Jan. 1935.



Davis's ideas of how to build a Left opposition to the New Deal, however, came not from the CPUSA but from the Urban League. The NUL embraced the task of building a collective black working class voice in the summer of 1934. "For the last sixty-eight years the Negro worker has been appealing to American labor for a 'new deal,'" an Urban League newsletter declared, but "these efforts have met either with limited half-hearted success or with dismal failure." By forming what came to be known as the Workers' Bureau, the NUL organized its own United Front through educational programs for workers and as well as organized direct action against discrimination in both capital and organized labor. By the end of 1935, the Bureau represented approximately 30,000 laborers within fifty-two workers' councils. Actions ranged from supporting organized protest against "starvation wages" of the Public Works Administration (PWA) and Works Progress Administration (WPA) programs as well as lobbying congress to include an anti-discrimination clause in the Wagner Act. The councils also made substantial outreaches to white working class communities "in order to effect a better understanding between white and Negro workers." Despite such efforts, Secretary of the Workers' Bureau Lester B. Granger determined change would never come within the segregated AFL unions. After presenting his case for desegregation at the AFL convention in October, he expressed grave doubt that "anti-Jim Crow legislation can be passed...without a sharp change in the set-up of the American Federation of Labor."<sup>35</sup>

Granger recognized the emancipatory potential in the growing leftward trend within the industrial unions known collectively as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Thanks

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<sup>35</sup> "Labor Program of the National Urban League," May 10, 1934, part I, box D4, Labor Program 1934 folder; Report on the Activities of the Workers' Bureau May 24, 1935 to Oct. 15, 1935, part I, box D9; Lester Granger to Arnold Hill, Oct. 21, 1935, part I, box D9 Workers' Bureau Reports folder; and Lester Granger to the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor, Oct. 4, 1935, part I, box D9, Workers' Bureau Reports, 1935 folder, all found in National Urban League Records ("NUL records" hereafter), Washington, D.C., Library of Congress.

to the CIO and its supporters from the CPUSA, Granger expressed hope in the “astonishing new relationships between white and black workers.” He wrote in awe of burgeoning community-based protests such as the 500-strong CPUSA demonstration in Newark, New Jersey of which half were black. In New York, the local Urban League joined the CPUSA and ALAWF in an interracial picket line in front of the Italian consulate declaring a “world wide protest” against fascism. Signs of a United Front were also emerging in notorious Jim Crow states such as Alabama, Tennessee, and Louisiana. Jesse O. Thomas, southern field secretary of the NUL, observed a “new spirit toward collective action” by workers against the “most firmly entrenched and ruthless capitalistic system of the world.” Thomas observed a determination by the workers that in order to survive vicious shifts in the economy, “complete racial integration within American industry must occur.” Seizing the opportunity, Granger contacted CIO leader John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers (UMW) in November 1935 to inform him of the workers’ councils. Granger also encouraged Lewis to work with the Workers’ Bureau’s Pittsburgh division, home of CIO headquarters.<sup>36</sup>

John P. Davis expressed passionate support for the workers’ councils and lobbied for a full endorsement by the NUL. As plans for the NNC convention were being set for February 1936 in Chicago, Davis encouraged Granger to establish “joint action” between the Workers’ Bureau and the NNC. Davis also invited Granger to serve as discussion leader at the NNC convention for the most crucial economic panel, “Industrial Unionism and the Negro.” Granger understood the possibilities an alliance with the NNC would bring. He enthusiastically

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<sup>36</sup> Lester Granger, “Negro Labor and Recovery,” *Opportunity* (June, 1934): 190, part I, box N33, Vols. 10-13, 1932-1935; Jesse O. Thomas, “Negro Workers and Organized Labor,” *Opportunity* (Sept. 1934): 277-278, part I, box N33, Vols. 10-13, 1932-1935, both found in NUL records; and “Defy Police in Picketing of Consulate,” *Chicago Defender*, Sep. 14, 1935, 5; and Lester Granger to John Brophy, Nov. 13, 1935, NUL records, part I, box D3, Committee for Industrial Organization folder.

proclaimed “you can count on me” and submitted a complete report on the NNC to the National Advisory Committee of the workers’ councils as well as distributed the NNC program to all councils directly. Granger even agreed to preside over the formation of the NNC’s New York City council. Adding to the culture of harmony, an Urban League official in Pittsburgh believed Davis and the NNC brought “dynamic possibilities” to the workers’ movement. Together, these organizations would directly challenge the “lily black” assumptions “that Negro problems are different from those of other working class groups.”<sup>37</sup>

The goal for both Davis and Granger was to help integrate African Americans into the CIO drives. Once Granger and Davis finalized their course of action, both pooled their influence together and jointly lobbied the CIO to hire black organizers for the Steel Workers’ Organizing Committee (SWOC). A triumvirate among the Workers’ Bureau, NNC, and CIO would demonstrate, in the words of Davis that “we mean business, that we mean to fight for daily bread for the masses.” In a meeting between Granger and CIO National Director John Brophy, it was understood that the CIO would “greatly increase its own potential strength by doing what the A.F. of L has thus far refused to do.” Though the CIO often turned down suggested organizers due to strenuous financial obligations, signs of coalescence between the black freedom struggle and workers’ movement gradually materialized.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Lester Granger to John P. Davis, July 29, 1935, part I, reel 5, frame 278; John P. Davis to Lester Granger, July 31, 1935, part I, reel 5, frame 251; Lester Granger to John P. Davis, Aug. 6, 1935, part I, reel 5, frame 257; Lester Granger to John P. Davis, Sept. 10, 1935, part I, reel 5, frame 252; Lester Granger to John P. Davis, Nov. 13, 1935, part I, reel 5, frame 165; John P. Davis to Lester Granger, Nov. 21, 1935, part I, reel 5, frame 231; Lester Granger to John P. Davis, Dec. 4, 1935, part I, reel 5, frame 263; John P. Davis to Lester Granger, Jan. 29, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 182; William E. Hill to John P. Davis, Feb. 27, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 757, all found in Papers of the National Negro Congress (“NNC papers” hereafter).

<sup>38</sup> “Final Report on the Activities of the Workers’ Bureau and Information Service of the National Urban League for the Period Oct. 16 to Dec. 31, 1935,” part I, D9, Workers’ Bureau Reports, 1935 folder; Lester Granger to John L. Lewis, April 16, 1936, part I, box D3,

Marking the official beginning of the NNC, Davis and academic Ralph Bunche jointly sponsored a three-day conference at Howard University to discuss the formation of a permanent black Popular Front in May 1935. Each discussion session was reportedly “crowded to a standing room” in the Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall. Delegates representing the NUL, the CPUSA, the NAACP, the SPUSA, and its Trotskyist faction known as the Workers’ Party (WP) listened with outrage to the testimonials from representatives of the black industrial worker, sharecropper, and domestic. Each testimonial demonstrated that Jim Crow within the NRA and other New Deal initiatives reinforced the depression-era caste system. One farmer from Panola County, Mississippi claimed he was nearly lynched after a dispute over his salary with NRA agents. Lea Duncan, representing 143 black women from Forrest City, Arkansas, described life under the Maid-Well Garment Company. Hundreds of workers were fired, Duncan claimed, once NRA agents exposed their identities to the company after filing complaints. Testimonials also came from a Pittsburgh steel worker, a New York domestic, and a tobacco worker and officer of a local union from Reidsville, North Carolina.<sup>39</sup>

For Davis, the testimonies and discussion sessions highlighted the dangerous reality that black workers found themselves “subject as other groups of workers and farmers, to economic exploitation within a capitalist nation,” but are also “exploited because of the accident of race.”

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Committee for Industrial Organization folder; John Brophy to Lester Granger, April 21, 1936, part I, box D3, Committee for Industrial Organization folder, all above found in NUL records; John P. Davis to Lester Granger, Aug. 11, 1935, part I, reel 5, frame 312; Lester Granger to John P. Davis, Aug. 10, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 331; John P. Davis to Lester Granger, July 10, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 187; and John P. Davis to Lester Granger, Sept. 12, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 217-218, all above found in NNC papers.

<sup>39</sup> “New Deal and Race Discussed at Conference, *Chicago Defender*, Jun. 1, 1935, 4; “Say N.R.A. Agents Helped Intimidate Workers,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 25, 1935, 3; “Economic Status of Negro to be Topic of Nation-Wide Confab.,” May 11, 1935; Editorial Comment, “The National Conference on the Economic Crisis and the Negro,” *Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 1 (Jan., 1936), 1-2.

The New Deal propagated “the belief that a planned economy could be created within a capitalist nation which would carry with it none of the toll of human sacrifice and human poverty so characteristic of capitalist development.” And yet, more than two million African Americans and four million families, Davis noted, received unemployment relief. In the South, the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) provided wealthy landlords great profit through its subsidy program, which empowered them to engage in “wholesale robbery of their tenants...tenant evictions” and “terrorization against the organization of Negro and white agricultural unions.” Keynesian economics’ inability to adequately support workers during a time of social upheaval led Davis to conclude that capitalism was potentially breathing its last breath. “Capitalism is only a few hundred years old,” Davis thundered, but “as feudalism is dead so may it die.” Now was the time to facilitate this process through “an immediate change in emphasis from protection of private property to protections of human beings from misery and poverty.”<sup>40</sup>

The militant attitudes expressed by the delegates testified not just to the growing disillusionment in the New Deal’s unequal distribution of wealth but a fear of the growing social isolation of the working class. Fascism was making itself ever present, Ralph Bunche warned, due to the “alliance between the middle-class political power and the economic power of big business.” “Italy and Nazi Germany,” he noted, “afford classic illustration of the sort of ‘balance’ the working masses can expect from such a process.”<sup>41</sup> Though not casting aspersions on the New Deal directly, the NUL’s Arnold T. Hill did praise the “militant attitude” on the part of the “left-wing unions” of the CIO. “Our mistake,” Hill agreed with Davis and Bunche, “has been that we have sought of organizing Negroes on the basis of race and race alone.” Only by organizing on the basis of class would black workers “avoid the fate of virtual peonage toward

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<sup>40</sup> John P. Davis, “National Conference,” 3, 6, and 12.

<sup>41</sup> Ralph Bunche, “National Conference,” 61.

which they are trending.”<sup>42</sup> The socialist and most prominent black trade unionist A. Philip Randolph stressed the difficulties placed before them. Segregation in the trade union movement was “doubtless the greatest challenge to its profession of democracy and its claim of representing a progressive force in American society.”<sup>43</sup> Edward S. Lewis of the Baltimore Urban League (BUL) similarly proclaimed that only by “securing a practical working class philosophy” would the dream of industrial democracy become reality.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the consensus for direct action, the question as to who would constitute the leadership positions of the Popular Front was left unanswered. Communists, independent Leftists, socialists of various stripes, and even liberals all agreed that the threat of fascism was real. But the ultimate question, as the SPSUA’s Norman Thomas put it, “is which philosophy and which tactics are most likely to avert Fascism in America and establish a genuine cooperate commonwealth.”<sup>45</sup> This question encapsulated the closing session. Standing out among all speakers, James W. Ford offered a pragmatic as well as democratic proposal. Only by ingratiating itself within working class communities, Ford argued, could a Popular Front ever claim any political legitimacy. “Daily struggles,” he concurred with Davis, “are a most important part of the struggles of the masses.” This could only be done through a “broad National Negro Congress together with sympathetic organizations of whites.”<sup>46</sup>

By contrast, Thomas expressed grave doubts about a Popular Front due to his distrust of the communists. Though he acknowledged that the CPUSA was historically more audacious in its call for racial equality than the SPUSA, he insisted that his party was “far more loyal to the

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<sup>42</sup> Arnold T. Hill, “National Conference,” 43, 45, and 46.

<sup>43</sup> A. Philip Randolph, “National Conference,” 55.

<sup>44</sup> Edward S. Lewis, “National Conference,” 78.

<sup>45</sup> Norman Thomas, “National Conference,” 100.

<sup>46</sup> James W. Ford, “National Conference,” 95.

dictates of brotherhood, racial solidarity, common sense and Socialism than the Communists.”<sup>47</sup>

The black trade unionist and Trotskyite Ernest R. McKinney of the WP was even more sectarian.

“The Negro worker must realize his class position as a worker and not attempt to maintain a race position as a Negro,” and thus must be organized only under “the leadership and guidance of the revolutionary political party.” Before a Popular Front could take shape, black workers must first form “a solid front against the black ruling class, reformist as well as reactionary [leaders.]”<sup>48</sup>

Some expressed doubts about interracial working class mobilization altogether.

Representing the NAACP, W.E.B. Du Bois expressed disbelief that the trade union movement would ever accept black workers on an equal basis. Recalling his visit to the Soviet Union in

1926, Du Bois reiterated his socialist convictions. Nonetheless, he concluded that white

supremacy in the U.S. made the liberation of black people through class struggle impossible.

“There is no automatic power in socialism,” Du Bois declared, “to override and suppress race prejudice.” African Americans must first organize themselves, he maintained, before joining any interracial movement against inequality. Black Americans, he asserted, must “realize that race segregation is the white man’s loss and not the black man’s damnation.”<sup>49</sup> The black Popular front, thus, must prioritize race struggle over class struggle.

The task of unifying these disparate factions into one harmonious National Negro Congress was left to the newly appointed President Randolph and Executive Secretary Davis. The avoidance of sectarianism at all costs was the overriding objective. “This congress,” wrote Randolph, “will not be disposed to supplant or take over the work of any existing organization.” However, despite the “efficient, splendid, and valuable work” each organization is engaged in,

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas, “National Conference,” 103.

<sup>48</sup> Ernest R. McKinney, “National Conference,” 98.

<sup>49</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “National Conference,” 123 and 125.

“the magnitude, complexity and danger of the Negro’s present condition demands the mobilization of overwhelming mass pressure and force, which can only be achieved through the agency of a National Negro Congress.” Randolph’s outline for the NNC was self-evidently influenced by Ford’s proposal at the Howard conference. The function of the NNC was to act as a federation uniting all anti-fascist organizations in order to address every political and economic challenge that stood before the black working class.<sup>50</sup>

### **Early Fissures in the Popular Front**

The position taken by Ford for a United Front led by various anti-fascist organizations was far more rooted in popular sentiment than any speaker at Howard. In Cleveland, Italian workers in the CPUSA decided during a series of meetings to unite with black communities against the “imperialist robber aggression” of Italy and its mission to “plunder and destroy the free state of Ethiopia.” In Cincinnati, the ALAWF, UNIA, and NAACP discussed Italian fascism’s threat to world-peace with support from the local Italian working class. In perhaps the most militant act of solidarity, white and black radicals of Chicago led a demonstration of 10,000 in defiance of Police Commissioner James P. Allman’s multiple refusals to grant a permit. Before the march even began, 500 officers blocked off all areas thereby trapping the protesters on 47<sup>th</sup> Street and Prairie Avenue. Acting on his promise that “heads will be busted” if the protestors defied his orders, Allman’s police force picked-off the demonstrators one-by-one with clubs and subsequently threw them into patrol wagons. Black communist Harry Haywood was dragged off a roof then beaten and arrested for speaking through a megaphone. Almost 450 demonstrators were thrown in jail. Unshakable in the face of Allman’s authoritarian tactics,

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<sup>50</sup> A. Philip Randolph, “The Keynote Address of President A. Philip Randolph,” *The Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress* (Washington, D.C.: NNC, Feb. 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>, 1936), 3, NNC papers part I, reel 2, frame 248-270.



1,000 black and white Chicagoans stood at the Metropolitan Community Center pledging to provide money and other forms of aid to Selassie the following week.<sup>51</sup>

In Harlem, Pan-Africanists and communists led 20,000 black and white anti-fascists in what was described as “one of the most colorful demonstrations ever given.” The rally began with two separate parades—one coming from the West on 127<sup>th</sup> Street and Lennox Avenue and the other from the East on 120<sup>th</sup> Street and Second Avenue. The latter contained a large number of white marchers parading through the Italian neighborhoods. Shouts of “Death to Mussolini!,” “Death to Fascism!,” and “We are against war in Ethiopia!,” were met with almost unanimous cheers by residents standing on the sidewalks and leaning out from their windows. The two parades linked on 129<sup>th</sup> Street and Seventh Avenue and continued to march towards Bradhurst and Edgecombe Avenues where a massive wooden stand awaited them with amplifiers. Under the watch of “unusually alert” 200 police officers, 150 detectives, 20 mounted men, four lieutenants, and three captains, the crowd reached a pitch of extreme passion to the point that the keynote speakers warned the demonstrators to keep a distance from the stage for fear of its collapse. Unlike the Chicago demonstration, not a single arrest was made.<sup>52</sup>

The parade included representatives from practically every civil rights organization. Participates ranged from ministers and Rabbis in the religious community, Pan-Africanists from the PCDE and the Pioneers of Ethiopia (PE), communists from the CPUSA and ALAWF, and socialists from A. Philip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Union (BSCP). The

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<sup>51</sup> “Italian And Negro Workers to Join Hands in Demonstration,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, Jul 25, 1935; “Chicago Cops Arrest 300 in Ethiopian Parade,” *New York Amsterdam*, Sep. 7, 1935, 3; “300 Ethiopian Sympathizers Jailed in Chicago,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sp. 7, 1935, 5; “Police Halt Big Protest Meeting Here,” *Chicago Defender*, Sep. 7, 1935, 2; and “Make Pledge to Raise Funds For Haile Selassie,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 19, 1935, A10.

<sup>52</sup> “White and Negro Join Peace Rally,” *New York Times*, Aug. 4, 1935; “20,000 Parade in Harlem to Preserve Peace,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Aug. 10, 1935, 5; and “Harlem Has Huge Anti-War Demonstration,” *New Journal and Guide*, Aug. 10, 1935, 1.

parade also included Red Cross workers displaying a float reading “Americans Against War and Fascism.” Even 500 elementary school children carried placards inscribed “Schools Not Bullets” and “Do Not Fight Italian Icemen, Fight War and Fascism.” The mingling of communists, socialists, Pan-Africanists, religious leaders, trade unions, and civil servants throughout Harlem’s streets helped legitimize Ford’s call for a diverse Popular Front. As a journalist for the *World Telegram* wrote, the “political adherence was as varied as the costumes worn by the marchers.”<sup>53</sup>

Ford was invigorated by this call to action. At the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in August, Ford proclaimed with zeal “not a moment can be lost in developing the broadest people’s front against” war and fascism. Harlemites’ chants of “Down with Mussolini!” evidenced their “cry of solidarity with their Ethiopian brothers.” This global protest revealed to Ford that “powerful reserves exist among the Negroes in the fight against imperialist war, fascism and the enslavement of small nations and colonial people.” Promoting the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement to the world stage, Ford championed the “Negro nationalist organizations” for their contribution in drawing a “clear line of joint struggle of all anti-fascist forces for the national liberation movement.” With support from Pan-Africanists for the black Popular Front, as was demonstrated at the Harlem rally, the movement could continue to educate the masses on the dangers of fascism both at home and abroad.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the culture of harmony that the defense for Ethiopia engendered, the NAACP was conspicuously absent from the Harlem march. Throughout July, the ALAWF’s Allen Taub

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<sup>53</sup> “White and Negro Join Peace Rally;” “20,000 Parade in Harlem to Preserve Peace;” “Harlem Has Huge Anti-War Demonstration;” “More Whites than Negro in Harlem Anti-War Parade,” *World Telegram*, August 3, 1935, Patterson papers, box 7, fol. 3; and Allan Taub to A.L. King, Aug. 5, 1935, UNIA CD records, reel 5.

<sup>54</sup> James W. Ford, “The Struggle for Peace and the Independence of Ethiopia,” speech delivered at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, Aug., 1935, (New York: The Harlem Division of the Communist Party, 1936), 41-47.

developed a correspondence with William Pickens of the Association's New York Branch. Taub hoped to win over Pickens' endorsement of the Harlem parade as well as William N. Huggins's trip to Europe by sending all of the ALAWF's publicity material. Aware of the NAACP's aversion to collaborating with communists, Taub assured Pickens that the ALAWF and PCDE represented "people with widely divergent opinions [but] people who are united in sincere desire to promote peace" and were "sincerely striving for a broad participation of all groups...opposed to the invasion of Ethiopia." Seeking advice, Pickens sent all his correspondence with Taub to Roy Wilkins. After meeting with two CPUSA officials in person, Wilkins withheld any official endorsement but wrote Pickens, "It is well for us to keep in touch with all these movements." After the march in Harlem, Pickens wrote with glowing appraisal of the Popular Front. "It was the greatest parade that has ever passed up a Harlem street," he wrote. He even applauded the work performed by the "many communists." Pickens forcefully described the demonstrators as "the raw stuff out of which revolutions are made."<sup>55</sup>

The NAACP contemplated forming its own plans for assisting the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement. Some suggested working with the UNIA, NUL, church officials, and trade unions. For the time being, President Walter White and the board of directors opted instead to send petitions of protests directly to the Department of State and the Council of the League of Nations without the endorsement from any other anti-racist organization. The lobbying effort proved insufficient. A State Department official dismissively responded to White, "appropriate attention

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<sup>55</sup> Allen Taub to William Pickens, July 3, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 716; Allen Taub to William Pickens, July 13, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 713-714; William Pickens to Allen Taub, July 19, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 748; William Pickens to Allen Taub, July 23, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 759; Roy Wilkins to William Pickens, July 22, 1935, Part 11, reel 30, frame 755; William Pickens to Allen Taub, July 22, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 759; Allen Taub to William Pickens, July 25, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 760; Allen Taub to William Pickens, July 24, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 760, all found in NAACP papers; and William Pickens, "Negro and White-Unite," *Atlanta Daily World*, Aug. 15, 1935.

has been given to the contents thereof” and “your interest in the matter is appreciated.”

Frustrated with the anemic results, White suggested forming “protests, especially on the part of American Negroes,” which involved occasional coordinated efforts with the PCDE and ALAWF. For the most part, however, White preferred to keep his distance from the Popular Front and, instead, opted to develop an intense publicity campaign and continue the lobbying.<sup>56</sup>

The grassroots militancy among the communists and Black Nationalist exposed fractures within the NAACP. In July, the Association decided to send a delegation to speak directly with Secretary of State Cordell Hall and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The question of who would represent this delegation was hotly debated. Legal counsel for the NAACP Charles H. Houston insisted to White that the meeting must build the “strongest united front with biggest people possible.” White, on the other hand, suggested that the delegation be “all-Negro” and “that the more conservative the group is the more effect it would have.” Houston was unhappy with this position. He described White’s proposed delegates as having “no weight except for the particular organization they represent.” Providing an alternative, Houston recommended sending the Association’s official position on Ethiopia to various organizations for their endorsement. The more politically astute Roy Wilkins gently pushed the issue of a Popular Front by noting that “fairly well organized groups consisting of members of both races” have plans of their own and insisted that “we ought to determine whether we will cooperate with these groups.” Given

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<sup>56</sup> Albert Weisbord to Walter White, Feb. 21, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 570; Manley O. Hudson to Walter White, March 1, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 571; Walter White to Manley O. Hudson, March 12, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 572; Unknown [Walter White] to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, March 20, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 578; Unknown [Walter White] to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, April 11, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 583; Department of State official to unknown [Walter White], March 27, 1935; Walter White to Council of the League of Nations, April 12, 1935, NAACP papers, part 11, reel 30, frame 594; Walter White to Manley O. Hudson, April 11, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 595; Unknown [name ineligible] to Walter White, part 11, reel 30, frame 601, all found in NAACP papers.

Wilkins's simultaneous correspondence with members of the ALAWF, his suggestion for working with communists was undeniable. Even William N. Huggins, a life-long member of the NAACP, appealed to White during the winter for support in forming a joint venture to "keep interest in Ethiopia alive." "If the independence of Ethiopia is destroyed," Huggins warned, "then the status of black folk will be lowered."<sup>57</sup>

Walter White's hatred for the CPUSA and the Soviet Union was palpable. He chastised the slow response of Maxim Litvinov, Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs, to the Ethiopian crisis at the League of Nations: "Does your anti imperialism stop at black nations?" Litvinov's slow response to fascist Italy was proof, in White's mind, of the Soviet Union's willingness "to dump the Negro" whenever the black freedom struggle "conflicts in any ways with Russia's interest." White even blamed the Soviet Union for Ethiopia's fate. "Haile Selassie would be able to resist Mussolini's invasion," White wrote Wilkins and Houston, "only if Litvinov spoke out against Italy's invasion." Though hardly capable of preventing Italy's occupation of Abyssinia, the Soviet Union validated White's suspicion when it agreed to maintain its long-standing trade agreement of selling wheat to Italy. It was a teachable movement for White in the months to come. "We should not be afraid to criticize either proletarian or capitalist government[s]," he rightfully concluded. White also, however, carried this lesson with him during the months-long

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<sup>57</sup> Charles H. Houston to Walter White, July 8, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 697; Walter White to Roy Wilkins and Charles H. Houston, July 15, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 718; Roy Wilkins to Walter White, July 16, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 721; Charles H. Houston to Walter White and Roy Wilkins, July 16, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 723; Carl Porter to Roy Wilkins, July 19, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 745; William N. Huggins to Walter White, Oct. 28, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 866; William Huggins to unknown [Walter White], n.d. [1935], part 11, reel 30, frame 877; William N. Huggins, "A Call to the Aid of Ethiopia," n.d. [1935], part 11, reel 30, frame 810, all found in NAACP papers.

planning of the National Negro Congress. This would become one of the key obstacles for the NNC's founders in their pursuit of building a broad civil rights coalition.<sup>58</sup>

In the absence of more moderate anti-fascist forces, the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement articulated a militant conception of the Popular Front, a conception that engaged in a balancing act between Pan-Africanism and interracial working class solidarity. In October, 15,000 marched from lower Harlem to Central Park West and 63<sup>rd</sup> Street. The demonstration, as always, displayed ostentatiously decorative Garveyite symbols such as the presentation of black men dressed in military uniforms dazzling with gold braid and green arm trimmings while riding on horseback as well as the waving of an effigy of Mussolini hanging from the scaffold. Filled with communists, socialists, and trade unionists, the movement also determined that only through a working class resistance could fascism and war be averted. Francis J. Gorman of the United Textile Workers of America (UTWA) addressed the demonstrators, "whether or not we are to continue to be torn apart by world war and domestic crises...depends not on we who get up here and speak to you in high-sounding phrases," but rather on "the workers themselves." "If the workers make up their minds that they will tolerate oppression and exploitation no longer," he spoke with bellicosity, "then we can have peace. But we can have peace then and only then."<sup>59</sup>

The Hands-off Ethiopia Movement's communist and Black Nationalist leaders influenced the ways Davis conceptualized the NNC's relationship with anti-fascist and anti-colonial struggles. Stressing Pan-Africanism, Davis wrote "Negroes in America feel a deep sympathy for national oppressed Negroes elsewhere in the world," because Italy's unimpeded destruction of

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<sup>58</sup> Walter White to Earl Browder, May 22, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 628; Walter White to Maxim Litvinov, May 22, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 616; Walter White to Charles H. Houston, May 22, 1935, part II, reel 30, frame 617; Walter White to William N. Jones, July 8, 1935, part 11, reel 30, frame 692, all found in the NAACP papers; and "Soviet Will Sell Wheat to Italy," *New York Times*, Oct. 13, 1935.

<sup>59</sup> "15,000 March Here in 'Peace Parade,'" *New York Times*, Oct. 27, 1935.

Ethiopia means “a world conflict of nations, war and probably fascist dictatorship unless there is mass action for peace.” Connecting militarism abroad with economic depression at home, Davis determined that fascism inevitably “means even lower living standards for workers than at present” and brings the “destruction of what democratic rights and civil liberties still remain.” “It means for Negroes what it means for Jews in Germany today: concentration camps, indignity and ‘white supremacy.’” The anti-fascist front was, thus, “the struggle of the Negro in America to sustain his national heritage and to preserve civil liberty and economic justice.”<sup>60</sup>

Davis’s writings on fascism and Nazism made him a nation-wide magnet for grassroots anti-fascist organizations looking to join a broader movement. In Cleveland, the Ethiopian League offered its assistance to Davis in forming a local NNC council. The Ethiopia Pacific Movement in Jersey City also sponsored a local NNC council and distributed NNC leaflets at mass rallies in order to “cooperate wholeheartedly in your magnificent effort to organize the race.” The Philadelphia Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia and the American Aid for Ethiopia in Newark made similar commitments. In Tampa, activists sponsored a “United Front Meeting for the Defense of Ethiopia” along with prominent members of the local Ministerial Alliance. Together, these community organizers offered to distribute NNC leaflets throughout the city’s black community, write editorials in the *Tampa Bulletin*, as well as send delegates to the NNC’s Chicago convention. In Detroit, a state-wide conference was called to support the NNC and its effort to “oppose war and fascism, the attempted subjugation of Negro people in Ethiopia, [and] the oppression of colonial nations throughout the world.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> John P. Davis, “Let us Build a National Negro Congress,” (Washington, D.C.: National Negro Congress, 1935), 28, NNC papers part I, reel 2, frame 271-310.

<sup>61</sup> David Craigs to John P. Davis, May 22, 1936, part I, reel 4, frame 340; A. Henderson to John P. Davis, Jan. 2, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 737, A.R. Mayo to John P. Davis, Feb. 27, 1936, part I, reel 6, frame 660; Albert Lopez to John P. Davis, Nov. 14, 1935, part I, reel 6, frame 281; A.J.

In Latin America, anti-fascists found the NNC a useful ally as well. Declaring solidarity with black workers and the political Left in South America, Davis accused finance capitalism in the U.S. and Great Britain of fostering fascist governments that jailed and murdered minorities and labor organizers. Inspired by Davis, the Havana-based Provisional Committee for Cuba—under its slogan “Cuba for the Cubans”—beseeched Davis to send a delegation to protest the Fulgencio Batista regime’s arrest of nine Afro-Cubans who allegedly designed “plans to stir up the Negro population” in Cuba. In Rio De Janeiro, the Joint Committee for the Defense of the Brazilian People requested Davis to join the protest against the trial of Luis Carlos Prestes, Brazilian communist and head of the Brazilian Popular Front Alianca Nacional Libertadora (National Liberation Alliance), for his opposition to the military dictatorship under Getulio Vargas. In support of the Brazilian anti-fascists, dozens of NNC delegates as well as Ethiopian diplomat Lij Tasfaye Zaphiro confronted the Brazilian Ambassador in Washington, D.C. in protest over the treatment of black Brazilians as well as the 17,000 political prisoners including Prestes, prominent socialist Pedro da Cunha, and German Comintern official Arthur Ewert.<sup>62</sup>

In New York, A.L. King, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and other veterans of the PCDE helped build the local NNC council. Through the New York-based Medical Committee for the

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Shapiro to John P. Davis, Jan. 9, 1936, part I, reel 7, frame 961; Benjamin D. Amis to Nat. Sponsoring Committee of the Nat. Negro Congress, Dec. 10, [1935], part I, reel 3, frame 469, all above found in NNC papers; and S.T. Holland, “Hundreds Attend Michigan Branch of the National Negro Congress,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 1, 1936, A9.

<sup>62</sup> Unknown [name ineligible] to John P. Davis, June 10, 1936, part I, reel 4, frame 903; Joint Committee for the Defense of the Brazilian People, press release, June 6, 1936, part I, reel 4, frame 904; Joint Committee for the Defense of the Brazilian People, press release, June 5, 1936, part I, reel 4, frame 905; Joint Committee for the Defense of the Brazilian People, June 10, 1936, part I, reel 4, frame 906; Conrad Komorowski, Feb. 14, 1936, part I, reel 6, frame 169; John P. Davis to Henry L. Moon, May 19, 1936, part I, reel 6, frame 719; Henry L. Moon to John P. Davis, May 18, 1936, part I, reel 6, frame 728; “National Negro Congress: Report of National Secretary,” 7-8, all found in NNC papers; and “National Congress Groups Hold 2-Day Session in D.C.,” *Afro-American*, Mar. 28, 1936, 9.



Defense of Ethiopia—an offshoot of the PCDE—Davis lobbied Ethiopian diplomat Lij Tasfaye Zaphiro to endorse the NNC as well as speak at the Chicago convention. Eager to promote the importance of Ethiopia to black Americans, Zaphiro readily agreed. Together, the PCDE and the local NNC council led by Lester Granger held a benefit concert supporting both Ethiopian soldiers and the Scottsboro Nine, African-American youth falsely accused of raping two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama in 1932. “Strike a blow at Fascism by supporting this worthy cause,” they jointly declared. To make the benefit a success, Zaphiro gave the keynote speech.<sup>63</sup>

The coalescence of these various anti-fascist organizations and trade unions shaped King’s Pan-Africanism. Inspired by his experience working within a diverse coalition, King determined, “When [the] danger of extermination of Mankind can be forestalled by [the] meeting of opposing races, such demonstration should be considered by all means.” Some UNIA officials greeted such sentiment with consternation. As King gained notoriety for his work in the PCDE, conservative UNIA members pushed back. By 1935’s end, Marcus Garvey received numerous complaints over King’s solicitation of communists’ support despite the impactful work performed by the New York UNIA. Though Garvey was grateful for King breathing “new life” into “the spirit of the organization,” he was also concerned with “your affiliation with the Communists.” Though initially welcoming of communist support, Garvey expressed concern that the UNIA was now leaning far to the Left. King assured Garvey that no organization outside of the PCDE contained communist members and, thus, had no outsized influence in the

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<sup>63</sup> Arnold Donawa to John P. Davis, Jan. 21, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 4, frame 650; U. Simpson Tate to A. Clayton Powell, Junior, Jan. 2, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 7, frame 272; “Negro Congress to Hear Zaphiro, *New York Amsterdam*, Feb. 8, 1936, 2; “An Appeal to the People of Harlem to Support a Benefit Entertainment and Dance for Wounded Ethiopian Soldiers and the Scottsboro Boys Defense,” Feb. 15, 1936, reel 5, UNIA CD records; Clifford N. McLeod to unknown [A.L. King], Jan. 28, 1936, UNIA CD records, reel 5; and Clifford N. McLeod to A.L. King, March 1936, UNIA CD records, reel 5.

organization. “It is not my desire to create any more enemies for the organization than is necessary,” King wrote Garvey. “I am seeking friends be it left or right,” he claimed, and “I’ve tried to make the Division the balance of power without yielding to one side or the other.”<sup>64</sup>

Despite King’s claims, the balance of power within the New York UNIA was clearly leaning Left. Appointed to the NNC’s National Executive Council, King continued to work with A. Philip Randolph, Lester Granger, and communists James W. Ford and Benjamin J. Davis. Together, they made the New York NNC council a success. By early 1936, King not only continued associating with Ford, Allen Taub, and the ALAWF but other communist affiliates such as the International Labor Defense (ILD) and the Scottsboro Defense Committee (SDC) as well. King was even invited by the Friends of the Soviet Union (FSU) to appoint a UNIA member to serve as a “national minority” delegate to tour Soviet factories. Though no record detailing King’s response exists, the various forms of coordination between King and communists illuminates just how strong the bonds between the New York CPUSA and UNIA were forged.<sup>65</sup>

The Hands-off Ethiopia Movement was the primary source of inspiration for the ways in which Davis and other NNC organizers envisioned the black Popular Front’s relation to global anti-fascist struggles. In their promotion of the Chicago convention, James W. Ford and fellow

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<sup>64</sup> “Captain King, Negro Leader Calls Fascist Invasion of Ethiopia, ‘Imperialist Grab,’” n.d. [1935], CD UNIA records, reel 5; Marcus Garvey to A.L. King, Nov. 21, 1935, *The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers, Vol. VII*, 658; and A.L. King to Marcus Garvey, Dec. 19, 1935, *The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers, Vol. VII*, 661.

<sup>65</sup> Ashley L. Totton to New York UNIA, June 21, 1936, reel 4; Lester B. Granger to unknown [A.L. King], Dec. 6, 1935, reel 4; Richard B. Beaman to A.L. King, Dec. 7, 1935, reel 5; Frank D. Griffin to March 10, 1936; Mike Walsh to “All Organizations,” Feb. 24, 1936, reel 5; C. Cordoze to Scottsboro Defense Committee, Feb. 28, 1936, reel 5; Mary Dalton to A.L. King, Feb. 19, 1936, reel 5, all found in UNIA CD records; John P. Davis to Lester Granger, Nov. 27, 1935, NNC papers, part I, reel 5, frame 234-235; John P. Davis to A.L. King, June 8, 1937, NNC papers, part 1, reel 10, frame 793; and “Members of the National executive Council of the National Negro Congress,” *Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress*, 40.

CPUSA member A.W. Berry described the NNC as the product of the “growing maturity of the Negro working class” and the realization of its “power, force, and leadership in the Negro liberation movement.” As the struggle for Ethiopia “is bound to lead to a new and upward movement throughout Africa,” the NNC will likewise develop “international connections [that] will exercise a needed influence on world opinion.” Energized by the CIO’s call for industrial unionism, the Leftward shift in some black political organizations, and the mass movement against war and fascism, the NNC “will be the beginning of a real negro liberation movement.” This militant conception of political protest, however, exposed more differences than similarities within the civil rights community. As the first NNC convention neared, a number of prominent figures concluded that the costs of associating with communists and radical Pan Africanists within the NNC outweighed the benefits.<sup>66</sup>

### **United Front From Below**

Lester Granger and his Workers’ Bureau firmly defended Davis against venomous attacks by moderates. Mississippi Republican Perry Howard, for example, chastised the NNC as “the most monumental fraud ever perpetrated upon the race,” due to the influence of “Socialists and Communists and 600 or 700 whites.” In response, Granger declared Howard an “unfit” public servant and praised Davis as an “organizing genius.” He also directed his ire towards the black press’ coverage of the NNC as “lazy,” which could no longer be relied upon for political opinions. What many black officials failed to see in the NNC, argued Granger, was the collective expression of “flaming resentment” against the New Deal. He expressed “no faith” in the jobs programs for their discriminatory practices and labeled black government administrators as sycophants to the Roosevelt Administration. The Urban League’s full endorsement and defense

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<sup>66</sup> James W. Ford and A.W. Berry, “The Coming National Negro Congress: A New Phase in the Liberation Struggles of the Negro People,” *The Communist*, Feb. 1936, 139-140 and 141.

of the NNC testifies to the militant determination with which the Workers' Bureau approached the Popular Front.<sup>67</sup>

Even with ironclad support from organizations such as the Workers Bureau as well as the esteemed SPUSA leader A. Philip Randolph serving as president, the NNC continued to confront stern opposition from conservative socialists. Some within the SPUSA accused Davis of promoting a "United Front from Below," the Soviet Union's Third Period policy of building a working class movement led only by communist parties. Though the Soviet Union abandoned this approach during the Seventh World Congress, the perception of a communist-dominated NNC persisted. Francis A. Henson, head of an anti-fascist affiliate of the SPUSA, accused Davis of employing methods that are "much too similar" to the United Front from Below and warned him that "The S.P. would be taking an entirely different attitude towards this Congress...if this approach had been used." Henson suggested postponing the NNC convention until Davis secured full support from the SPUSA, the craft unions of the AFL, and "sections of the middle class." An irate Davis sarcastically responded, "I am none too familiar with Marxist theses," and lambasted Henson and other socialists for failing to "recognize the rising fascist tide in this country" against African Americans.<sup>68</sup>

By assuring "democratic control" of the congress, Davis still aimed to establish a Popular Front between the socialists and communists. Frank Crosswaith, trade union leader and friend of A. Philip Randolph, helped Davis win over the SPUSA. Davis assured Crosswaith and other

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<sup>67</sup> "National Congress a Fraud, Says Howard," *Afro-American*, Feb. 22, 1936, 2; "Granger Raps Perry Howard, Newspapers and New Deal," *Afro-American*, Mar. 28, 1936, 7; and Lester Granger, "The National Negro Congress, An Interpretation," *Opportunity* (May 1936): 151-153, NUL records, part I, box N33, Vols. 14-17, 1936-1939.

<sup>68</sup> Francis A. Henson to John P. Davis, Jan. 12, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 747; John P. Davis to Francis A. Henson, Jan. 16, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 575; Francis A. Henson to John P. Davis, Dec. 16, 1935, part I, reel 5, frame 748-759; John P. Davis to Francis A. Henson, Dec. 4, 1935, part I, reel 5, frame 776-777, all found in NNC papers.

socialists that “any left wing group...would be given a cordial and sincere invitation to participate.” Davis’s refusal to denounce the CPUSA, however, enraged Crosswaith who consequently declined multiple requests to help build the New York council. In one last offer for reciprocal influence in the congress, Davis wrote “Certainly at no time more certainly then [*sic*] at the present is there need for a broad united front of every kind...willing to work in defense of the Negro.” In the end, the SPUSA’s National Executive Committee voted against any endorsement and, instead, appointed Crosswaith, George Streater, and Norman Thomas to serve as “official observers” of the convention proceedings.<sup>69</sup>

A Left-Center Left coalition between the NNC and NAACP was still possible. Roy Wilkins, editor of the *Crisis*, gladly agreed to publish Davis’s article “Jim Crow in Steel.” Davis was encouraged by the coordination between both organizations (as well as other radical groups) on the local level. NAACP chapters in Mobile, Alabama, Washington, D.C., and St. Petersburg, Florida expressed support. The Association’s New York branch co-sponsored a speaking event for Lij Tasfaye Zaphiro along with the NNC, PCDE, Urban League, and the International Labor Defense. In New Orleans, the local NAACP and ALAWF held a counter demonstration against a fascist parade celebrating Italy’s victory over Ethiopia. As pro-Mussolini demonstrators raised their hands in the fascist salute, three counter protesters including professor St. Clair Drake cut in front of the parade in an automobile bearing an anti-fascist placard.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Clarence Senior to John P. Davis, Jan 13, 1936, part I, reel 8, frame 2 and John P. Davis to Clarence Senior, Nov. 13, 1935, part I, reel 8, frame 65-67.

<sup>70</sup> “Jim Crowism in Steel Industry Rapped;” Griffin to National Sponsoring Committee for a National Negro Congress, Dec. 30, 1935, part I, reel 5, frame 462; Roy Wilkins to John P. Davis, July 27, 1936, part I, reel 8, frame 510; U. Simpson Tate to N.W. Griffin, Jan. 2, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 202; John Lovell, Jr. to John P. Davis, June 27, 1939, part I, reel 17, frame 270; N.W. Griffin to National Sponsoring Committee for a National Negro Congress, Dec. 30, 1935, part I, reel 5, frame 462; J. L. LeFlore to John P. Davis, Sept. 11, 1937, part 1, reel 11, frame 3, all found in NNC papers; N.W. A.C. McNeal to Walter White, Jan 18, 1936, NAACP papers,

Like the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement, the NNC exposed deep fissures within the NAACP. For some, the congress provided a unique opportunity for building a militant front. In Chicago, NAACP chairman A.C. McNeal and John P. Davis jointly held a meeting to promote an anti-lynching bill as well as defend the imprisoned Scottsboro Nine. McNeal even allowed African-American communist and secretary of the NNC's New York council Benjamin J. Davis to establish headquarters in his office in preparation for the convention. Charles Houston was, perhaps, the most enthusiastic supporter. Houston saw the NNC as providing an indispensable confluence between anti-racism and working class mobilization. By allying with the NNC, Houston wrote Walter White, the Association could "close the gap between its members and the trade unions and the working classes." Because the NAACP lacked the necessary personnel to lead a labor movement, Houston suggested organizing a legal defense "to back up Negro labor in its fight to organize, to picket and to strike, [and exercise] freedom of speech and freedom of assembly." Undoubtedly familiar with White's conservative instincts, Lester Granger warned that if the NAACP refused to participate in a black Popular Front, "Others will, and we may regret the type of representation that would result."<sup>71</sup>

Possibly influenced by the SPUSA, Walter White heard "disturbing rumors" about the NNC and expressed suspicion of its "sponsorship and where it is going." He categorically dismissed the NNC for its philosophy that "all employers are limbs of Satan and all workers [are] paragons of virtue and victims of evil machinations." Roy Wilkins similarly characterized the

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part 10, reel 15, frame 326; "Protest New Orleans Italian Victory Parade," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Jun. 6, 1936, 7; and "Medical Committee Plans Gala Benefit, *New York Amsterdam*, Feb. 15, 1936, 1.

<sup>71</sup> John P. Davis to Walter White, Jan. 20, 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 327-328; Benjamin J. Davis to unknown, Jan. 11, 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 332; Charles H. Houston to Walter White, Feb. 29, 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 367; and Lester Granger to unknown [Walter White], Dec. 6, 1935, part 10, reel 15, frame 312, all found in NAACP papers.

NNC as a “heterogeneous collection of malcontents.” This view was fueled by rumors spread throughout the NAACP that Davis accepted significant financial resources from the CPUSA. Confidants of White suspected that the congress was solely designed to help communists agitate against the AFL, a position some within the Association frowned upon. One complained to White that for every ten African Americans in the NNC there were two whites “and not of the better classes.” The presence of sharecroppers and poor white farmers from the International Labor Defense within the NNC, one wrote White, “Should give you a laugh, or make you cry.” As a result, White refused to even speak at the convention and, instead, appointed Roy Wilkins to observe and report.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the SPUSA and NAACP’s shunning of Davis, his much desired endorsement from Lij Tasfaye Zaphiro—the most recognized Ethiopian diplomat in the West second only to Emperor Selassie—bestowed international prestige to the convention. On a Sunday morning in February, Zaphiro stepped off the Chicago train station on LaSalle Street. In what the *Chicago Defender* described as “the coldest weather he has ever experienced,” Zaphiro made his way through a blizzard to the Congress Hotel. With a large escort standing behind him, hotel management claimed that no reservations had been made under his name. Because of Jim Crow norms, the *Defender* reported, “it was in line for them to turn down an Ethiopian.” Stranded in a twenty-below zero degree temperature, Zaphiro found a last-minute reservation at the Stevens

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<sup>72</sup> Gertrude B. Stone to Walter White, Jan. 9, 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 324; Unknown [Walter White] to Carl Murphy, Dec. 28, 1935, part 10, reel 15, frame 321; Unknown [Roy Wilkins] to John P. Davis, Jan. 21, 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 329; Unknown [Walter White] to Harry E. Davis, Jan. 27, 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 336; Charles H. Houston to Unknown, Jan. 31, 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 342-343; A. Philip Randolph to Walter White, part 10, reel 15, frame 350; and “Nuffie” to Walter White, March 17, 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 331-333; Walter White to A. Philip Randolph, Feb. 3, 1936 part 10, reel 15, frame 348, Roy Wilkins to John P. Davis, March 3, 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 368-369, all above found in NAACP papers; and Walter White to John P. Davis, Sept. 13, 1935, NNC papers, part I, reel 2, frame 614-615.

Hotel. Once again, Zaphiro was refused service once management saw the color of his skin. Enduring discrimination in the U.S. hardened his conviction that a “united front is necessary for all blacks.”<sup>73</sup>

After speaking to various churches and schools, Zaphiro made his way to the Eight Regiment Armory located at the Southside Bronzeville neighborhood, the site of the NNC convention. With approximately 750 delegates representing twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia as well as thousands standing outside in the sub-zero temperature listening to the proceedings through loudspeakers, the convention exuded a militant aura. “The battle has just begun!,” sang the delegates. In a possibly embellished report, Roy Wilkins wrote, “No matter what section is being held, there are some CPs there...always with their hands in.” Contributing to the far left mood, Mao Zedong of the Chinese Soviet Republic sent his greetings, “The heroic resistance of your brothers, the heroic Abyssinian people” is a struggle that “must be a tremendous incentive for you to rally your ranks and to set up a united fighting front.” An outraged Colonel William J. Warfield of the Eight Division of the Illinois Guard demanded, according Wilkins, either “the Communists were to be thrown out” or the entire convention would “be completely submerged.” In order to save the convention, Davis went “from one person to another” encouraging them to “give Warfield a buzz to let the conference proceed.” Warfield eventually relinquished his demand after fifteen alleged communists left the convention, including CPUSA President Earl Browder. Despite the expulsions, some Bishops refused to give the opening prayer in protest of the convention’s “Sovietism and Atheism.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Dan Burley, “Ethiopian Envoy Insulted by Two Chicago Hotels,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 1, 1936, 1.

<sup>74</sup> “Discord Rocks National Negro Congress Meet,” *Afro-American*, Feb. 22, 1936, 7; Roy Wilkins to Charles Houston, Feb. 15, 1936, NAACP papers, part 10, reel 15, frame 360-362; “Browder Speech Barred from Negro Congress,” *New York Post*, Feb. 17, 1936, NAACP papers,



Before Zaphiro spoke, Davis stood on stage for an hour in an attempt to quell the boisterous, and partly hostile, crowd. “The National Negro Congress is not and shall not be dominated by any political party or faction,” Davis promised. His plea, Wilkins speculated, was “a direct slap at the C.P. but that may be part of the strategy.” Davis’s perceived pandering towards moderates at the expense of militant resistance provoked speculation within the Left about the NNC’s credibility. Reporting for *The Negro Worker*, Herbert Newton wrote that the congress sparked a cleavage between the “Uncle Tom type” and the “progressive type.” For Newton, Davis was clearly in the latter though “None can say whether these progressives will go the entire distance in the liberation struggle.” Validating this concern, delegates intermittently shouted throughout the proceedings, “What about the Scottsboro boys? What about Negroes in Black Belts...What about labor unions denying the Race equal opportunity to earn a decent living?” The crowd gradually calmed, however, throughout Davis’s speech. “He looks in the face,” Wilkins described Davis, “as though he had been drawn through a knothole.”<sup>75</sup>

The now calm audience graciously listened to Zaphiro. Calling for solidarity, Zaphiro challenged the “propaganda...that Ethiopians are not Negroes.” Possibly inspired by his experience with Jim Crow in Chicago, Zaphiro thundered, “What man could be born and bred in Africa and not be colored?” In spite of Ethiopia’s achievement of independence, “We have been

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part 10, reel 15, frame 436; “National Race Congress’ Alleged ‘Snubbing’ of Bishops Scored by Group,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 29, 1936, 12; “Universal Unrest Among Black People Revealed at National Congress,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 22, 1936, 1; “Chinese Soviet Greetings to the U.S.A.-Negro Congress,” *The Negro Worker*, March 1936, 19; James W. Ford, “The Officials Proceedings of the National Negro Congress,” 16-19; and Erik S. Gellman, “‘The Spirit and Strategy of the United Front’: Randolph and the National Negro Congress, 1936-1940,” in *Reframing Randolph: Labor, Black Freedom, and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph*, eds. Andrew E. Kersten and Clarence Lang, 129-162 (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 137.

<sup>75</sup> “Universal Unrest,” Roy Wilkins to Charles H. Houston Feb. 15, 1936; Arthur Taylor, “Says Negro Congress has Survived Scare,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, Feb. 27, 1936; and Herbert Newton, “The National Negro Congress,” *The Negro Worker*, May-June 1936, 25.

called barbarians, not able to govern our own land.” He enjoyed the loudest applause when he declared, “But Ethiopia is not the only country today in which barbarism exists.” Calling attention to the threat of fascism worldwide, Zaphiro warned “Ethiopia’s defeat may mean the downfall of the collective security system and perhaps the end of the League of Nations.” Only through victory over fascism would the world enter “a new era of peace, friendship and goodwill among all peoples.”<sup>76</sup>

It was President A. Philip Randolph’s keynote that crystalized the entire purpose of the black Popular Front. Due to illness, the audience was unable to listen to the eloquent socialist provocateur directly. Instead, Regional Vice-President of the NNC Charles W. Burton read Randolph’s speech, but the words were no less profound. The official inauguration of the NNC had begun under worldwide “social confusion, economic chaos, political disorder and intellectual uncertainty.” The global “tendencies towards Fascist growth and development” have now appeared in “America, France and England.” The malignant cancer that is fascism is a “grave and sinister portent to the world of workers, lovers of liberty and minority groups.” With Germany acting as the “spearhead of modern monopoly capitalism against the workers’ republic,” the ominous prospect for another world war was ever present “which may put an end to civilization as we know it.”<sup>77</sup>

Connecting fascism to the Great Depression, Randolph noted that the nation-wide joblessness, the liquidation of farmers’ land, the crumbling of small businesses, the foreclosure of home mortgages, the shrinking of the middle class, and the exploitation of industrial workers and sharecroppers continued under the “hectic, sketchy, patchy, and makeshift capitalist

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<sup>76</sup> Lij Tasfaye Zaphiro, “Excerpts from the Speech of Lij Tasfaye Zaphiro, Special Envoy of His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia,” *The Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress*, 13.

<sup>77</sup> A. Philip Randolph, “The Keynote Address of President A. Philip Randolph,” 7.

program” of the New Deal. Inequality, he warned, was fostering civic chaos and consequently a decline in the functioning of democratic institutions. Such conditions intensified the “racial and religious hatreds together with increasingly blatant and provocative nationalism.” Thus, arose fascism “which seeks the complete abrogation of all civil and political liberties.” This served to heighten black workers’ double burden of racism and exploitation, which intensified both the lynching of African Americans and the theft of their labor power. Trapped by the manacles of Jim Crow and capitalism, the black working class “cannot escape the dangers and penalties of the depression, war or Fascism.”<sup>78</sup>

To combat these global and local trends, Randolph endorsed the CPUSA’s position that only under an “independent working class political party” could African Americans attain political and economic power. Such a party would utilize the structures of the industrial and craft unions within the CIO and AFL (“with the emphasis on the former”). The tactics needed for actualizing this United Front, Randolph argued, were through direct action, mass protest, boycotts, picketing, legal action, and the distribution of socialist readings. The working class, he determined, could only thrive with the support of all anti-racist organizations. Aware of the moderates’ aversion to a Popular Front, Randolph declared that such a coalition would not weaken any one faction but, on the contrary, enhance its influence. A Popular Front “affords an opportunity for the contribution of strength by each organization to the common pool of organizational power for a common defense against the enemy.” This is the task, Randolph insisted, that awaited black America and organized labor.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Randolph, “The Keynote Address of President A. Philip Randolph,” 8-9.

<sup>79</sup> Randolph, “The Keynote Address of President A. Philip Randolph,” 10-12.

## **The Intransigence of the Moderates**

The ideas that emanated from the Hands-Off Ethiopia Movement were enshrined in the Chicago conference. In a resolution on Ethiopia, the NNC condemned the “international brigandage as a threat to world peace and an unjustified invasion upon the land of a peace loving people.” The resolution considered the Roosevelt Administration’s neutrality acts feeble responses to Italian aggression and, thus, demanded the United States bar the selling of oil, metals, and cotton to the fascist nation. The resolution also called for the cooperation among all organizations to provide humanitarian relief. In a separate resolution on war and fascism, the NNC declared, “the threat of fascism is real and immediate, involving attacks against all organizations of the population.” In light of the growing menace of American fascism, the resolution determined to “participate with all organizations in a common, united, cooperative effort against the menace of war and fascism.” By appealing to a united front of all organizations in the struggle against fascism, the NNC demonstrated, according Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., “that Negroes can be radical and fight for their rights without being Communists.”<sup>80</sup>

Despite the convention’s militant atmosphere, Roy Wilkins, the staunchly anti-communist and NNC-skeptic, acknowledged the congress as “unusually democratic in setting up its machinery and in proceedings.” Once the proceedings began, the governing body known as the Presiding Committee was elected by each state delegation and subsequently organized topical sessions to be discussed throughout three days. The issues ranged from defending Ethiopia, combating fascism wherever it could be found, promoting industrial unionism, supporting the NAACP’s anti-lynching bill, combating Jim Crow in civic life, organizing black women against

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<sup>80</sup> Report of the Resolutions Committee, *Officials Proceedings of the National Negro Congress*, 26-29 and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., “The Soapbox,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Feb. 22, 1936, 12.

racism, sexism, and exploitation, and many others. The discussion sessions served under the guidance of elected committees charged with drafting formal resolutions. Every delegate as well as any observer who paid a registration fee could vote freely on all resolutions as well as contribute to any session. Upon conclusion, a total of fifteen platforms were adopted and presented to the Committee on Resolutions.<sup>81</sup>

Numerous Republicans, Democrats, and African-American New Dealers “were out in force” against the NNC. After all, Randolph characterized the mainstream parties as “committees of Wall Street” that “serve the profit making agencies” and therefore “can no more protect or advance the interests of the workers than can a sewing machine grind corn.” Nevertheless, Wilkins determined that accusations of communist domination “are wholly without foundation.” The vast majority of financing came from individuals selling campaign leaflets as well as delegates and union organizers “working with an unbelievable zeal” to raise money. These participants consisted mostly of “working class and mass organizations, who came at great personal sacrifice.” In light of the bottom-up approach, Wilkins concluded, “Unquestionably, the Congress was an expression of the willingness of masses of the people to sacrifice and fight.” In light of the NNC’s popular support, Wilkins and others concluded that criticism of the Association’s middle class sensibility would “be intensified a hundredfold if we held off and refused to take any part in this movement.”<sup>82</sup>

The NNC went to great lengths welcoming the NAACP’s influence even after the Chicago convention. The NAACP’s national leadership refused to see the NNC as anything other than a political threat. Wilkins pleaded with White and the Board of Directors to reconsider.

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<sup>81</sup> Roy Wilkins, “Memorandum to the Board of Directors on the National Negro Congress,” March 9, 1936, NAACP papers, part 10, reel 15 frame 370-376.

<sup>82</sup> Randolph, “The Keynote Address of President A. Philip Randolph,” 10 and Wilkins, “Memorandum.”

Pointing to the organizational capabilities of Davis, a man with an “excellent mind, a capacity for hard work, and a grasp of the economic and civil plight of the Negro second to none of his contemporaries,” the NNC would make for a powerful partner for the Association. Under Davis’s direction, local organizers “were hard at work,” and the Board of Directors, thus, “cannot afford to dismiss lightly the efforts which are now being made.” Despite ten prominent members of the NAACP present at the convention as well as Wilkins’s passionate assessment, the leadership refused to even consider Wilkins’s proposal “because of the pressure of time.” Instead, the board dismissed his report and deferred to the Committee on Administration. “It is certainly very far from a refusal to cooperate,” Wilkins struggled to reassure Davis, “I think it is a good beginning.”<sup>83</sup>

James W. Ford, now head of the NNC’s international relations division, considered participation from the UNIA vital for the black Popular Front’s success. “The U.N.I.A. is of great value in the National Negro Congress movement,” Ford wrote, “because of its international outlook.” Ford acknowledged that previous communist fronts such as the LSNR and the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC) failed to foment anti-imperialist sentiment among the masses. As a result of the “sectarian method of work” by both organizations, Ford conceded, communists were unable to ground their global struggle in the “immediate, daily needs of the people.” By continuing his work in the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement, Ford hoped to use the lessons he learned from the Black Nationalists in the PCDE in order to make the NNC as global in its political stance as possible. He anticipated that the coalition of Pan-Africanists,

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<sup>83</sup> Wilkins, “Memorandum;” Roy Wilkins, “Supplementary Memorandum to the Report on the National Negro Congress,” March 10, 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 377; Roy Wilkins to Jon P. Davis, March 11, 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 379; Clifford N. McLoed to Charles Houston, March 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 984; and Clifford N. McLoed to Roy Wilkins, March 1936, March 1936, part 10, reel 15, frame 985, all found in NAACP papers.

communists, and others would utilize the NNC's grass-roots mobilization as an international "vehicle" for national liberation struggles throughout the diaspora.<sup>84</sup>

Two months after Ford's outreach to the UNIA, Italian forces defeated the last line of resistance in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa. As Emperor Haile Selassie fled the country, A.L. King swore to continue his humanitarian efforts by aiding refugees. "We shall conduct a program here to aid Ethiopians," he assured, "just as the Jews have helped the Jewish refugees of Germany." The ALAWF made a similar declaration and demanded that the League of Nations refuse to recognize Italy's right to conquest. That same day, the conservative faction of the New York UNIA voted to impeach King from his leadership post. Charges ranged from mishandling financial records, holding secret meetings with non-UNIA officials, ousting members without justification, and fostering communist sympathies. The move was a clear power grab by the right faction. "Garveyism & Communism Does Not Mix," they declared.<sup>85</sup>

Marcus Garvey approved of King's expulsion. Alarmed by the communists' position in Harlem, Garvey labeled the United Front a dangerous platform. White communists, Garvey argued, look upon the black working class no differently than do capitalists. The CPUSA organizes black workers only because of their firm position in the labor market and are, thus, mere puppets in the class struggle. If communism were to ever overthrow the capitalist mode of production, he warned, black workers would continue to endure white supremacy. Communism is nothing more than a "determined effort to trick the Negro workers so as to starve him out of existence." This sharp disavowal of the United Front vindicated more extreme Black

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<sup>84</sup> James W. Ford, "The National Negro Congress," *The Communist* 15, no. 4 (April 1936), 557-560.

<sup>85</sup> "Italian Trap EX-Harlemites in Addis Ababa," *New York Amsterdam*, May 9, 1936, 1 and 13; "To Follow Dad's Lead: Capt. King is Still Boss," *Afro-American*, May 9, 1936, 13; and Notice from the New York UNIA Division No. 340, in *Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*, 677.

Nationalists' call to anti-Italian violence. In protest of Italy's conquest of Ethiopia, for instance, a street corner speaker inspired 400 black Harlemites to throw bricks, bottles, and stones at the windows of an Italian restaurant. Black and white patrons were beaten as they filtered out the door. As the confrontation swelled to 5,000 participants and spectators, one officer was stabbed three times while trying to disperse the crowd. Fearful of further outbreaks, an additional 250 police officers patrolled the streets of Harlem the next day.<sup>86</sup>

Securing an endorsement from the AFL was the last chance for maintaining a moderate faction in the NNC. But the backing of the CPUSA, the CIO, and the Workers' Bureau dimmed Davis and Randolph's hope for achieving this goal. Unlike the NNC's national officers, a number of local organizers felt no need to pander to segregated craft unions. By October 1936, for example, the NNC's Chicago counsel announced unequivocal support for the CIO and open war with the AFL by declaring its members "the most vicious exponents of Jim-Crowism" in the workers' movement. "The future of Negro labor in America," they demanded, "is dependent upon the principle of unified organization, of all workers...which the C.I.O. stands for." This position was not out of step with the national leaders. The number of local councils dispersed throughout the country, however, rendered efficient coordination concerning tactics and strategy almost impossible. Mimeographed correspondence, Davis once complained, was the only feasible form of communication. Vague directives from the national office imparted immense agency onto regional and local officers. Open and direct confrontation by the local councils

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<sup>86</sup> Marcus Garvey, "Communism and the Negro," *Black Man*, May-June 1936, in *Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*, 681-682 and "3 Police in Harlem Hurt Fighting Mob," *New York Times*, Jul. 13, 1936.



against the AFL, therefore, evidenced the process by which grassroots mobilization outpaced that of the national body.<sup>87</sup>

Hoping to avoid a permanent split between skilled and unskilled labor, Davis and Randolph maintained a firm commitment against dual unionism between the CIO and AFL. Randolph and Davis pleaded with the AFL to maintain harmony by supporting the CIO's call for industrial unionism as well as the NNC's manifold labor resolutions. As a charter member, Randolph held the most credibility in convincing the AFL to embrace these positions at its national convention in Tampa, Florida in December 1936. The opening session, however, testified to the resistance and indignity Randolph was about to face. Speaking on behalf of the mayor, city attorney A.E. McMullen opened the proceedings on the convention floor by making "darky" jokes. An amused Senator Claude Pepper followed-up by telling his own "salacious and uncomplimentary jokes about Negroes." Whether the AFL Executive Council members found this humorous or not, they remained silent.<sup>88</sup>

Under this atmosphere, Randolph made his plea. Using the geographical setting of the convention to make his case for a United Front, Randolph delivered a report conducted by the local branches of the NAACP and SPUSA that detailed the working conditions of black workers living in a turpentine labor camp outside Jacksonville. Workers, the investigators found, toiled on the turpentine plantation from sunup to sundown and received a salary ranging from fifty cents to one dollar and twenty-five cents per day. They were also forced to buy their supplies at a

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<sup>87</sup> Eleanor Rye to John P. Davis, Oct. 6, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 7, frame 660-663 and John P. Davis Bernice Coplenad, June 9, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 9, frame 260.

<sup>88</sup> John P. Davis to Frank Morrison, Nov. 10, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 6, frame 924; "Resolution Adopted by the Executive Committee of the National Negro Congress on October 15, 1936 for Presentation to the American Federation of Labor at the Fifty-Six Annual Convention," NNC papers, part I, reel 6, frame 925; and "Scores Insults to Race at Tampa Confab," *Chicago Defender*, Dec. 5, 1936, 18.

local commissary that charged almost double that of the prices at stores in nearby Tampa. The workers were not even allowed to leave the plantation. The property owner reportedly employed two supervisors to spy on the workers in order to both thwart escape and prevent labor unrest. Those who tried to flee suffered physical assault, and some were even threatened with murder.<sup>89</sup>

Randolph detailed the turpentine workers' conditions in the hopes of appealing to the AFL's moral sensibility to organize black workers on an equal basis. The proposed resolutions for a United Front were seven-fold: the abolition of the color bar in the AFL, the appointment of black organizers to work within the AFL, the condemnation of Italy's occupation of Ethiopia, the support for the CPUSA's idea for a Farmer Labor Party, the rescinding of the CIO's expulsion, and the defense of the Scottsboro Nine as well as imprisoned African-American communist youth organizer Angelo Herndon. Secretary of the Resolutions Committee John P. Frey considered Randolph's report of the turpentine workers "was not relevant" to AFL policy and immediately threw out all of the NNC's proposals. Such "arbitrary resolutions," Frey argued, were fruitless.<sup>90</sup>

After the debacle at Tampa, Davis accused AFL president William Green and his fellow members of harboring white supremacy. "The labor movement cannot afford the luxury of insulting anti-Negro jokes," Davis demanded. On another occasion, Davis wrote, "Such insults are typical of the reactionary leadership of Green...and others of that clique who have stifled every attempt to accomplish the organization of" all workers. Paraphrasing Karl Marx, Davis proclaimed, "labor in a white skin cannot be free as long as labor in a black skin is oppressed." Because of the suspicion moderate and conservative groups such as the AFL held towards the

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<sup>89</sup> C.E. Chapman, "Bare Peonage Charges at A.F. of L. Meet," *Chicago Defender*, Dec. 5, 1936, 10.

<sup>90</sup> Chapman, "Bare Peonage Charges at A.F. of L. Meet" and "Davis Lambasts Labor Federation for Racial Insults," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Dec. 5, 1936, 9.

NNC, Davis, Randolph, and Ford were unable to harness the support they originally envisioned for building a black Popular Front. Despite the opposition, they persisted in their attempts to broaden the coalition throughout the NNC's existence. A year later, for instance, Davis requested Green's support for the NNC's legislative campaign for an anti-lynching bill. A dumbfounded Green wrote, "it is difficult for me to understand why and how you could write me soliciting the help and support from the American Federation of Labor for any measure." "Your attitude toward the American Federation of Labor," an outraged Green responded, "has been one of offensive opposition and antagonism."<sup>91</sup>

## **Conclusion**

During the culminating stages of the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement, African Americans engaged in a militant struggle against fascism, labor exploitation, and Jim Crow. Through demonstrations, vandalism against merchant stores, searching for ways to leave for Africa, and occasional acts of violence, numerous workers and sharecroppers expressed a militant Ethiopianism. Initially, these actions were seen as a triumph for more extreme Black Nationalists. In an effort to combat this trend, leftwing Garveyites in the New York UNIA and African-American communists harnessed Ethiopianism into a more inclusive and coherent anti-fascism by forming the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia. By appealing to a militant Pan-African consciousness while simultaneously emphasizing unity within the entire working class, A.L. King, James W. Ford, and others maintained that only through the overthrow of Jim Crow and labor exploitation under the guidance of a broad coalition could African Americans subvert fascism in the U.S. This struggle was made possible only through the sincere

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<sup>91</sup> "Scores Insults to Race at Tampa Confab;" William Green to Jon P. Davis, June 29, 1937, part I, reel 10, frame 55; John P. Davis to William Green, June 16, 1937, part I, reel 10, frame 96; John P. Davis to William Green, Nov. 24, 1936, part I, reel 10, frame 99, all found in the NNC papers.

effort of King and Ford to work harmoniously. By acknowledging their respective organizations' past failures to foment mass unrest, King and Ford learned the emancipatory value of a black Popular Front.

As the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement evolved into an overall critique of capitalism, John P. Davis recognized the potential of harnessing anti-fascism into the building of a new civil rights organization far more militant than any other. Davis's formulation of a new protest movement grounded in working class mobilization was made possible by the rise of the CIO. With the support from industrial unions, Davis envisioned the reemergence of a black-labor alliance unseen in the U.S. since the International Workers of the World (IWW). The radicalization of the Urban League, under the leadership of Lester Granger, and the Comintern's shift in tactics for combating fascism in the summer of 1935 also facilitated Davis's call for a Unified Front. With support from the CIO, CPUSA, and the Urban League's Workers' Bureau, Davis expressed the need for the National Negro Congress in global terms.

The politics expressed at the NNC's Chicago convention, however, were full of contradictions. One delegate was asked to explain the purpose of the congress. "The purpose," he discordantly avowed, "is to legislate the white man out of existence and to make America a Utopia for the black man." Others observed with surprise at the sizable presence of whites who may or may not have been communists. These confused delegates together wondered, "Do you think its red or just pink?" Another characterized the convention more as "a black gathering with red and white trimmings." Many were surprised by the noticeable absence of older and more prestigious civil rights leaders. "Where is the old guard?" they queried. The multiplicity of

opinions expressed by the delegates demonstrates the level of difficulty the NNC's founders faced when forming a consensus.<sup>92</sup>

Despite the diverse array of opinions, the priority was to place the black working class front-and-center. Delegate George Robison of Gauley Bridge, West Virginia spoke to the audience describing the conditions he endured as a miner working for the Union Carbide Company. Dying from silicosis, Robison implored the audience to prioritize the fight for his fellow miners and others in their struggle for more humane working conditions. In his last letter he wrote Davis before passing away six months after the convention, Robison pledged, "The National Negro Congress always will have my support." Robison's struggle, in the minds of Davis and others, epitomized the necessity for a black Popular Front. "This is the job," Davis eulogized Robison, "that the National Negro Congress is pushing with all its power."<sup>93</sup>

The NNC's close affiliation with the communist movement was not predetermined. The vast majority of the national leadership, as Randolph and Davis constantly reiterated, consisted of radicals outside the CPUSA. But the burning desire by congress leaders to organize on the basis of a United Front brought them into the communist orbit. This partnership introduced a militant conception of direct action by emphasizing the imperative role of the black working class in the global Popular Front. With James W. Ford providing a seminal contribution in making the NNC a success in its first year of existence, the CPUSA recognized the NNC's ability to succeed where it had previously failed—to foment populist support among the black masses. Recognizing the CPUSA's sincere support for a black-labor alliance, Davis refused to denounce communism amidst the constant onslaught of red-baiting. As Davis's biographer

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<sup>92</sup> Nahum Daniel Brascher, "National Negro Congress Tidbits," *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 22, 1936, 1.

<sup>93</sup> "Delegate to NNC Victim of Silicosis," *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 8, 1936, 4.

Hilmar Ludvig Jensen wrote, “It was he who invited Communists—at great risk to his public credibility—to participate in the founding of the NNC, not vice versa.”<sup>94</sup>

At the same time, congress leaders’ close affiliation with the communists made a Left-Center Left coalition within the NNC impossible. The AFL, NAACP, SPUSA, and UNIA looked upon the black Popular Front with suspicion if not outright hostility. For them, a United Front posed more challenges than possibilities, and associating with communists, they felt, endangered their political fortunes. This calculation stood in sharp contrast with a large portion of the masses. A great number of the NNC’s grassroots organizers were eager to work side-by-side with anyone who supported their goals. As one local NNC official in Magnolia, New Jersey affirmed, “The Communist Party has proved its sincerity to our people in this country...So, if the congress was prominent with Communists, it is because we recognize them as our allies, and in turn many of us are part of them.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Jensen, “The Rise of an African American Left,” 6.

<sup>95</sup> Charles P. Hardy, “Afro Readers Say,” *Afro-American*, March 7, 1936, 4.

**Chapter Two**  
**“Premature Anti-Fascists”**  
**The Spanish Civil War and Local People’s Global Humanitarianism, 1937-1938**

“The present war in Spain,” an editorial in *The Negro Worker* declared in January 1937, “is closely connected with the whole colonial question.” A fascist victory in Spain, the article maintained, would harden Italy’s grip on Ethiopia as well as the other colonial powers. While the editorial praised the efforts of the National Negro Congress (NNC) and the various youth and students movements in the United States, the authors insisted that more was needed. A Republican victory in Spain necessitated a “world people’s movement against war and fascism.” African Americans would be critical to this global resistance. In the Popular Front, the author insisted, “belongs every Negro man and woman who desires to prevent another world bloodbath and to prevent their colonial brothers falling under the iron heels of murderous fascism.” Only through collective action “can we make 1937 safe for peace!”<sup>1</sup>

Soon after installing its genocidal regime in Ethiopia, fascist Italy signed the Pact of Friendship and Alliance of 1936 with Nazi Germany. Under the agreement, both nations formed a joint venture to support the Spanish coup d’état waged by the rightists, monarchists, and militarists collectively known as the Nationalists led by General Francisco Franco. The Spanish Civil War marked a new phase in the global fascist movement. As one historian noted, the intervention in Spain was the moment when “the politics of Italy and Germany became increasingly entangled with each other.”<sup>2</sup> Both fascist heads of state considered a Nationalist victory in Spain crucial to the success of their own imperial plans. Mussolini hoped to build a superpower in the Mediterranean by countering the British navy, via Spanish forces, in the Strait

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<sup>1</sup> “Editorials, 1937,” *The Negro Worker*, Jan. 1937, 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Christian Goeschel, *Mussolini and Hitler: The Forging of a Fascist Alliance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 5.

of Gibraltar. Hitler similarly viewed a Spanish ally as providing a key bulwark to Great Britain and France. A civil war in Spain, Hitler believed, would distract the Allies from Germany's imperial plans for central Europe. The accord between the burgeoning empires promised to radically restructure European politics. Mussolini proclaimed that the Rome-Berlin accord would act as an "axis around which all European States animated by a desire for peace may collaborate."<sup>3</sup>

The fascist intervention in Spain ignited a transnational crusade of the far right against what it perceived as the growing tide of communism and atheism personified by the Spanish Popular Front. The objectives of the 3,000 foreign volunteers were not completely uniform. Some 8,000 Portuguese—disillusioned with their own Nationalist leader Antonio de Oliveira Salazar—crossed the border in the hopes of creating a genuine Nazi state. Another 700 Irish soldiers joined Franco in the hopes of one day returning home to foment fascism. One hundred Poles joined the Nationalists in the hopes of preserving Catholicism as well as prepare for an eventual war with either Germany or the Soviet Union. Almost 78,000 Moroccan soldiers also joined Franco forces with the hope, though unfulfilled, of achieving independence. Regardless of the various motivations, all shared one common principle—the destruction of Spanish democracy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Benito Mussolini, quoted by "Text of Mussolini's Milan Speech," *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1936, 12; Anthony Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 109-116; Paul Preston, *Franco: A Biography* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 144-170; and Monica Fioravanzo, "Italian Fascism from a Transnational Perspective: The Debate on the New European Order (1930-1945)," in *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation Between movements and Regimes in Europe From 1918 to 1945*, ed. Arnd Bauerkamper and Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe, 243-263 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 243-250.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Othen, *Franco's International Brigades: Adventurers, Fascists, and Christian Crusader in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 1-8.



Studies of the Spanish Civil War detail the contributions of African-American soldiers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (ALB) who risked their lives in the name of republicanism.<sup>5</sup> Many of these volunteers were inspired by the global politics of the NNC in 1935 and 1936 to join the struggle. By early 1937, these young radicals sailed to Spain and looked to the NNC for support in their fight against the Spanish insurgency. “We urge you” five ALB soldiers wrote NNC Executive Secretary John P. Davis, “to have every negro paper campaign, every pulpit ring, and every Negro organization activism [*sic*] to help.” In so doing, the Spanish Civil War compelled the NNC to develop anti-fascist solidarities beyond Ethiopia while still emphasizing Pan-African empowerment. The ALB soldiers explained Spain’s centrality to the future of Ethiopia by telling Davis that “a defeat of Fascism in Spain is a blow against international Fascism and will result in the liberation of Ethiopia.” “A free Ethiopia,” they insisted, “shall be the symbol of Freedom for the Negro Peoples of the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Since 1935, the NNC’s founders avoided more conservative Black Nationalist ideals. While they cherished a global black pride, NNC officers maintained that racial separatism was antithetical to the core principles of the Popular Front. The fascist intervention in Spain advanced this viewpoint. Richard Wright expounded upon the necessity of a United Front after visiting the trenches. Black national politics, Wright identified, was the logical manifestation of Jim Crow.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Arthur H. Landis, *Death in the Olive Groves: American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1988); Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1994); Danny Duncon Collum, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: ‘This Ain’t Ethiopia, but It’ll Do* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991); Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution, and Revenge* (London: Harper Collins, 2006); Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (New York: Penguin, 2006); and Adam Hochschild, *Spain in Our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (New York: Mariner, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Otto Reeves, et. al. to John P. Davis, Jan. 4, 1938, Papers of the National Negro Congress (“NNC papers” hereafter), part I, reel 14, frame 641-642 and “Ask Aid for the Spanish Loyalists,” *Chicago Defender*, Mar. 5, 1938, 24.

The feudal economy of the American South, he explained, necessitated the formation of separate social-economic institutions. The post-World War I climate, however, demanded a reevaluation of such tactics. The Great Migration, the economic boom of the 1920s, its collapse in the 1930s, and the struggle for industrial unionism “have created conditions which should complement the rise of a [new] school of expression.” This school of expression must articulate “a sense of the oppression of the Negro people, the danger of war, of fascism, of the threatened destruction of culture and civilization; and, too, the faith and necessity to build a new world.” Implicit in Wright’s thoughts, including the NNC, was the need for African Americans to join the Popular Front while also celebrating black pride and culture.<sup>7</sup>

In order to achieve this, John P. Davis outlined the significance of Spanish fascism to black Americans by linking the Republican cause with the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement. “The ruthless mass murder of...Ethiopian citizens by the same Italian Fascists now invading Spain,” Davis declared, “furnishes added reason for enlistment of broad masses of Negro people behind the fight for the democratic liberties of the Spanish People and against the whole broad fascist world front.” By linking Ethiopians with Spanish democrats, NNC activists continued to harmonize Pan-Africanism with the global United Front of workers and now soldiers. The NNC’s greatest ambition was to utilize the Spanish Civil War as a galvanizing force for African Americans against Jim Crow. Max Yergan, NNC Secretary and co-founder of the International Committee of African Affairs (ICAA) avowed, “The Spanish struggle has had the effect of

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Literature,” in *Amistad 2*, ed. John A. Williams and Charles F. Harris, 3-20 (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 10-11.

increasing the desire of the American Negro for more genuine democracy.” For the NNC, the fight against fascism in Spain and the struggle for democracy at home were inseparable.<sup>8</sup>

Black radicals—both in Spain and at home—were convinced that the Spanish Civil War’s outcome held consequences for the black freedom struggle. The American right would later derisively characterize these men and women as “Premature Anti-Fascists,” those who joined the anti-fascist struggle before America’s entry into World War II.<sup>9</sup> Members of the black Popular Front embraced this label with pride. As one ALB veteran declared upon his return home, “Our people were among the first to volunteer to fight against fascism to save democracy.” When asked why he joined the fight, he replied, “because I belong to a race of people who aren’t on the first step of the social and economic ladders. My people are so brutally denied the right to life, liberty, and happiness, which without that, democracy is just a word.” The premature anti-fascists were convinced that if the Axis Powers were victorious, “our own Mussolini in the form of the Ku Klux Klan and other lynchers of my people, would use that as a cue to tighten more the chains of segregation and lynching that already engulf us.”<sup>10</sup>

African-American women’s contribution to the Loyalist cause was no less profound. In an open letter entitled “To My Sisters of the Negro Race,” feminist and member of the Spanish Communist Party Dolores Ibárruri wrote, “You Negro women...can understand better than any other people, the suffering of our people, the infinite pain of our women.” Calling for transracial anti-fascism, Ibárruri proclaimed, “The blood of Negro brothers has wet the Spanish earth in

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<sup>8</sup> John P. Davis to Willard R. Espy, Nov. 9, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 4, frame 745 and Max Yergan, quoted by “Regarding Spain, These Men Have this to Say,” n.p., n.d. [1938], n.p., NNC papers, part I, reel 13, frame 44-46.

<sup>9</sup> Louise Thompson, interview by Linda Burnham, Mar. 9, 1988 and Mar. 11, 1988, 2, Louise Thompson Patterson papers (“Patterson papers” hereafter), box 27, fol. 12, Emory University: Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

<sup>10</sup> James Robinson, quoted by “Spanish Volunteer Returns to U.S.A.,” *Chicago Defender*, Dec. 1937, 24.

defense of democracy, in defense of the Spanish Republic, in defense of World Peace.” For black radical feminists at home, Ibárruri’s plea for a Popular Front against fascism was not just a struggle in the defense of minorities and the working class but for women the world over.

“Negro women of America,” Ibárruri beseeched, “Because we know you are infinitely discriminated against, help us!” “To you Negro women of American goes my embrace,” she proclaimed, “With all the love of a mother and a woman that has a profound love for liberty.”<sup>11</sup>

Today’s scholars of African-American feminism have unearthed women’s contributions to global liberation movements of the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> A number of these women played formative roles in the NNC’s international protest. Louise Thompson, member of the International Workers Order (IWO), represented the NNC at international gatherings and organized public lectures in Harlem for NNC members. A key supporter of the ALB, Patterson routinely publicized African Americans’ contributions. Her experience reinforced her conviction that only through the defeat of fascism can democracy and peace exist. She later reflected of her tour of the Spanish front, “I saw firsthand the hardships brought on by war.” She was overwhelmed by the determination of the Spanish people to protect democracy. “I can’t even

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<sup>11</sup> Dolores Ibárruri, “To My Sisters of the Negro Race,” n.p., Dec. 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 723.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Gregg Andrews, *Thyra J. Edwards: Black Activist in the Global Freedom Struggle* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011); Keith Gilyard, *Louise Thompson Patterson: A Life of Struggle for Justice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); and Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

convey the feeling that you got of the unity of the people,” she wrote. She praised “their determination to have their freedom and to rid the country of [General Francisco] Franco.”<sup>13</sup>

Thyra Edwards, renowned social worker and member of the NNC’s National Executive Council, was an internationally recognized advocate for the working class. Edwards developed a sharp critique of capitalism from her work with the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) as well as from the mentorship of NNC President A. Philip Randolph. The nation’s most prominent black socialist described Edwards as one of “the most brilliant young women of the Negro or any other race, in public life today.” Her travels throughout Europe in the mid-1930s radicalized her anti-racist convictions. On a train from Vienna bound for Munich in 1934, Edwards was forced to share space with fascist passengers and listen to their “Incantations” and “Heiling” to Adolf Hitler, each chant receiving a “choral response” one after the other. Directing her ire towards one passenger adoring various Nazi insignia, she remarked with disdain, “One could visualize him in the frenzy of religious orgies,” dabbling in, “the solemn business of mystic initiatory rites in some wood hollow in Georgia or Indiana.”<sup>14</sup>

The work of these activists testifies to the indispensable contributions African-American women and youth made to the black Popular Front. As A. Philip Randolph remarked in 1937, the anti-fascist movement “is stirring the women and youth of the Negro people to join and struggle with the national and world agencies...for a better world.” For the NNC, a better world required

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<sup>13</sup> Louise Thompson, “Unpublished memoirs: chapter 7, The Paris Conference and the Harlem Suitcase Theatre,” 2 and 4, Patterson papers, box 20, fol. 6 and “Announcing the Seminar in Negro History: 1938 Spring Series of Lectures Under the Auspices of Harlem Community Center,” (New York: International Workers Order, March, April, and May, 1938), 1-4, Patterson papers, box 8, fol. 9.

<sup>14</sup> John P. Davis to Thyra J. Edwards, Jan. 29, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 4, frame 700; Chatwood Hall, “Thyra Edwards Makes ‘Inspection’ Tour of Soviet Russia,” *Chicago Defender*, June 16, 1934; and Thyra Edwards, “Germany—Not in the Badacker,” n.p., n.d., [1934], Thyra Edwards Papers (“Edwards papers” hereafter), box 1, fol. 1, Chicago History Museum: Research Center.

mass mobilization of African Americans defending the rights of the Spanish people.

Demonstrating its commitment, the NNC emerged as a prominent human rights organization that linked democratic rights for Spaniards with African Americans. By transcending divisions of race, the NNC looked to Spanish Republicans as fellow travelers in the fight for democracy.<sup>15</sup>

By 1938, the NNC frequently protested the growing deterioration of Jewish human rights in Europe. Studies of black and Jewish collaboration primarily emphasize either Jews' contributions to the black freedom struggle or Jewish perceptions of blackness in the U.S.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the NNC and its sister affiliate known as the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) were the leading African-American civil rights organizations fighting for Jewish human rights during the Popular Front. For the NNC, the prevalence of anti-Semitism in Europe overlapped with Jim Crow-inspired violence. Less than a month after Nazi Germany's annexation of Austria, the NNC held its own conference to protest the Senate filibuster of the proposed anti-lynching bill. For John P. Davis, the connection between anti-Semitism and the lynching of black Americans was more than a metaphor. It was a part of a global fascist assault against all racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. "We American Negroes stand at the cross-roads of our development in the United States," wrote Davis, and "the position of the Jews in Austria offers new proof of the

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<sup>15</sup> A. Philip Randolph, "The Crisis of the Negro and the Constitution," *Publication of the National Negro Congress* (Washington, D.C.: NNC, n.d. [Oct., 1937]), n.p., NNC papers, part I, reel 11, frame 950-998.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Robert Weisbord and Arthur Stain, *Bittersweet Encounter: The Afro-American and the American Jew* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1970); Lenora Bernson, *The Negro and the Jews* (New York: Random House, 1970); Hasia R. Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977); Murray Friedman, *What Went Wrong?: The Creation and Collapse of the black-Jewish Alliance* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Seth Forman, *Black in the Jewish Mind: A Crisis of Liberalism* (New York: University Press, 1998); Clive Webb, *Fight Against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001); and Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

need for closest cooperation on the part of all minority peoples.” After the annexation of Austria and the signing of the Munich Agreement between Germany and Great Britain, the black Popular Front warned that the democratic nations’ policy of placating Nazism would result in a global humanitarian catastrophe. Their fears came to fruition during Kristallnacht (The Night of Broken Glass).<sup>17</sup>

Similar to 1935 and 1936, the NNC experienced difficulty in forming partnerships outside the CIO, the SNYC, the black church, the American Communist Party (CPUSA), and its Popular Front affiliates. While leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and American Socialist Party (SPUSA)—principally Walter White and Norman Thomas—maintained a correspondence with Davis and others as well as attended NNC-sponsored conferences, both organizations maintained a firm distance. The greatest Center-Left opponent to the NNC’s international came from President Franklin D. Roosevelt. NNC members routinely lobbied the Roosevelt Administration to lift the embargo on the Spanish Republic, to support the passing of the anti-lynching bill, and to provide a safe haven in the U.S. for Jewish refugees after Kristallnacht. The NNC and its allies’ unpopular civil rights and humanitarian efforts in 1937 and 1938 evidenced the prevalence of white supremacy as well as the indifference to oppression at home and abroad, thus, bestowing them the title “premature anti-fascists.”

### **Premature Anti-Fascists**

At the NNC’s Chicago convention in February 1936, the Youth Section, composed of 125 delegates ranging from ages 16 to 30, adopted a series of resolutions including “a militant fight for peace and an unrelenting struggle against fascism.” Composed predominantly of high

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<sup>17</sup> John P. Davis to Barnett R. Brickner, March 25, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 12, frame 444-445

school and college students, they also called for the teaching of black history as well as equal educational opportunities. Their most consequential resolution called for a separate all-youth Popular Front organization based in the American South. This came to be known as the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC). While preparing for their own national convention set for February 1937 in Richmond, Virginia, the SNYC later compiled six areas of importance for African-American youth during a round table discussion. Item number six called for promoting the significance of Ethiopia and Spain to “the darker peoples of the world” and called for uniting “with the progressive forces of the world in the struggle to maintain world peace.”<sup>18</sup>

The delegates quickly elected the Texan and college student Edward E. Strong as National Secretary. Born in 1914, Strong spent his childhood laboring on a cotton plantation. Eventually migrating to Flint, Michigan, Edwards received acclaim for his ability to debate in High School. Demonstrating his oratory skills at the Chicago convention, Strong decried the Post-Reconstruction ideologies of Booker T. Washington’s gospel of gradualism and W.E.B. Du Bois’s elitism of the Talented Tenth. Though many black youth embraced these ideas “unhesitatingly and without questions,” the hardships of industrial capitalism proved that self-help had “outworn its usefulness.” Directing attention to the current crisis, Strong pointed to the rise of African Americans entering academia under the promise that the Great Depression “would not last long and that we should continue the philosophy of hard study [and] patient work.” Upon graduation, thousands of former students looked for employment, but “we were told that there were not to be had.” Consequently, a new generation began asking questions such as “why starvation should exist in the land of plenty.” Galvanizing around an “all inclusive youth

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<sup>18</sup> “Report of the Youth Section of the National Negro Congress,” *The Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress* (Washington, D.C.: NNC, Oct. 14-16, 1936), 37, NNC papers, part I, reel 2, frame 248-270 and Edward E. Strong, “The Negro Youth Offensive,” *The Negro Worker*, May 1937, 8.



movement,” the SNYC determined to “put a stick of dynamite under the industrial barons that rule this country.” This was the purpose of the SNYC.<sup>19</sup>

Four months after the NNC convention, Strong finished his undergraduate studies at the Central YMCA College in Chicago. After graduating in June, he entered the graduate program of Howard University’s iconic Political Science Department. Here, he engaged in the readings of a diverse array of philosophers. He studied the classical works of Plato, Saint Augustine of Hippo, William James, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Lock, and others. He also developed a sharp critique of capitalism by reading Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Nikolai Bukharin, Joseph Stalin, Maxim Gorky, and Earl Browder. Recognizing the relevance of these studies to American race relations, Strong determined that a United Front of the working class, backed by youth movements, was the strongest instrument to advance the black freedom struggle.<sup>20</sup>

Promoting the SNYC on the global stage, Strong spent six weeks touring Europe in September 1936. Under the auspices of the International Association of League of Nations Societies in Geneva, Switzerland, 700 youth delegates from twenty five countries attended the first World Youth Congress. The delegates came in search of a “common plan of international cooperation for the prevention of war and the organization of peace.” Representing the entire North American delegation, Strong served as the first African American to ever speak to this assembly. Speaking on the same platform occupied by Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie a few months prior, Edwards decried the “foolish theories of racial superiority” as the “major cause for

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<sup>19</sup> Edward E. Strong, “Negro Youth Demands a Hearing,” *The Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress*, 13-15 and “Geneva Bound for Congress,” *Atlanta Daily World*, Aug. 15, 1936, 7.

<sup>20</sup> “Geneva Bound for Congress,” *Atlanta Daily World*, Aug. 15, 1936, 7 and Edward E. Strong, “Liberty and Political Obligation in the Soviet Union,” (Master’s Thesis: Howard University, n.d. [1937]), 23, Edward E. Strong Papers (“Strong papers” hereafter), box 167-1, fol. 22, Howard University: Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

equally foolish wars” and called for a “united youth movement” against Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. He also developed a more coherent understanding of the three-month-old conflict in Spain. At the congress’s conclusion, Strong, along with nine other delegates, visited Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia. During an interview, he described the civil war as “a fight between the believers in democracy as represented by the government” and the “believers in economic slavery for the many and special privileges for the few as represented by the rebels.” “Americans of color should realize,” he insisted, “that the Fascists (rebels) in Spain are being supported by the same Italian Fascists who invaded Ethiopia and who are allied with the anti-colored German Nazis.”<sup>21</sup>

While the first ALB soldiers set foot on Spanish soil, more than 500 delegates congregated at the SNYC’s first national convention in the former capital of the Confederate States of America. The youth conference earned praise and participation from the elder statesmen of the NNC such as Max Yergan, John P. Davis, and A. Philip Randolph as well as academic E. Franklin Frazier and Howard University President Mordecai Johnson. The afternoon sessions were organized around roundtable group discussions focusing on practical solutions to the Great Depression including industrial unionism, sharecroppers, civil and political rights, and challenges pertaining to students. Unlike the NNC’s Chicago convention, redbaiting mattered little to the young radicals. “Although there are Communists openly participating in proceedings,” wrote James W. Ford, “not once has the ‘red scare’ been raised.” President

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<sup>21</sup> Edward E. Strong, “Report of Youth Activities to the National Executive Council of the National Negro Congress,” 1-2, Feb. 5 and 6, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 16, frame 271-273; Edward E. Strong, quoted by “Negro Congress Delegate Speaks in League of Nations Assembly Hall,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sep. 26, 1936, 3; Edward E. Strong, quoted by “Youth Leader Returns From European Tour,” *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 17, 1936, 20; Edward E. Strong, quoted by “Saw Blacks Fighting in Spain,” *Afro-American*, Oct. 17, 1936, 11.

Johnson similarly proclaimed, “the danger to the South does not come from Socialism or Communism, but from those forces who wish to enrich the few at the expense of the many.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition to domestic policy, the conference also formulated what James W. Ford described as “the social basis of international understanding.”<sup>23</sup> President of the Christian Youth Council of North America Martin L. Harvey, for example, proclaimed “a new world is coming into being and American youth must step into the front ranks of those who would remake this new world.” Max Yergan described the commonalities between the black youth and those suffering from exploitation abroad. “A large part of the world,” he proclaimed, “is not away from poverty dominated by a small group of exploiters, nor away from an imperialism that takes a nation’s tools and means of making a livelihood, and that uses labor without compensation and destroys the culture of a people.” The audience roused into a “burst of applause” in response to the socialist and journalist Joseph P. Lash’s praise of the Spanish Republican youth.<sup>24</sup>

Communist Angelo Herndon, the most nationally recognized African-American youth activist, drew widespread attention at the conference. “Our generation,” the SNYC hailed Herndon, “can be justly proud that from our ranks in the midst of the South, has come forth that heroic young fighter for Negro rights...This young man who has earned the love and admiration of his people.” Herndon enjoyed a roaring applause from the audience upon his description of the SNYC as a new movement dedicated to the overthrow of the “conditions that are forced on us as a minority group.” The youth congress, he declared, is the basis, “where we will become a

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<sup>22</sup> “Youth Session Plans Are Laid,” *New Journal and Guide*, Jan 30. 1937, 11; Victor Lawson to Juanita Jackson, NAACP papers, part 10, reel 15, frame 411; and “Draft Call to the Southern Negro Youth Conference,” NAACP papers, part 10, reel 15, frame 416-418, James W. Ford, “Negro and White Youth Join in Southern Parley,” *Daily Worker*, Feb. 15, 1937, 1; and Mordecai Johnson, quoted by Ford, “Negro and White Youth Join in Southern Parley,” 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ford, “Negro and White Youth Join Southern Parley,” 4.

<sup>24</sup> All above quoted by Ford, “Negro and White Youth Join Southern Parley,” 4.

free...Negro and white youth with all the barbarism and cruelty of this system removed from America.” After the congress, Herndon noted the “sad graveness and heaviness of heart and mind” among the delegates as they looked across the street gazing upon the “awful and weird” image of black workers, “brutalized and warned by a cruel and unjust society.” The vivid portrayal of Richmond’s black population was a reminder that “throughout the South the plight of all Negroes is identically the same.” For the aroused and steadfast delegates, the SNYC served as a “reaffirmation of their life purpose” to combat peonage, lynching, and segregation.<sup>25</sup>

The reasons for Herndon’s celebrity stemmed from his arrest in Atlanta, Georgia in the summer of 1932. Herndon was indicted on charges of “insurrection” based on a state law passed in 1866 and revised in 1871, a crime punishable by execution. His insurrection involved organizing a protest of approximately 1,000 black and white industrial workers protesting against the state’s pension relief fund. After his arrest, prosecutors found communist literature in his apartment, strengthening their case. Herndon’s defense team, representatives of the International Labor Defense (ILD), attempted to quash the indictment based on grounds of the all-white jury in Fulton County but was overruled. Two days later, he was found guilty and sentenced to eighteen to twenty years on a chain gain, an act of mercy by the judge. After a series of motions and appeals, Herndon’s petition for a retrial was denied by the state Supreme Court. By December 1935, however, Judge Hugh Dorsey of the federal Supreme Court declared that

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<sup>25</sup> Edward E. Strong to unknown, Jan. 7, 1937, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (“NAACP papers” hereafter), part 10, reel 15, frame 438; Herndon, quoted by Ford, “Negro and White Youth Join in Southern Parley,” 1; and Angelo Herndon, “Negro Youth of Southland Maps Its Fight for Rights,” *Daily Worker*, Feb. 18, 1937, 2.

Herndon's imprisonment violated his Fourteenth Amendment constitutional rights and was released from custody on bail.<sup>26</sup>

Less than a week before the SNYC's convention, Herndon's case was heard before the Supreme Court. Lead defense attorney Whitney Seymour argued Herndon "engaged in lawful political activity" provided by the First Amendment of the Constitution. "There was no danger," he concluded, "to the State in the activities of Herndon." J. Walter Le Crow, Assistant Solicitor General of Georgia, declared Herndon's activism was "designed to bring about violence and create a black belt in the Southern States," the policy of the CPUSA during the Third Period (1928-1934). As a communist, Herndon "took his orders from the Communist International, not from any American Communist party, and the Communist International advocates violence to gain its end." By April's end, the Supreme Court ruled in a five to four decision that the state of Georgia violated Herndon's Fourteenth Amendment rights. The majority opinion lambasted the insurrection law as a "dragnet which may enmesh any one who agitates for a change of government." "So vague and indeterminate," the majority concluded, "are the boundaries this set to the freedom of speech and assembly that the law necessarily violates the guarantees of liberty embodied in the Fourteenth Amendment."<sup>27</sup>

Like his brother Angelo, Milton Herndon was a steel worker and a member of the CPUSA during the early 1930s. By the summer of 1937, he served as Sargent for the ALB's Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion in Spain. According to his fellow soldiers, Milton spoke often of his brother's cause célèbre. Angelo, however, was not the only member of the Herndon family to receive international acclaim. As a Sargent, Milton commanded the Mackenzie-Papineau's

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<sup>26</sup> "Chronology of the Case of Angelo Herndon," *Chicago Defender*, May 8, 1937, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Both quoted by "Herndon Case is Argued," *New York Times*, Feb. 9, 1937, 5 and Owen J. Roberts, quoted by "Herndon Set Free by Supreme Court," *New York Times*, Apr. 27, 1937, 1.

machine gun company named after Frederick Douglass, a title given by him. “He knew what lies behind this war. He was always politically alert,” said battalion member and Finish-American Hialmar Sankari.<sup>28</sup> African-American Aaron Johnson also served under Herndon in the Douglass Company. “Yesterday, Ethiopia,” Johnson recounted a speech by Milton, “Today, Spain. Tomorrow, maybe America. Fascism wont stop anywhere—until we stop it.”<sup>29</sup>

For Angelo, his brother’s commitment to the anti-fascist struggle was equally consequential. “Deprived of their liberties in most parts of the world,” Angelo wrote of his brother as well as all black soldiers, “Negroes everywhere realize that the supremacy task of all liberty-loving people, is to check fascism in Spain.” Spaniards, including communist feminist Dolores Ibárruri, expressed profound fondness for soldiers like Milton. During a parade of the International Brigades in the town of Albacete, Milton defiantly hoisted the American flag. War correspondent for the *Daily Worker* Joseph North described the aura, “All the Spaniards...remarked on the flag-bearer—handsome, erect [Milton], proudly carrying the flag.” Ibárruri later told North, “I shall never forget the picture of that boy marching for Spain, an American Negro bearing your country’s flag, marching with the Spanish troops.”<sup>30</sup>

The story of Milton Herndon’s journey from a working class activist to a soldier in an anti-fascist army reflected the stories of other ALB veterans. In his youth, for instance, Walter Garland lived in “quiet desperation” in Brooklyn, New York. The oldest of two brothers and two

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<sup>28</sup> Hialmar Sankari, quoted by Langston Hughes, “Milt Herndon Died Trying to Rescue Wounded Pal, *Afro-American*, Jan. 1, 1938, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Aaron Johnson, quoted by Hughes, “Milt Herndon Died Trying to Rescue Wounded Pal,” 2.

<sup>30</sup> Angelo Herndon, “Why Negroes Aid Loyalist Spain: A Message from Angelo Herndon,” *The Negro People Defend Democracy by Aid to Spanish People* (New York: Negro People’s Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, n.d. [1939]), n.p., Edwards papers, scrapbook concerning the tour of the Negro People’s Ambulance for Loyalist Spain and Joseph North, “Pasionaria ‘Will Never Forget’ Herndon—Negro American Who Carried Stars and Stripes in Vet Parade,” *Daily Worker*, Dec. 2, 1938, 7.

sisters, Garland was forced to find work after his mother died soon after he completed grade school. As a musician, he wrote scores for the Lucky Strike and Show Boat radio shows. By 1935, however, Garland underwent a political awakening. During the Hands off Ethiopia Movement, he determined “It would only be a matter of time before these brutalities descended upon the Negro in America unless the spread of fascism was halted.” Inspired by the Popular Front, Garland joined the local NNC council. During his work with congress organizers, Garland gained what Richard Wright described as “new perspectives and most important of all, courage and a method of action” and consequently grew conscious of “what was happening to all the oppressed the world over.” Determined to stop fascism where it stood, he arrived in Spain in January 1937.<sup>31</sup>

Garland was one of the first Americans to set foot in Spain. Initially a private, he quickly earned the rank of sergeant. During the Battle of Jarama, an offensive by the Nationalists in August 1937, Garland was shot while carrying munitions to the front lines. He was one of four hundred and fifty Americans in the battle, but the newly arrived soldiers lacked the experience to adequately defend themselves. And yet, they were ordered to march straight into the fascist lines without artillery or air support in a desperate attempt to save Jarama. The combat subsided after three weeks when the fascists retreated in defeat but with heavy losses on both sides. For the next two months, Garland rested in a hospital with a bullet wound in his stomach. Upon discharge, he received the commission of Second Lieutenant and became commander of the Lincoln Brigade’s training base in Valencia. His responsibilities included training newly arrived volunteers

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Wright, “Walter Garland Tells What Spain’s Fight Against Fascism Means to the Negro People,” *Daily Worker*, Nov. 29, 1937, 2 and Langston Hughes, “Lieutenant Walter Garland in Command,” 4, n.p., Nov. 1937, Patterson papers, box 18, fol. 28.

unseasoned in military combat, supervising radio and telephone operators, and updating military maps. He even wrote the first combat manual in English for the ALB.<sup>32</sup>

Fellow soldier James Yates of Mississippi remembered Garland fondly. Prior to their arrival, Garland and Yates stood in the same breadlines and attended the same rallies defending the Scottsboro Nine and Angelo Herndon in New York. Now in Spain, Garland frequently discussed his youth activism in the Brooklyn NNC with Yates. “He always said,” Yates reflected, “the most important discovery of his youth was the realization that what was happening locally to oppressed people was happening the world over.” Yates also remembered listening to NNC activists in 1935 and 1936. At a rally sponsored by the American League Against War and Fascism (ALAWF) held at Madison Square Garden, Yates marveled over NNC President Randolph’s discussion of the link between Italy’s occupation of Ethiopia and the exploitation of black industrial workers. It was this period, Yates reflected, when young black radicals in New York were “listening and getting educated about world events.”<sup>33</sup>

Enthralled by Garland and his comrades, Langston Hughes—a staunch supporter of the NNC and delegate to its Chicago convention—wrote a series of articles for the *Baltimore Afro-American* detailing the war’s impact on American race relations. For Hughes, the Lincoln Brigade was composed of “true representatives of the anti-fascist fighters of the world.” Louise Thompson was equally passionate. Under the auspices of the IWW, Patterson documented the Spanish Front alongside Hughes. She similarly characterized the Spanish Popular Front as the “Focal point for all people who loved freedom and hated fascism. All over the world.” After

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<sup>32</sup> Hughes, “Lieutenant Walter Garland in Command,” 4; Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 491; and Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 155.

<sup>33</sup> James Yates, *Mississippi to Madrid: Memoir of a Black American in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Seattle, WA: Open Hand, 1989), 92 and 119.



fighting for eight months, the twenty-two year old Garland gained what Patterson described as the “strength and maturity far beyond his years.” Garland introduced Patterson to numerous soldiers in the town of Albacete, a transport base for the Lincoln Brigade. Here, she met Vaughn Love, a New York native recently wounded in the Battle of Brunete. She was also introduced to the Jamaican-born Oliver Frankson, a mechanic whose responsibilities included running supplies to the trenches. In Villa Paz, Patterson met Salaria Kea, a nurse from the Harlem Hospital. Though the only black woman, Key “expressed no loneliness, no desire to return home—only a great happiness that she had come to Spain and was doing her part.”<sup>34</sup>

In Akron, Ohio, Kea’s father worked as a janitor at the State Hospital for the Insane. When Salaria was six months old, her father was murdered. Impoverished, her mother returned to her native home of Georgia but left her children behind to live with a family friend. Here, Salaria lived with three siblings along with her foster parent’s five children. While attending West High School, she worked for the black physician Bedford Riddle in the summers. Upon his recommendation, she attended the Harlem Hospital Training School. After graduating in 1934, the hospital hired Salaria full time. During off hours, she and other more progressive nurses attend public lectures “to understand what was happening in Harlem and its relationship to events in Europe and Africa.” During the Hands off Ethiopia Movement, she joined a drive by

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<sup>34</sup> Hughes, “Lieutenant Walter Garland in Command,” 6; Langston Hughes to unknown [John P. Davis], Feb. 1, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 5, frame 815; Langston Hughes, “The International Brigades,” n.p., Nov. 1937, 1-5, Patterson papers, box 18, fol. 28; Louise Thompson, “unpublished memoirs: chapter 7, “Paris Conference and Spain,” 3, Patterson papers, box 20, fol. 6; Louise Thompson, “Black Warriors,” 1-5, n.p., n.d., Patterson papers, box 10, fol. 11; and Louise Thompson, interview by Linda Burnham, March 2, 1988 and March 9, 1988, 16, Patterson papers, box 27, fol. 11.

Harlem physicians to provide seventy-five hospitable beds and other medical supplies for Ethiopia.<sup>35</sup>

In March 1937, she sailed from New York with the second American Medical Unit to Republican Spain. Along with twelve nurses and physicians on board, Kea was the only African American. In the village of Villa Paz near Madrid, she assisted in converting the former summer home of King Alfonso XIII into a hospital. In addition to caring for homeless peasants, Kea also assisted the twice-wounded Garland. “Garland,” Kea remembered, “could never be convinced that he was wounded and not fit for the front lines.” In April, Kea, along with other doctors and nurses, were called to the front to set-up a field hospital near Pueblo De. Wounded patients would pour in by the hundreds. On one occasion, the Nationalist’s flew planes over the hospital and opened fire. The next morning, the Republican lines had broken, and all were forced to evacuate. Separated from her unit, Kea hitchhiked her way alone to re-join her unit at the American medical compound outside Barcelona. In March, 1938, Kea was badly wounded in a bombing raid. Her injury reportedly left her unable to continue her work, and she was furloughed home that same month.<sup>36</sup>

Volunteers like Garland and Kea were the principle inspirations for Hughes’s anti-fascist poetry. Written under the pseudonym “Johnny,” Hughes’s “Post Card from Madrid Addressed to Alabama” dramatized the war’s implications for Jim Crow. “Folks over here don’t treat me like white folks. When I was home they treated me like they treatin’ you,” Langston ventriloquized

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<sup>35</sup> Thyra Edwards, “Salaria Kea: A Negro nurse in Republican Spain,” (New York: Negro Committee to Aid Spain with the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, 1938), n.p., reprinted by Marion Merriman Wachtel, *Bay Area Post*, Feb. 6, 1977, 15-17, 24, 29-30, 34-35. Though the pamphlet was published anonymously, it is widely accepted that Edwards was the author. See, for example, Walt Carmon, “A Dramatic Story of a Negro Nurse in Spain,” *Daily Worker*, Sept. 7, 1938, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Salaria Kea, quoted by Edwards, “Salaria Kea,” n.p.

Johnny. “I don’t think things ‘ll ever be like that again,” he postulated, “I done met up with folks who’ll fight for me just like I’m fightin’ now for Spain.” Hughes’s folk poetry illustrated the impact of African-American soldiers’ role in the global Popular Front. In Spain, “The most interesting Negroes one meets,” Hughes explained, “are not prize-fighters, or writers, or performers in the theaters. They’re Negroes with uniforms on...Negroes you never heard of in any book.”<sup>37</sup>

For Garland, engaging in violent resistance to fascism was emancipatory. “We Negroes who have been in Spain,” he spoke through a radio broadcast in Madrid, “are a great deal luckier than those back home.” Unlike African Americans in the U.S., “We have been able to strike back, in a way that hurts, at those who for years have pushed us from pillar to post.” By equating the Spanish insurgents with the forces of Jim Crow, Garland rejoiced in fighting “back at the counterparts of those who have been grinding us down back home.” “We Negroes know what oppression is,” he proclaimed, “That’s why we must fight this thing wherever and whenever it crops up.” Transcending divisions of race, Garland maintained that the fight required a United Front of all soldiers. Emphasizing this point, Garland retold the battle at Villanueva del Pardillo. In order to survive the onslaught of shells, all survived “because we stuck together,” and “that’s why we will continue to go ahead together...whatever our color or nationality.”<sup>38</sup>

Louise Thompson seconded Garland’s call for a United Front in the defense of democracy. “It is not only a civil war—not only a war against Franco,” she proclaimed, “but a fight to keep fascism from engulfing a people for whom democracy is dearer than life itself.”

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<sup>37</sup> Langston Hughes, “Post Card from Madrid Addressed to Alabama,” n.p., Sept. 1937, Patterson papers, box 17, fol. 17 and Langston Hughes, “Negroes in Spain,” n.p., Oct. 1937, box 18, fol. 28.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Garland, radio broadcast at Station EAR, Madrid, Spain, Aug. 27, 1937, 1-3, Patterson papers, box 10, fol. 11 and “U.S. Race Men to Broadcast From Madrid,” *Chicago Defender*, Sept. 4, 1937, 5.

Despite the vast ocean separating Spain from black America, “They are fighting oppression, and I come from a people whose oppression is centuries old.” The bonds between the Spanish democrats and black American soldiers were forged over their shared outrage of fascist Italy’s massacre of the Ethiopian people. She explained, “I am a part of their feeling against the Italian fascism which has participated in the devastation of their country, because we in America felt keenly the devastation by the same forces of Ethiopia.” By drawing on the shared fight, Thompson warned of the perilous results a victory of Franco’s forces would bring. “All of us who are minority peoples are victimized by fascism,” and, thus, “have a duty of supporting this fight...It is our common struggle.”<sup>39</sup>

In a celebration of the Brigade’s first year anniversary, thousands of Spaniards paid tribute to Garland at a town hall-style meeting in a church outside Valencia. Addressing Garland, the mayor declared, “You have worked well for us, and in the true spirit of our revolution. We villagers have struggled here many years in the defense of the rights of working people.” Espousing solidarity among all races, a local delegate of the Spanish Popular Front declared, “In republican Spain, and in our village, there are no races, no parties. We are all anti-fascists!” Responding to the accolades, Garland expressed hope for Spain’s future. “You...must work continually and study continually to be of greater use in the fight,” he declared to the villagers. “Then, knowing as you do know in your hearths that you are right,” he proclaimed, “we will win!” Garland then turned to the troops. Sensing fear from these men who have yet to experience battle, he encouraged them to face the enemy with determination. “Answer my comradeship in this fashion,” he told them, “When you go to the front, don’t go with the thought that you are

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<sup>39</sup> Louise Thompson, radio speech at Station EAR, Madrid, Spain, Aug. 27, 1937, 1-2, Patterson papers, box 13, fol. 9.

going there to die. Go instead with the thought that you are going to live—to live to create a better life for us all!”<sup>40</sup>

Another prominent black feminist in Spain was social worker and NNC National Executive officer Thyra Edwards. Under the auspices of the Social Workers’ Committee for Aid to Spain, Edwards observed the Loyalist Government’s housing and education programs. The vast majority of Spanish children separated from their families were evacuated from Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia and housed in the “Delegation of Colonies,” a program organized by volunteers for the Ministry of Education. In order to avoid air raids, the colonies were built in mountainous regions. Parallel to the communal homes project, the Spanish government recalled teachers fighting in the front lines created schools in the colonies. Edwards spent considerable time in a palace-turned communal home built high up in the Pyrennes Mountains. The conversion of high-end palaces and villas into communal homes for children, she discovered, was common. “In visiting these children homes,” Edwards told Richard Wright, “I never visited so many palaces and former summer villas in all my life.” These colonies, however, were not immune from the conflict. Salaria Kea recalled a Nationalist bombing raid on a children’s colony in Barcelona in which 150 children were killed. Along with others, Kea dug the earth to retrieve the dismembered bodies.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the carnage she witnessed, Edwards was inspired by the government’s public housing program being conducted in the major cities. The project was two-fold: to rebuild homes destroyed in air raids and to begin a long-term program of raising the standard of living for Loyalist Spaniards. An inspired Edwards envisioned building a public housing project funded

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<sup>40</sup> All quoted by Hughes, “Lieutenant Walter Garland in Command,” 4-5.

<sup>41</sup> Thyra J. Edwards to John P. Davis, Oct. 2, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 13, frame 29; Richard Wright, “Negro Social Worker Hails Housing, Education in Spain,” *Daily Worker*, Nov. 12, 1937, 2; and Edwards, “Salaria Kea,” n.p.

solely by black Americans and organizations. A fervent Edwards suggested, “We could name it after one of our own great fighters for liberation,” such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, or Frederick Douglass. For her, the link between democratic rights for Spaniards with social justice for African Americans was grounded in the belief that all victims of oppression share a space in the global resistance to fascism. “I feel in this way,” she declared, “the American Negro could actively participate in this world-wide struggle for the preservation of democracy in a world where democracy is under attack everywhere. At the present I can’t think of anything more fitting.”<sup>42</sup>

After three weeks documenting the carnage of Spain, Louise Thompson, her eventual husband and communist lawyer William L. Patterson, Dr. A. William Wilberforce, and Thyra Edwards departed for Paris to attend the Congress against Racism and Anti-Semitism. For over a year, John P. Davis desired the NNC to help organize an “International Congress for Negroes” to take place in France. The conference was, thus, an opportune moment for the black American delegates to outline the relationship between Spanish Nationalism with Jim Crow. Edwards described the gathering an ideal “inter-national commission concerned with freedom and democracy for all kinds of people.” For her, Spain was “symbolic of all the rest of us. And certainly there isn’t going to be any freedom and equality for Negroes until and unless there is a free world.” Louise Thompson described the situation even more vociferously, “It is only after one has seen how fascism destroys all beauty and culture, kills innocent people, destroys their homes, leaves tens of thousands of little children without parents,” when, “one becomes steeled in the determination that fascism is a blight on the world which must itself be destroyed.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Wright, “Negro Social Worker Hails Housing, Education in Spain,” 2.

<sup>43</sup> Louise Thompson, interview by unknown, June 9 and 18, 1987, n.p., Patterson papers, box 27, fol. 9; John P. Davis to George Riand, May 23, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 8, frame 543;

## A Violent or Non-Violent Popular Front?

Throughout August and September, a group of French activists called for a World Rally Against Racism and Anti-Semitism in response to the numerous Nuremburg rallies sponsored by the Nazi Party. Though the congress encompassed hundreds of delegates representing almost seventy nations stretching from Algeria to Palestine, the purpose of the gathering was to specifically address “the work of international fascism.” The French organizers maintained that the democratic governments’ policy of neutrality permitted fascism’s growth. Without resistance, the committee argued, fascism will thrive. “Wherever it gains strengths and wherever it develops,” they argued, “hatred and intolerance grows.” The congress was a stark reminder for Louise Thompson that any nation was susceptible to fascism, even under the protection of a Popular Front regime. In a park outside her hotel, for instance, she conversed with the son of the hotel manager. The young man expressed to Patterson his infatuation with fascism and its proposed solutions for ridding the world of Jews, the true culprits for the current geo-political instability. “I was amazed to see a young Frenchman with this kind of ideology.” The embrace of fascism by every-day European citizens, Patterson concluded, was a dangerous portent for the U.S.<sup>44</sup>

For the congress delegates, the simultaneous rise of anti-black violence and anti-Semitism was not a coincidence. President of the Socialist Party in Senegal Lamine Gueye spoke

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“Racial Unity Sought at Confab,” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 4, 1937; and Thyra J. Edwards to Claude A. Barnett, Oct. 15, 1937, Claude A. Barnett Papers (“Barnett papers” hereafter), box 137, fol. 15, Chicago History Museum: Research Center.

<sup>44</sup> Louise T. Patterson, interview by Linda Burnham, Feb. 19, 1988 and Feb. 24, 1988, 25, Patterson papers, box 27, fol. 10; International Executive Committee, “Program of the Congress of September 1937,” 1937, box 10, fol. 10; “An Effort to Assemble Must be Made!: Manifesto of Second World Congress Against racism and Anti-Semitism,” 1, Sept. 10-13, 1937, Patterson papers, box 10, fol. 10; “American Problem to be Discussed at World Congress Against Racism, Anti-Semitism in Paris,” *Daily Worker*, Aug. 26, 1937, 2; “Paris Meet Hits Vicious Race Propaganda,” *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 2, 1937, 2.

to the dire need for members of all races and democratic institutions to form a wall of resistance to the “rapidly expanding power and influence of the race-baiting authoritarian governments led by Hitler and Mussolini.” Max Braum, the exiled leader of the Germans in the Saar basin, followed Gueye. Braum warned that Nazi Germany’s persecution of the Jewish population had extended to “peoples of Negro extraction.” Not every delegate, however, supported a two-front fight against European fascism with colonialism.. During the debate of resolutions, a minority claimed that the struggle against reaction was taking place in Europe and any attention towards colonialism—and, thus, anti-black violence—was a secondary concern. William L. Patterson roundly defeated this move. The African Diaspora provided firm numbers in the anti-fascist resistance, and any such resolution would isolate Africans and black American from the Popular Front. Patterson, as well as all black delegates, was self-evidently alarmed by the Nationalist forces’ deployment of Moroccan soldiers (derisively referred to as “Moors”). Going even further, Patterson warned that the Ethiopians, now under Italian control, were now more vulnerable to fascist propaganda. If colonialism and fascism were addressed with equal measure, black delegates could return home and carry a message of specific tasks needed to advance the democratic movement.<sup>45</sup>

At the urging of the black American delegates, the congress concluded that racial integration in the U.S., as well as other non-fascist nations, was vital to the global Popular Front’s success. The U.S., congress Chair G.A. Tedessee concluded, was highly susceptible to fascism because of its “ethnological groups that...tend to confine themselves within their particularities.” The “economic and demographic potentialities make them the indispensable field of expansion for the totalitarian states,” as well. The task for the Americans was to “help

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<sup>45</sup> “Race Unity Sought at Confab,” *Atlanta Daily World*, Oct. 4, 1937, 1 and “Paris Confab Asks Unity of Races; Notables Present,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 9, 1937, 11.



them to come to know each other better and show them the absurdity and the danger of theories which aim at raising barriers between the different human families.” The American delegates’ contribution to anti-fascism would also “be so much the more effectual because they possess by their number, by their wealth, and by their geographical situation, the means to smoke the liars of the promoters of racism.”<sup>46</sup>

Louise Thompson departed Paris just in time for the second annual NNC convention set for middle October in Philadelphia. An energetic John P. Davis estimated the number of delegates at 1,200 with more than 4,000 spectators attending each day. Unlike Chicago, the discussion of fascism broadened exponentially. Inspired by Thompson’s work in Spain, NNC Secretary Max Yergan wrote, “I am not sure how fully people realize that a victory of the Loyalist forces in Spain will be a blow to the Fascist regime in Ethiopia and the spread of Fascism in other parts of Africa.” Yergan impressed upon Thompson the importance for all African Americans “to be increasingly better informed on the real issues in the international situation.” For Yergan, only by preserving as well as spreading democratic institutions will the “Means to human improvement” triumph over fascism. This would be the main topic of discussion at Philadelphia.<sup>47</sup>

The date for the Philadelphia convention marked an opportune moment for the NNC. Various campaigns for the Republican cause as well as the return of ALB soldiers recently raised the issue of Spain into the black public consciousness. Less than three weeks before the convention, for instance, an ALB soldier described fascism’s impact on global black radicalism

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<sup>46</sup> G.A. Tedesee, “Report: The Organization of the Struggle Against Racism and Anti-Semitism,” n.d. [Oct. 1937], 1, Patterson papers, box 10, fol. 10.

<sup>47</sup> “Delegates Attending National Negro Congress,” *Afro-American*, Oct. 23, 1937, 17; John P. Davis to Morris Rodman, March 1, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 525-528; and Max Yergan to Louise Thompson, Oct. 20, 1937, Thompson papers, box 13, fol. 9.

in an editorial for the *Chicago Defender*. The Nationalist insurgency, Japan's invasion of Manchuria, Italy's occupation of Ethiopia, and Nazi Germany's persecution of the Jewish minority were the "logical sequences of Fascist imperialism." In the U.S., black Americans "will be the first to be visited by the plague." The question for all was "shall Fascism, which has enslaved, pauperized and degraded its own people...be allowed to continue to spread its rule abroad and destroy the freedom of other peoples?" Or, "Shall the democratic and liberty-loving people of the world unite to defend their own security, and halt the onward march of Fascism?" This was the question the convention delegates sought to answer.<sup>48</sup>

The Spanish Civil War also made Philadelphia an ideal host for the NNC's convention. Local activist Morris H. Wickman, for instance, was a member of the ALB's Philadelphia Company. In his youth, Wickman attended the Tuskegee Institute. Upon completion of his education, he joined the CPUSA and studied at Moscow University during the early 1930s. Sometime between 1935 and 1936, he returned to Philadelphia and joined the local NNC council. Here, he played an active part in the defense of Angelo Herndon and the Scottsboro Nine. By February 1937, he set sail for Spain. After suffering from bullet wounds in September, Wickman rested at a camp run by a first aid corps while his regiment advanced towards the town of Brunette. During the advancement, a detachment of insurgents raided the camp and killed Wickman, along with the rest of the injured, reportedly with bayonets.<sup>49</sup>

While the NNC maintained the Black Nationalist qualities that partially shaped its internationalism in 1935 and 1936, the context surrounding Wickman's death reinforced the impetus in forming a global United Front of workers and soldiers of all skin colors to join the

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<sup>48</sup> Sterling Rochester, "Race Must Help Spain to Rescue Freedom," *Chicago Defender*, Sept. 25, 1937, 24.

<sup>49</sup> J. Robert Smith, "Reds to Honor War Victim," *Afro-American*, Sept. 4, 1937, 13.

struggle to defend democracy. Commander Garland and Commissar Frank Rogers wrote the Philadelphia delegates, “Greetings from Negro and white Americans fighting in Spain.” “Unity and organization,” the proclaimed, “wins progress and defeats fascism.” Attesting to his own commitment to fuse the Loyalist cause with the black freedom struggle, John P. Davis invited the Popular Front organization North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy to place advertisements in the NNC convention’s approximately 150-page program. Davis’s declaration of solidarity with the Spanish Loyalists evidenced a deep conviction among NNC organizers on the mission to stop fascism where it stood.<sup>50</sup>

The Spanish Civil War triggered an intense conversation on the nature of violence as a tactic of resistance. Outlining a revolutionary framework in his speech, James W. Ford analogized the liberal and conservative criticism of the NNC with the abolitionists’ condemnation of John Brown almost eighty years prior. “In his day,” Ford declared, “John Brown was looked upon as a crazy man—an extremist. He was executed as a criminal.” Yet it was John Brown’s call to armed uprising, Ford proclaimed, that paved the path for the American Civil War and the subsequent abolition of slavery. Brown “was not afraid of the conclusion which was particularly dangerous to the slave holder—armed force to abolish slavery.” What was needed more than ever, he declared, was to emulate the radical abolitionist movement.<sup>51</sup>

It was not, however, Brown’s violent tactics Ford encouraged the delegates to revitalize. Instead, he highlighted Brown’s commitment to the United Front. “He knew,” Ford spoke, “that only the liberation of the Negroes could provide a basis for substantial freedom of white labor.”

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<sup>50</sup> John P. Davis to *Philadelphia Independent*, Sept. 15, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 10, frame 530; Walter Garland and Frank Rogers, *Publication of the National Negro Congress*, n.p.; and John P. Davis to North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, Sept. 17, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 11, frame 911.

<sup>51</sup> James W. Ford, *Publication of the National Negro Congress*, n.p.

With the militant workers' movement rising, the times necessitated "united action" for all those who supported organized labor, civil rights, and democracy. Fascism's intervention in Ethiopia and Spain, along with the Japanese empire lurking over East Asia, required a "joint policy" among black Americans with all forces of social justice. "Our best friends," he insisted, "are the white working people and the progressive middles class." A United Front, with the support of intellectuals and progressives, contained the necessary ingredients for resisting fascism. This was the lesson, Ford concluded, to be learned from Brown's legacy. "John Brown symbolized the unity of the Negro and white people," he declared.<sup>52</sup>

The keynote speech delivered by President A. Philip Randolph elaborated on the duality between violence and non-violence. On the home front, spoke Randolph, "true liberation can be acquired and maintained only when the Negro people possess power" and that power encompassed organizing every social aspect of black life: "In the mills and mines, on the farms, in the factories, in churches, in fraternal organization, in homes, colleges, women's clubs, student groups, trade unions, tenants' leagues, in cooperation guilds, political organizations and civil rights organizations." The collapse of capitalism, the rise of fascism, the persistence of imperialism, and the threat of world war brought forth the "need of re-examination, re-evaluation and re-appraisal" of American political-economic institutions. Only through this radical restructuring will workers benefit from the fruits of their own labor and minorities attain equal citizenship rights.<sup>53</sup>

Like Ford, the President's demand for united action was not a call to arms. "The Congress does not seek to change the American form of government," Randolph assured, "but rather to implement it with new and rugged morals and spiritual sinews to make its democratic

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<sup>52</sup> Ford, *Publication of the National Negro Congress*, n.p.

<sup>53</sup> Randolph, *Publication of the National Negro Congress*, n.p.

traditions...more permanent and abiding.” Violent revolution failed to provide minorities and workers a positive platform for change. “The Negro people need more than a statement of negative purpose,” he emphasized. Attesting to the original intent of the black Popular Front, Randolph reiterated the NNC’s non-partisan approach. The congress was neither Communist nor Socialist, let alone Republican or Democratic, but “embraces all sections of opinion among the Negro people. It does not seek to impose any issue of philosophy upon any organization or group, but rather to unite varying and various organizations.” The congress, thus, sought to foment a consensus for radical domestic reform among all unions and anti-racist organizations.<sup>54</sup>

Connecting workers and minorities’ struggle at home with the global scene, Randolph noted that even the “honored democracies” of Great Britain, France, and the United States “are under constant, menacing stress and strain of tendencies toward the rule of fascist force.” The liberal capitalists powers have betrayed the “defenseless women and children of the legitimate Loyalists government of Spain [who are being] massacred in shocking barbarism.” Armed self-defense abroad was necessary because “a world flood of fascism may not be far behind, and imperial free peoples everywhere.” Emphasizing this point, Randolph concluded with an anti-fascist and anti-imperialist battle cry:

Forward with the destruction of the imperialist domination and oppression of the great peoples of Africa! Forward to the abolition of the fascist rule of Italy over the noble independent, and unconquerable men of Ethiopia! Forward the creation of a united, free and independent China! Forward to victory of the valiant loyalist armies over the fascist brigands of Franco! Long live the cause of World Peace! Long live the spirit of world democracy!<sup>55</sup>

In the event of a second world war against fascism, some within the black Popular Front encouraged the African American youth to join the military. At the second annual conference of

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<sup>54</sup> Randolph, *Publication of the National Negro Congress*, n.p.

<sup>55</sup> Randolph, *Publication of the National Negro Congress*, n.p.

the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) the following April, Howard University's Rayford W. Logan proclaimed, "We see in the world today a struggle for the maintenance of Democracy," which "has been preserved through forces of arms." Directing his ire towards the student youth, he ridiculed the "peace experts" in the universities who deny the moral righteousness of war. "Colored American youths," he spoke, "living in a dream world of peace should therefore re-adjust their thinking to the possible necessity of going to war to preserve Democracy, however imperfect and incomplete it may be." Going further, Logan connected racial oppression under the Axis Powers to the American South. As long as this region remained dominated by semi-feudalism and the Democratic Party, "The South politically is as fascist as is Italy or Germany." A victory against fascism abroad, he insisted, would empower the struggle at home.<sup>56</sup>

The NNC's seminal leadership in black radical internationalism firmly supplanted the CPUSA's involvement into a secondary role. Esteemed Marxist scholar of African-American history James S. Allen, for instance, deemphasized much of the CPUSA's civil rights policies of the 1920s and early 1930s. For Allen, the NNC epitomized an independent and organic mobilization of black America. "The National Negro Congress," he wrote, "offers the opportunity for uniting the vast majority of the Negro people in an anti-fascist democratic front together with labor, the farmer and middle class progressives." CPUSA President Earl Browder similarly acknowledged that "the great majority of the Negro people" have been "aroused notably through the work of the National Negro Congress." Seminal communist lawyers Vito Marcantonio and William L. Patterson also described the NNC's work as the "important step

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<sup>56</sup> Rayford W. Logan, *Official Proceedings: Second All-Southern Negro Youth Conference, Chattanooga, TENN* (Richmond, VA: SNYC, 1938), 15-16, Edward Strong Papers ("Strong papers" hereafter), box 167-1, fol. 15, Howard University: Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

forward in [the] vital American task of stopping lynchings and winning civil democratic and economic rights for the Negro people.” By acknowledging the NNC as the “best instrument” for black liberation, the communists resigned themselves in taking a secondary role in the NNC.<sup>57</sup>

This is not to say that the CPUSA lacked influence at the Philadelphia convention. On the contrary, of the five keynote speakers of the convention’s “War and Fascism” panel included speakers representing the CPUSA, Pan-African organizations, and the black religious community. The eclectic ideological makeup of the speakers spoke to the strong continuity of a black Popular Front of communists, Pan-Africanists, and religious leaders that originated during the Hands off Ethiopia Movement more than two years prior. Harry F. Ward of the American League Against War and Fascism (ALAWF), C.S. Chang of the American Friends of the Chinese People (AFCP), Clarence Hathaway of the *Daily Worker*, Louise Thompson, and William L. Patterson represented the communist faction. The Pan-Africanists included New York’s Reverend William L. Imes of the United Aid for Peoples of African Descent (UAPAD) and personal representative of exiled Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie Dr. Malaku E. Bayen of the World Ethiopian Federation (WEF). President Norman Thomas served as the SPUSA’s sole emissary.<sup>58</sup>

John P. Davis did not deliberately minimize the socialists’ involvement. In the summer, he invited State Secretary of the SPUSA’s New England District and head of the Negro Work

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<sup>57</sup> Vito Marcantonio and William L. Patterson to the National Negro Congress, NNC papers, part I, reel 11, frame 691; Earl Browder, “Building the Communist Party Within the Democratic Front,” *Daily Worker*, Dec. 15, 1938, 6; and James S. Allen, “Negro Liberation” (New York: International Publishers, 1938), 30, 38, 41, and 46, Records of the Special Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1944, the Dies Committee (“Dies committee records” hereafter), box 89, fol. Negro front organization and pamphlets on subject of Negro, National Archives and Records Administration: Center for Legislative Archives.

<sup>58</sup> “The Sessions of the Second National Negro Congress Meeting in Philadelphia,” *Daily Worker*, Oct. 19, 1937, 2.

Commission Alfred B. Lewis to participate. Davis even inquired Lewis's interest in joining the NNC's National Executive Committee. Adding the Caucasian Lewis to the all-black committee would add much needed diversity, Davis believed. Lewis, like most SPUSA members, took offense to the communists' involvement in the NNC, a group who's past criticisms of the SPUSA's civil rights platforms were scathing. "The silly attacks," Lewis complained to Davis, "Does not help to increase the enthusiasm of our organization for the Congress." Though Lewis declined Davis's invitation, he latter expressed amazement over the convention's success and expressed hope for closer cooperation by donating \$250 to the NNC's treasury. "You are certainly doing a splendid piece of work," Lewis wrote Davis after the convention, "Another year we will be in the National Negro Congress somewhat more wholeheartedly I hope, and will have a larger number of delegates present as a result."<sup>59</sup>

The "War and Fascism" panel unanimously agreed on the parallels between the Axis Powers and "domestic fascism." Norman Thomas incited consternation, however, upon outlining what he considered the most viable tools on combating fascism abroad. Articulating an orthodox interpretation of imperialism, Thomas proclaimed "The root of war is not Fascism," but rather, "the unfair practices of the capitalists in industry and their failure to lay the sure foundations for peace." Like the First World War, the crises in Europe were primarily driven by the capitalist class and, thus, did not justify American intervention. A militant pacifist, Thomas maintained that the foreign policy of collective security would threaten American lives by pulling the nation into another imperial conflict. The most viable anti-war tactic was to "put the brakes on

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<sup>59</sup> Alfred B. Lewis to John P. Davis, July 23, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 10, frame 845; John P. Davis to Alfred B. Lewis, July 26, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 10, frame 847-848; Alfred B. Lewis to John P. Davis, Oct. 11, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 10, frame 890; and John P. Davis to Alfred B. Lewis, July 20, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 10, frame 920.



capitalistic governments” by expanding President Roosevelt’s Neutrality Law from Spain to all warring parties as well as conducting boycotts against Axis-made products, especially Japan.<sup>60</sup>

Clarence Hathaway and Harry Ward expressed displeasure with Thomas’s disavowal of collective security, support for the neutrality law, and obscuration of fascism. Though Hathaway agreed with Thomas that “the roots of war lie in the capitalist system,” he also reminded Thomas that the powers currently waging war “Are precisely those nations that are under Fascist rule.” The anti-fascists countries, both capitalist and communist, must “employ every resource to stop these wars before they spread into a general world war that will involve everyone one of us.” Ward similarly warned that the global crisis would end “either for a period of Fascist control of the world, or for the development of peace and of freedom through increasing organization of democracy throughout the world.” Hathaway and Ward therefore insisted that the NNC must arouse the American people into supporting collective security, or what Ward described as “collective action of the democratic people of the world.” This did not necessitate an American declaration of war, they maintained, but rather a diplomatic alliance with the Soviet Union, China, Spain, Ethiopia and other nations most vulnerable to the Axis Powers.<sup>61</sup>

C.S. Chang magnified the importance of collective security by linking the black freedom struggle with the people of China. Speaking directly to the black audience, Chang declared, “The Chinese people...are whole heartedly with you.” Chang praised the NNC for its support of the Ethiopians and Spaniards but pleaded with them to address the Asian conflict more thoroughly, “Will you not protest against such an outrage and come to the aid of the Chinese people who are fighting valiantly against the Japanese invaders?” Intimately familiar with support for Japan

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<sup>60</sup> Norman Thomas, *Publication of the National Negro Congress*, n.p.

<sup>61</sup> Harry Ward, *Publication of the National Negro Congress*, n.p. and Clarence Hathaway, *Publication of the National Negro Congress*, n.p.

within some black circles, Chang warned that while “the Japanese imperialists claimed to be the protectors of the darker races” they simultaneously ally with Nazi Germany, “the persecutor of the Jewish people and the preacher of the so-called ‘Nordic’ superiority.” “How can anyone be blood brother of Mussolini and Hitler,” Chang rhetorically asked, “and at the same time the protector of darker races.”<sup>62</sup>

Max Yergan directly challenged the propagated distinction between the geo-political implications of war in East Asia with that of Europe and Africa. He targeted what he derisively described as “Japanese agents” in the U.S. who “have sought to convince colored America of the justness of Japan’s war.” The promulgation of Japan as the leader of the “World’s colored races” concealed, if not justified, the exploitation of Chinese peasants and workers. The substitution of western imperialism for Japanese imperialism, therefore, “Cannot possibly be of service to the millions of Asia.” Japan’s alliance with the anti-Semitic regime of Nazi Germany and Ethiopia’s oppressor fascist Italy stultified its racial uplift propaganda into “The greatest possible insult to the intelligence of Negroes in America and Africa.” Japan’s conquest of East Asia has, in fact, “Served to strengthen the world forces of fascist oppression” equal to Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco thereby empowering the “menace to negro minorities and majorities in America and Africa.” Only through the struggle against all of the Axis Powers can the black Popular Front “become an inspiration and bulwark to struggling peoples everywhere.” “On this basis, proclaimed Yergan, “we may see the action of Japan in its true light.”<sup>63</sup>

Yergan’s endorsement of collective security between the United States and China was a sharp rebuttal against prominent African-American supporters of Japanese imperialism. The

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<sup>62</sup> C.S. Chang, *Publication of the National Negro Congress*, n.p.

<sup>63</sup> Max Yergan, “An Answer to Japanese Propaganda Among American Negroes,” *China Today*, May 1939, 1-11, Papers of Max Yergan (“Yergan papers” hereafter), box 206-5, fol. 8, Howard University: Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

NNC particularly targeted W.E.B. Du Bois. Perturbed by accusations of receiving financial support from the Japanese government, Du Bois insisted, “I have never received a cent from Japan or from any Japanese and yet I believe in Japan.” Du Bois’s romanticism for Japan’s military conquests, a sentiment shared by a number of African Americans, stemmed from the belief that Japan was a true foe of western imperialism and white supremacy.<sup>64</sup> “It is not that I sympathize with China less,” Du Bois reasoned, “But that I hate white European and American propaganda, theft and insult more.” Echoing Japan’s war propaganda, he declared “I believe in Asia for the Asiatics [*sic*].” In a drastic rebuttal of the Popular Front, Du Bois insinuated, “Despite the hell of war and the fascism of capital, I see in Japan the best agent for this end.”<sup>65</sup>

Upon the panel’s conclusion, the delegates adopted a series of foreign policy proposals. In a possible acquiesce to Norman Thomas and other interventionist-skeptics, the congress favored collective security but characterized it as a “peace policy.” Drawing on the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, the NNC called for the outlawing of war as a means for solving international disputes and the punishment of nations that violate this pact by denying them credits as well as halting the sale of war materials. On the East Asian front, the congress favored the Nine-Power Treaty, the 1922 agreement by the western nations to respect China’s territorial integrity and boycotting Japanese-made products in punishment for violating this treaty. Aside from the militant support for the Spanish loyalists, the resolutions, almost verbatim, reflected

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<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895-1945* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2000); Gerald Horne, *Race War!: White Supremacy and the Japanese Attack on the British Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Gerald Horne, *Facing the Rising Sun African American, Japan, and the Rise of Afro-Asian Solidarity* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); and Chris Dixon, *African Americans and the Pacific War, 1941-1945: Race, Nationality, and the Fight for Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>65</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois to Unknown [John P. Davis], Feb. 25, 1939, NNC papers, part I, reel 16, frame 421.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Quarantine Speech" delivered in Chicago less than two weeks prior. The delegates, in fact, expressed "enthusiastic support" for President Roosevelt's stance against the nation's prevalent isolationist impulse.<sup>66</sup>

Thaddeus Battle read with joy about the convention while resting in his tent just a few miles from Madrid. Though safe from harm, Battle and Langston Hughes could hear the rumble of artillery and exploding mines only a few miles away. Described by Hughes as a "mild-mannered, quiet young man," Battle studied medicine at Howard University prior to his arrival. During his time as a student, he helped organize the local NNC council before joining the ALB. Inspired by the gathering in Philadelphia, Battle spoke to Hughes, "Our students must take a more active interest in labor problems, in the efforts of colored workers to better their conditions." Drawing connections with his experience fighting fascism first-hand to the American crisis, Battle warned, "At home...the forces of reaction can so easily use colored workers as a decoy to keep labor from achieving unity. That makes it easier for them to bring about a regime of repression in real Fascist style."<sup>67</sup>

### **Global Humanitarianism**

On January 1938, John P. Davis held a conference in England alongside exiled Emperor Haile Selassie ensuring the world of "a vigorous struggle being waged by the people of Ethiopia to retain their freedom and independence." Reading with alarm of reports that U.S. government officials were debating the merits of recognizing Italy's territorial claims, Davis wrote Secretary of State Cordell Hull decrying such a decision as constituting a "direct violation" of President Roosevelt's "Quarantine Speech." Seeking assurance, Davis requested Secretary Hall to publicly

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<sup>66</sup> *Publication of the National Negro Congress*, n.p. and "Roosevelt's Speech," *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 16, 1937, 16.

<sup>67</sup> Langston Hughes, "Howard Man Fighting as Spanish Loyalist," *Afro-American*, Feb. 5, 1938, 5.

deny any such discussion. Defending Ethiopia two years after its military defeat won the NNC admiration throughout various circles in the black political community. A member of the Christian-inspired Ethiopian Foundation in Jacksonville, Florida wrote Davis, “The National Negro Congress is and shall be an instrument [*sic*] in the Divine, universal plan for Ethiopia, the Black World.” The NNC’s efforts convinced this activist that only “Men and women whose first consideration will be the assembling of the scattered race,” can the rights of “the one historical homestead designated by God” be saved.<sup>68</sup>

Despite the accolades the NNC received, geo-political developments in Europe sealed Ethiopia’s status as Italian property. In April, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain formally recognized Ethiopia’s conquest in return for a limited withdrawal of Italian troops from Spain. Standing before the House of Commons, Minister Chamberlain hailed his diplomatic agreement. “I am glad to think,” he spoke, “there are no differences between our two countries.” In response, the NNC protested the international communities’ abandonment of Ethiopia. “No one in America, or elsewhere,” Max Yergan thundered, “can safely evade the misery of the people of Africa.” After all, the NNC and its allies “regard as one the cause of peace and the struggle of the people of Ethiopia, Spain and China against their fascist attackers.” The European democracies’ prioritizing of friendship over hostility with the Rome-Berlin Axis, however, vastly curtailed the scope of the Hands off Ethiopia Movement. Consequently, the NNC was forced to search for other avenues of global protest.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> John P. Davis to Cordell Hall, Jan. 31, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 694 and J.H. Jones to John P. Davis, Feb. 10, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 752; J.J. Jones to unknown [John P. Davis], part I, reel 14, frame 752, all found in NNC papers.

<sup>69</sup> Arnaldo Cortest, “British Recognize Italy’s Conquest; Put Pact in Force,” *New York Times*, 1; Neville Chamberlain, quoted by “Chamberlain’s Remarks: The Italian Withdrawals Mussolini’s Action Hailed,” *New York Times*, Nov. 3, 1938, 15; Max Yergan to unknown [addressed as “Dear Friends”], NNC papers, part I, reel 15, frame 805; and “Protest League Action on

While the NNC began its proceedings in Philadelphia, Milton Herndon's Douglass Company slogged in the trenches in an attempt to re-take the Nationalist-occupied Fuentes de Ebro. The Political Commissars, the representative of the various international companies, were headquartered just a few miles away. Due to the heavy rain and pitch black of night, the commissars were unable to make contact. Unbeknownst to them, the company fell under "a regular rain of bullets" as they trudged three hundred meters in an attempt to place their machine guns on top of a slope. In full view of fire, one soldier was shot in the leg and another directly in the heart. Attempting to save the wounded soldier, Herndon crawled up the slope and was shot in both the head and the mouth. Battalion members Hjalmar Sankari and Aaron Johnson escaped the bullets by crouching in the trenches and hiding in roadside ditches away from the line of fire. Making their way to the commissars, the devastated soldiers described Herndon's fate to Langston Hughes. As they boarded a motor truck returning to battle, Hughes reflected on Angelo's brother. "He died not only to save another comrade, or another country," he wrote, "but for all of us in America." "He understood," wrote Hughes, "the connections between the enemy at home and the enemy in Spain: They are the same enemy."<sup>70</sup>

Approximately two weeks following Milton's death, the ALAWF implored the NNC to attend its People's Congress for Democracy and Peace in Pittsburgh. The fall of an iconic black youth activist's brother in Spain added impetus for the congress's participation. "For sixteen long months," an ALAWF official wrote, "the youth of Spain have been engaged in mortal conflict." "To prevent similar disasters from overtaking America," he implored, all anti-fascists must congregate in the name of "the preservation of peace and democracy." Answering the call,

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Ethiopia," *International Bulletin* (New York: International Committee on African Affairs, June, 1938), 1, NNC papers, part I, reel 15, frame 783-784.

<sup>70</sup> Langston Hughes, "Milt Herndon Died Trying to Rescue Wounded Pal," 2 and "Milton Herndon Dies in Loyalist Attack," *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 1937, 16.

twenty-two thousand people packed the Duquesne Garden to hear speakers from around the world. Congressmen John T. Bernard of Minnesota and Jerry J. O'Connell of Montana recently returned from Spain and pledged their support for the removal of the Spanish embargo. Spanish Ambassador to the U.S. Fernando de los Rios spoke to his Popular Front government's struggle. British Liberal Party member Louis Kerran and Professor Ch'ao Ting Chi depicted the Japanese empire's destruction of Shanghai. Synthesizing the lessons from each keynote speech, professor of theology Reinhold Niebuhr warned of the global "retreat of democracy before fascist imperialism." Other prominent speakers included U.S. ambassador to Germany George O. Perhsing and German communist Ludwig Renn.<sup>71</sup>

The politics of Jim Crow, however, lurked throughout the three-day convention. At the exclusive William Penn Hotel, four African-American delegates, including Angelo Herndon, were denied rooms. In protest, a group of white delegates threatened to withdrawal all reservations and staged a thirty-minute protest in the hotel lobby shouting "Equal Rights." James W. Ford and Bonita Williams of the Workers' Alliance were also denied a room at the Fort Pitt Hotel. Outside, 300 delegates halted traffic shouting "equal rights for every race." Morris Shappes of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) stood atop an automobile and spoke, "I have been denied my equal rights," because the hotel, "has forbidden me the right to sleep and eat in the same building with my colored brothers and sisters." "Something," he demanded, "has to be done to break the back of the monster called discrimination."<sup>72</sup> At the downtown Donahoe's Cafeteria, two black delegates were initially denied service along with fifteen white delegates.

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<sup>71</sup> James Lerner to unknown [addressed as "Dear Friend"], NNC papers, part 10, reel 10, frame 881; Metz T.P. Lochard, "22,000 Pack Conclave at Pittsburgh," *Chicago Defender*, Dec. 4, 1937, 3; and "Negro and White Youth Groups Back Peace Congress Nov. 26," *Daily Worker*, Nov. 2, 1937, 8.

<sup>72</sup> Morris Shappes, quoted by John G. Taylor, "Pickets Parade to Protest Local Hotel Race Bias," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Dec. 4, 1937, 1.

Enraged, hotel management demanded the police remove the black patrons. Instead, the officers forced hotel management to serve all. At the Ritz Hotel's café, a similar incident occurred until hotel management relented to the racially mixed patrons.<sup>73</sup>

An evidently fuming Max Yergan was heralded as "one of the great speakers" on the congress's third day at the Motor Square Garden. After painting a starkly vivid picture of war-torn Spain and China, Yergan turned his attention to what he described as the "Negro in the labor world." He spoke to the semi-enslavement of the native South African workers by the white supremacist regime as well as the conditions of workers in Trinidad and Haiti. As a part in the transnational resistance to labor exploitation, Yergan proclaimed the black American community has recognized "that the cause of democracy is the cause of the Negro." The liberation of the Spanish, Chinese, and West Indians was intertwined with black American emancipation. "The Negro recognizes that democracy must be achieved. He must fight and struggle for it because it cannot be hoped for."<sup>74</sup>

The People's Congress for Peace and Democracy reinforced the conception that the black freedom struggle against Jim Crow and the Popular Front's resistance to fascism were one and the same. In an op-ed of the *Chicago Defender*, the authors described the conference as an example of what a "well-meaning body of men and women can and will do when actuated by the compelling motives of democracy and universal brotherhood." Together, the delegates described the "tragedies which unfold themselves with unprecedented ferocity in Loyalist Spain and in China," but they also "did not hesitate to apply here at home the measures which will ultimately deter the growth of Fascism in America." The predominately white delegates protesting outside

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<sup>73</sup> Taylor, "Pickets Parade to Protest Local Hotel Race Bias," 1 and "Congress Delegates Break Down Bars at Donahoe's and at the Ritz Hotel," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Dec. 4, 1937, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Max Yergan, quoted by "Max Yergan Says Negro is Aroused," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Dec. 4, 1937, 6.



the William Penn Hotel “did then what other so-called proponents of democracy have not had the moral courage and intellectual honesty to do.” Had the democratic nations embrace the culture of unanimity demonstrated at Pittsburgh, “humanity might have been spared the agonies of wars brought about by Fascist imperialism.”<sup>75</sup>

Later that week, Milton Herndon’s memorial service was held at the St. James Presbyterian Church in New York. The diverse array of activists represented at the funeral embodied the essence of the black Popular Front. Attendance by CPUSA officials such as Angelo Herndon, Walter Garland, William L. Patterson, and many others testified to the communists’ commitment to the Spanish cause. Others such as A.L. King of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) attended as well. King’s close relationship with communists and other Popular Front organizations evidenced the Black Nationalist’s firm belief in the link between the struggles in Spain with that of Ethiopia. The religious community represented by Reverend Adam C. Powell and many others demonstrated the cultural of harmony as well. The editorial board of the *Chicago Defender*, however, delineated the most memorable lesson from Milton’s death. “Herndon focuses our attention...on the increasingly significant role that the black man is playing in world affairs,” the editorial wrote. For the warriors in the ALB, “Their sacrifices will have created new hopes, new spheres for the blacks who are treated as beasts of burden in their own country.”<sup>76</sup>

John P. Davis was unable to attend the funeral services. In late October, he set sail for Europe to document the conditions in Spain. His goal was to publicize the “weaknesses in the neutrality policy of the United States government toward Spain.” In a widely publicized meeting,

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<sup>75</sup> “The True Spirit of Democracy,” *Chicago Defender*, Dec. 18, 1937, 16.

<sup>76</sup> “Herndon Brother Killed in Spain is Memorialized,” *Afro American*, Dec. 4, 1937, 3 and “A Real Patriot,” *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 30, 1937, 16.

Davis conversed with Dolores Ibárruri, presenting him with a letter to deliver back home entitled “Solidarity of Two Peoples.” The bond forged between the two leaders was a seminal moment for the NNC. Quoted in the *Chicago Defender*, Davis declared from Spain, “In the years, 1861-1865, the United States was rent asunder by those forces which wished to stem progress and perpetuate the enslavement of the Negro.” The people of Spain are now “Undergoing a similar experience. A handful of Spanish Fascists...are attempting to perpetuate the enslavement of the Spanish people. But as the reactionaries were defeated in America, so shall they be defeated here in Spain.”<sup>77</sup>

During his tour, Davis visited the Republican army during the initial stages of the battle of Terule as well as American soldiers in the Arragon Hills. While encouraged by the “splendid morale” of the ALB, Davis expressed dismay over their poor equipment. After returning to the U.S. in late January, Davis wrote both President Roosevelt and Senator Key Pittman of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee. The letter expressed outrage over the Roosevelt Administration’s “inconsistent position” of placing an embargo against the Spanish Republicans while simultaneously ignoring Germany and Italy’s unfettered transport of arms and ammunitions to the Nationalists. “I have witnessed German planes bombing hospitals and civilians homes...I have seen with my own eyes Italian sea planes raid the civilian population.” Inaction on the part of the Roosevelt Administration made the United States, Davis charged, “Responsible in part for the wholesale slaughter of Spanish women and children.” The arms embargo was, thus, “a fascist-serving device costing the lives of scores of thousands of Spanish

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<sup>77</sup> John P. Davis to William Taylor, Feb. 26, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 15, frame 292; “Spain’s Woman Leader Praises Race Fighters,” *Chicago Defender*, Mar. 12, 1938, 24; and John P. Davis, quoted by “Ask Aid the Spanish Loyalists,” *Chicago Defender*, Mar. 5, 1938, 24.

people and endangering the peace of the world.” Only by lifting the arms embargo can President Roosevelt’s anti-fascist rhetoric “be made reality.”<sup>78</sup>

In order to bolster Davis’s humanitarian relief efforts, Tyra Edwards acted as a key liaison between the NNC and the Spanish Republican movement. While in Spain, Edwards suggested the Spanish government radio station EAR (the same station that aired Walter Garland and Louise Thompson’s speeches) write Davis requesting that the NNC publicize its broadcasts. Each morning, the station reported the latest war news, discussed featured stories, and interviewed political figures. Broadcast director Sydney Kurtz beseeched Davis, “It is the duty of all active antifascists and antifascist organizations to combat these forces wherever they rear themselves.” Intent on stressing the links between black Americans and Republican Spaniards, Kurtz wrote, “Knowing the progressive nature and the antifascist opinions of the National Negro Congress, I do not think that it is necessary for me to inform you that the very same forces that are now invading Spain and jeopardizing world peace have outraged the only free Negro nation in the world—Ethiopia.” The NNC responded, “We are, at all times, willing and ready to joins hands.”<sup>79</sup>

The congress’s most reliable partners in promoting the Spanish Republican movement came predominately from the CPUSA, its Popular Front affiliates, and black churches. In Norfolk, Virginia, for instance, seven Virginia-born soldiers were honored at the Second Calvary Baptist Church after returning home in January 1938. The purpose of the celebration was to form

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<sup>78</sup> John P. Davis to Gardner Jackson, Feb. 24, 1937, part I, reel 10, frame 148-149; John P. Davis to Senator Key Pittman, April 21, 1938, part 1, reel 14, frame 405-406; John P. Davis to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, April 19, 1939, April 19, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 536-537; and John P. Davis to Elizabeth Wilson, Mar. 25, 1938, part I, reel 15, frame 492, all found in NNC papers.

<sup>79</sup> Sydney Kurtz and Felix Albin to John P. Davis, Nov. 4, 1937, part I, reel 10, frame 755-756 and Kether McNeill to Sydney Kurtz, Nov. 24, 1937, part I, reel 10, frame 754, both found in NNC papers.

a humanitarian relief committee for soldiers still fighting in Spain. The main speakers included Reverend Roger Dales, James H. Parker of the SNYC, Alexander Wright of the IWO, and CPUSA officials Donald Burke and Carl Speat. In Harlem, thousands silently marched from the Mother AME Zion Church to the funeral processions of fallen soldier Douglass “Max” Roach. Reverend B. C. Robeson sermonized, “may we dedicate, may we concentrate ourselves to the most worthy cause for which Douglas Roach died. May we pray God to give us strength that we might take up the torch of liberty where he dropped it.” Pallbearers included both white and black ALB veterans including Walter Garland.<sup>80</sup>

By this time, the black freedom struggle’s contributions to Spanish Republicanism received international acclaim. Nancy Cunard, the British socialite and anti-racist activist, sat with Salaria Kea over coffee at a café in Valencia and discussed the importance of the conflict to black America. Hundreds of white soldiers fought side-by-side with blacks and sometimes served under black officers, Kea informed Cunard. They also discussed Kea’s recent marriage to the International Brigade soldier and Irishman Sean O’Reilly. Though an interracial couple like O’Reilly and Kea could not only socialize but fight together in Spain, Kea reminded Cunard, “I could not go South with him.” When discussing American racism in a separate interview, an incensed Kea professed, “Here I have been out fighting for democracy and freedom for a whole year and come back to the United States to face that!” Returning to a Jim Crow society after fighting in an integrated army as well as marrying Irishman in Spain only strengthened the black volunteers’ commitment to the struggle, Cunard found. “The American Negro volunteers

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<sup>80</sup> “Norfolkians Fighting in Spain Honored,” *New Journal and Guide*, Jan. 22, 1938, 2 and B.C. Robeson, quoted by “Bury Spanish War Hero with Highest Honor,” *New York Amsterdam*, Jul 23, 1938, 4.

realized,” she wrote, “that the first stage of the world-fight for racial justice lies right here now, in Spain.”<sup>81</sup>

Upon her return from Europe in February, Thyra Edwards joined the Popular Front organization known as the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy as a field organizer. Based predominately in New York, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., Edwards was tasked with energizing the slightly lethargic organization by conducting a nation-wide fundraiser to collect medical supplies for Spain. Accepting the task, Edwards organized what came to be known as the Negro People’s Committee. Here, she outlined a plan to tour the nation alongside Salaria Kea who returned in late May. With a \$250 endowment from Paul Robeson, plus another \$600 from the New York and Chicago committees, Edwards and Kea purchased an ambulance and traveled the nation to raise money for food, clothing, and medical supplies “as a gift from the Negro people of America.”<sup>82</sup>

The tour was also designed to pressure the government to lift the embargo. Through her own column “My Day,” First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt expressed support for the Spanish Republicans, detailing the suffering of Spanish civilians. Mayors in thirty cities from Dallas and Atlanta to Spokane and San Francisco joined with Mayor F. LaGuardia of New York in issuing a “world-wide protest against Franco and Mussolini’s brutal bombing and the merciless slaughter of Spain’s civilian population.” Congressmen Jerry O’Connell and John Bernard stood on the floor of Congress denouncing the Rome-Berlin Axis’s support to General Franco and demanded

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<sup>81</sup> Salaria Kea, quoted by Nancy Cunard, “Harlem Nurse Plays Heroic Role in Spain,” *Journal and Guide*, Jan. 22, 1938, 6; Salaria Kea, quoted by Marvel Cooke, “‘I Would Return to Spain If I Could,’ Nurse Says,” *New York Amsterdam*, May 21, 1938, 11; and Cunard, “Harlem Nurse Plays Heroic Role in Spain,” 6.

<sup>82</sup> Thyra Edwards to John P. Davis, July 30, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 13, frame 38-39; Thyra Edwards to unknown [addressed only as “Dear Friend”], Aug. 4, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 13, frame 43; and “Race Nurse Back from Spanish War,” *Chicago Defender*, May 28, 1938, 5.

the lifting of the embargo. An invigorated Edwards proclaimed that African Americans must join this progressive bloc and “protest against this and all injustice.” “Recall,” she reminded, “the similarity of the aggression in Spain to Italy’s invasion and destruction of Ethiopia.”<sup>83</sup>

In response, Paul Robeson, A. Philip Randolph, Max Yergan, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, William Pickens, and many others agreed to sponsor the ambulance tour. Edwards and Kea, however, were received minimal institutional support. In Washington, D.C., for instance, Edwards requested Davis and the local NNC council to “take the lead” in arranging for a public meeting and reception for her and Kea at Howard University’s Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall, the birthplace of the NNC. African-Americans, she insisted to Davis, must lead this effort. Edwards considered this a potential “nucleus for future work” and provide a “definite service” for the NNC’s internationalism. Searching for help, Davis solicited the support from the local chapter of the Spanish democracy committee. Instead, the committee insisted that Davis and the local NNC take the burden. However, most members of the NNC council were students and professors, and more than half were away for the summer. In the meantime, Davis was working tirelessly planning for a local conference on police brutality. In the absence of a sizable NNC rank-in-file, Davis solicited support from predominately middle class organizations but to no avail. “There is no NAACP, no Urban League, no Pan Hellenic, and no Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs,” a frustrated Davis wrote Edwards.<sup>84</sup>

Thyra Edwards’ difficulty in securing aid from the NNC in the Spanish Republic movement was emblematic of her larger struggles working with the majority-male national

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<sup>83</sup> Thyra Edwards to unknown [addressed only as “Dear Friend”], Aug. 4, 1938.

<sup>84</sup> Thyra Edwards to John P. Davis, July 30, 1938, part I, reel 13, frame 38-39; John P. Davis to Thyra Edwards, August 6, 1938, part I, reel 13, frame 40-41; John P. Davis to Thyra Edwards, Aug. 10, 1938, part I, reel 13, frame 47; and Thyra Edwards to John P. Davis, Aug. 9, 1938, part I, reel 13, frame 48, all found in NNC papers.

executive leadership. At the 1936 Chicago convention, Edwards did serve on various committees, playing a significant role in formulating a strategy for combating the “three-fold exploitation” of African American women workers. The congress resolved to form a united front between black and white female workers as well as assist the unions in organizing black women working in the domestic and factory-based industries. The delegates even linked the “special problems of these groups with their general problems as women and as Negroes” with the “fight against war and fascism.” By October 1937, however, Edwards resigned her position as chair of the committee of women’s work. Her reasoning, “neither program nor work has ever been defined or agreed upon. There has been no budget, neither estimated nor actual.” Consequently, “it is...obvious that there is either no need for a chairman or grave need for a new chairman.”<sup>85</sup>

Searching for assistance from anyone willing or able, Edwards and Kea’s itinerary initially consisted of twenty-three cities in ten states stretching from the Northeast, the Midwest, and the Upper South. At Chicago, Edwards and Kea dined with Spanish consulate Louis Perez Begaga along with 300 prominent white and black Chicagoans including members of the local NNC, CIO, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and the *Chicago Defender*. The honored guest Kea spoke of the interracial unity required to help the Spanish. “A common enemy and a common hope,” she declared, “should bring the minority peoples together to aid each other.” Consulate Begaga similarly remarked, “The struggle of the Spanish people represents a struggle between reactionary forces of Fascism and the progressive forces of democracy.” The following day, Kea stood alongside fellow ALB veteran James Robinson and nurse Fredericks Martin at a local high school. Appealing to the audience, Kea beached, “The fight of Spain is also the fight

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<sup>85</sup> *The Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 14-16, 1936), 5, 22-23, 40, part 1, reel 2, frame 248-270 and Thyra J. Edwards to John P. Davis, Oct. 2, 1937, part 1, reel 13, frame 29, both found in NNC papers.

of my people for liberation.” “Under fascism,” she continued, “Negroes, Jews and every other racial minority would have no other destiny than constant subjection in filthy ghettos.”<sup>86</sup>

In Hampton, Virginia, Kea and Edwards spoke before the National Association of Graduate Colored Nurses (AGCN), emphasizing the conditions of Spanish children. Inspired students at Hampton University (then Hampton Institute) formed a committee pledging to collect 1000 cans of milk to accompany the ambulance. Accompanied by Walter Garland, Kea and Edwards collected \$600 from the more conservative-oriented fraternity known as the Elks at its annual convention in Baltimore. Their travels quickly expanded as far West as Kansas City as well as Tulsa and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The audience in Kansas City was reportedly “impressed by the vivid description of war conditions in the stricken country.” A group of citizens agreed to form a local committee to raise relief supplies.<sup>87</sup>

While Edwards and Kea raised funds, community leaders of Harlem made preparations for hosting African, West-Indian, and Indian delegates for the second World Youth Congress set to take place at Vassar College. The congress’s Coordinating Committee for Youth Action relied heavily on African-American organizations such as the Abyssinian Baptist Church, the Harlem Chamber of Commerce, and the New York NNC. Block parties were held along with receptions

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<sup>86</sup> “Ambulance Itinerary-Thyra Edwards and Salaria Kea,” 1-2, n.d., Barnett papers, box 137, fol. 5; “Send this Ambulance Aboard the American Relief Ship for Spain,” (New York: Negro Committee to Aid Spain with the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, n.d. [1938]), 1, NNC papers, part I, reel 13, frame 49; Thyra Edwards, “Salaria Kea Returns From Spanish Front,” *Chicago Defender*, Jun. 4, 1938; Salaria Kea, quoted by “Spain Unconquerable, Negro War Nurse Says,” *Midwest Daily Record*, July 11, 1938, n.p.; Edwards papers, Scrapbook concerning the tour of the Negro People’s Ambulance for Loyalist Spain; Salaria Kea, quoted by “300 Welcome Salaria Kea at Reception,” *Chicago Defender*, Jun. 18, 1938, 10; and Luis Perez Begaga, quoted by “300 Welcome Salaria Kea at Reception,” 10.

<sup>87</sup> “Salaria Kea Leaves On Tour to Rally Negro Aid for Spain,” *Daily Worker*, Aug. 18, 1938, 2; “Organize Spanish Aid Goup at Hampton,” *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 29, 1938, 3; “Elks Give \$500 for Spanish Aid,” *Afro-American*, Sept. 3, 1938, 24; Isabel M. Thompson, “Covering the Kansas Cities,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sep. 17, 1938, 22; “Contributions Pour in for Spanish Relief,” *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 5, 1938, 7.



and banquets. Max Yergan returned from Europe just in time to participate. Dorothy Height of the local NNC was elected secretary of the American delegation while Edward E. Strong was appointed as the official spokesperson. Angelo Herndon served as an official observer.<sup>88</sup>

The NNC's involvement was highly welcomed by the World Youth Congress's Presiding Committee, a body represented by all continents. One congress representative requested Max Yergan help address the "serious rift ...on the issue of collective security" developing within the peace movement. Many congress delegates were devout pacifists and, thus, pushed against strengthening diplomatic and economic relationships with the eventual Allied Powers out fear of risking another global conflict. The pacifists, however, were a minority. Those representing nations most vulnerable to fascism and imperialism enjoyed far larger support in their call for collective security. "They want Peace," an observer for the *Daily Worker* described the delegates' sentiment, "but there's no Peace possible when Fascism is attacking." Even peace advocates representing democratic nations such as Canada "said emphatically that isolation was not the answer."<sup>89</sup>

This majority sentiment was demonstrated throughout the conference proceedings. Of the 500 delegates, represented by fifty-four nations from every continent, those representing China, Czechoslovakia, Ethiopia, and Austria reportedly received "overwhelming ovations." An audience of 22,000 at the Municipal Stadium "rose to its feet in tribute" to the Spanish youth with shouts of "vive l'Espagne." Even Thyra Edward's North American Committee to Aid

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<sup>88</sup> "African Youth Leaders Enroute [*sic*] Here For Confab," Jul. 30, 1938, 2; "Harlem to Fete Youth Delegates," Aug. 13, 1938, 4; "Harlem Leaders Greet World Youth Congress," Aug. 6, 1938, 7; and Pauline Redmond, "Youth Confab in Session at Poughkeepsie," Aug. 27, 1938, 7, all found in *Chicago Defender*.

<sup>89</sup> Max Yergan to John P. Davis, April 8, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 15, reel 762; Joseph Starobin, "Hopes and Aims of World Youth Merge at Randall Meet," *Daily Worker*, Aug. 18, 1938, 5; Art Shields, "Youth Delegates of Five Continents Tell Aims," *Daily Worker*, Aug. 14, 1938, 5.

Spanish Democracy held an exhibit promoting the humanitarian relief drive. The Chinese delegates were also greeted with “tremendous enthusiasm of a crowd that understood the symbolism of the struggle of the Chinese people.” Though all agreed that peace was the ultimate objective, the Vassar Peace Pact also maintained that “there can be no peace without justice.” Broadening the scope of the platform to those suffering from all forms of imperialism, the pact called for the right of self-determination for all nations and the establishment of “political and social justice within their own countries.” In a nod toward collective security, the pact pledged to “give assistance to victims of treaty violations and refrain from financial or economic assistance to aggressor nations.”<sup>90</sup>

The diverse representation of delegates as well as the sizable minority of pacifists made for a less militant platform compared to the NNC. And yet, observers described the congress as a body of radical youth preparing for a global conflict. “The general tenor of the congress,” one wrote for the *Chicago Defender*, “was decidedly pro-war” as delegates “stood and wildly applauded when representative of warring nations spoke.” The overall structure of the congress proceedings “was in the hands of the ‘collective security’ forces, and the minority viewpoint was suppressed by subtle means.” Another journalist characterized the proceedings’ emphasis on Japan’s war with China and Russia, the Spanish Civil War, and Nazi Germany’s persecution of Jews as communist propaganda. “The Negro delegates,” he scolded, “have fallen in line with the

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<sup>90</sup> Starobin, “Hopes and Aims of World Youth Merge at Randall Meet,” 5; Beth McHenry, *Daily Worker*, Aug. 18, 1938, 5; Joseph Starobin, “Youth Delegates Sign ‘Vassar Peace Pact’ As Congress Closes,” *Daily Worker*, Aug. 24, 1938, 1 and 4; and Quoted by “Vassar Pact Pledges Aid to Minorities,” *Chicago Defender*, Sep. 3, 1938, 3.

Communists and Jews and they are forgetting their own troubles at home and discussing international questions.”<sup>91</sup>

By early October, the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy celebrated its second-year anniversary at the Madison Square Garden with 12,000 in attendance. The audience boasted a total of \$1,000,000 in cash and kind raised by the committee. Via telephone, Foreign Minister Alvarez Del Vayo conveyed his appreciation for the Americans’ contribution. William Pickens of the NAACP and close associate of Thyra Edwards recently returned from Barcelona. “The war for dictatorship in Spain,” he thundered, “is the direct issue of the supineness [*sic*] with which the strong nations allowed the rape of Ethiopia.” Inspired by the camaraderie of the ALB, Pickens thundered in amazement, “What is it that calls a Virginia Negro to fight for democracy in Spain?” By month’s end, the committee collected more than 1,000 tons of food, clothing, and medical supplies. The materials boarded the SS Eric Reed American relief ship on October 30, which already contained 5,000 tons of wheat donated by the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation. The abundance of supplies would not have been possible without Edwards and Kea’s efforts.<sup>92</sup>

While the black Popular Front demonstrated a high level of dedication and commitment to Spanish Republicanism through its humanitarian program and the ALB, the Allied Powers demanded an end to the war even under a Nationalist victory. In September, Spanish Republican Premier Juan Negrin ordered the withdrawal of the International Brigades in order “to remove

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<sup>91</sup> L. F. Coles, “How About the Blacks in America? Observer at World Youth Congress,” *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 27, 1938, 7 and “Youth Congress Deluded by Myth of ‘War for Democracy,’” *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 1, 1938, 24.

<sup>92</sup> “Spanish Relief Ship Begins Loading Here,” Oct. 28, 1938, 1; “British Labor Leader to Head Speakers at Garden Spain Rally,” Oct. 2, 1938, 3; “Del Vayo Talks Via Telephone to Spain Rally on Wednesday,” Oct. 3, 1938, 2; and “Spain on Alert Against Deals, Rally is Told,” Oct. 6, 1938, 1 and 2, all found in *Daily Worker*.

the possibility of any pretext for people's continuing to cast doubt on the purely national character of the cause for which the Republican army is fighting."<sup>93</sup> It was a desperate attempt by Republican Spain to convince England and France to lift the embargo. This, however, would risk another world war, a position the Allies desperately avoided. In response, the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade immediately launched a campaign to raise \$150,000 in order to charter a ship and bring back the approximately 1,350 Americans still fighting. "The cause of democracy against fascism in the United States," an official spoke, "will be aided immeasurably by the return of these men with the messages they will bring."<sup>94</sup>

### **Lynching is Nazism**

Concurrent to the Spanish refugee movement, the year 1938 witnessed a vastly growing desire on behalf of the NNC to assist the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign. Congress members utilized significant time and energy lobbying for the passage of the Wagner-Nuys Anti-Lynch Bill. Ideally, the campaign provided an opportunity for a more harmonious black Popular Front due to the bill's intra-racial and inter-class support. This did not, however, prevent the NNC from articulating lynching through class struggle. In the *Daily Worker*, President Randolph described the vastly expanding domestic fascist organizations as "the emotional and physical tools of monopoly capitalists who are becoming desperate over the advancement of the organization of the mass production industries" as well as the response to the "growing political consciousness of the once inarticulate masses." Because of the fight against lynching, the "opportunity for the

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<sup>93</sup> Juan Negrin, quoted by "ABROAD: Loyalist Volunteers Blood Along the Yangtze War's human Cost Royale Exile," *New York Times*, Sep. 25, 1938, 64.

<sup>94</sup> David McKelvy White, quoted by, "Plan to Bring Back Americans in Spain," *New York Times*, Oct. 1, 1938, 5.

service of the Congress in the liberation movement of the Negro people is greater now than ever before.”<sup>95</sup>

Understanding the importance of black unity in the anti-lynching fight, Davis stressed the need for a Popular Front in global terms. Davis argued, “a world at odds with itself had denied us our rights of manhood and citizenship.” Black Americans have organized in defiance of the “type of Americanism which exults in mob violence and lynching—the shame of America.” Inspired by struggles abroad, Davis insisted that “as an oppressed people,” African Americans, “must take cognizance of the mad drive to set the world aflame with the fires of war. We must be mindful of the heroic defense of culture and human rights in Spain and in China today.” “For we, above all others,” he continued, “know the meaning of death, know the deep dread and terror with which one witnesses the destruction of home and life.”<sup>96</sup>

A key tactic employed by the NNC’s anti-lynching campaign was to fuse the black freedom struggle with the fight for human rights on behalf of Jewish refugees. In response to Nazi Germany’s annexation of Austria, Davis avowed, “Negro People in America, representing a minority in our Democracy, are deeply concerned over the inhuman barbarism being practiced upon the Jewish minority in Nazi Germany.” Similar to the Spanish refugee crisis, Davis implored Roosevelt to establish a “Free haven for the oppressed Jewish people” in the U.S. In a separate letter, Davis implored the White House to use its “influence to secure immediate introduction” of the anti-lynching bill in Congress and requested a meeting to discuss “this grave

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<sup>95</sup> “Resolution on Lynching and Civil Liberties,” n.p., n.d. [1936], NAACP papers, part 10, reel 15, frame 421; A. Philip Randolph, “Randolph Weighs Gains Achieved by National Negro Congress Action,” *Daily Worker*, Dec. 16, 1937, 6; A. Philip Randolph to John P. Davis, Feb. 18, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 672-673.

<sup>96</sup> John P. Davis, “Radio Address of John P. Davis, Executive Secretary of the National Negro Congress, Columbia Broadcasting System,” 1-2, Oct. 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 15, frame 125-128.

matter affecting [the] constitutional rights of 15 million Negro citizens.” The simultaneous campaign for black civil rights and Jewish human rights was driven by a firm belief in “the inseparability of our fight for the Anti-Lynching Bill from the fight for the protection of minority groups throughout the country against fascism.” The fascists’ tactics of spreading violence across the globe, therefore, largely inspired the NNC’s dedication to an anti-lynching bill.<sup>97</sup>

Requiring Jewish Americans to support the anti-lynching bill was a deliberative attempt by the NNC to combat the increasing popularity of anti-Semitism in the U.S. As the *Chicago Defender*’s editorial board pointed out, “Here in America we find the germ of anti-semitism [sic], of religious and racial prejudice already implanted.” American fascists represented by the German American Bund and the Silver Shirts routinely propagandized the supposed threat trade unions, Jews, and New Dealers posed to the nation’s wellbeing. Such statements, the NNC readily pointed out, were not solely directed to white Anglo Saxon Protestants. White supremacists promoted fascism to all corners of society by articulating anti-Semitism through an anti-capitalist lens. As one member of the American League for Peace and Democracy (ALPD), the re-vamped ALAWF, noted, “there has been recent agitation blaming the Jews for the economic difficulties of the Negro people.” The dangers of these attempts were self-evident because African Americans “will certainly suffer most under any form of fascism.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> John P. Davis to Barnett R. Brickner, Mar. 25, 1938; John P. Davis to President Franklin D. Roosevelt March 23, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 538; part I, reel 12, frame 444-445; John P. Davis to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Nov. 15, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 484; John P. Davis to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Aug. 2, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 533-535; and John P. Davis to Barnett R. Brickner, April 8, 1938, part I, reel 12, frame 447, all found in NNC papers.

<sup>98</sup> “Checking the Epidemic of Prejudice,” *Chicago Defender*, Dec. 24, 1938, 6 and Silbert Rocke to David Holden, May 18, 1938, Dies committee records, box 57, fol. Chicago Correspondence, ALPD.

The anti-lynching bill and the proposal for re-settling Jewish refugees counteracted the growing rate of anti-Semitism within small segments of black America. Alarmed by some black communities' attempts to boycott Jewish-owned small businesses, the NNC held a National Board Meeting in Detroit to discuss "the relationship between the oppressed Negro people and the oppressed Jewish people." Representatives of several local councils from approximately twenty cities expressed concern that "anti-Semitism was developing among the Negro people." To combat this trend, the board decided to invite representatives of various Jewish organizations to discuss developing an educational campaign that would encourage Jewish storeowners to improve their treatment of black customers and employees as well as to educate blacks on the "identity of interest" between themselves and Jews. To actualize this initiative, the NNC hoped to secure Jewish organizations' endorsement for the congress's Washington, D.C. conference on the anti-lynching bill scheduled for March.<sup>99</sup>

Demonstrating his commitment, John P. Davis considered human rights on behalf of Jews an essential platform for any "truly militant Negro organization." The perpetrators of European anti-Semitism were identical to the "German Bunds" and "Bourbon plantation owners of the South." The vitriol some African Americans expressed towards Jewish merchants was, thus, "the game of the exploiting employer, of the fascist." Davis reasoned that most wealthy racial, ethnic, and religious minorities in the U.S. "serve their class interest, rather than the interest of the people from whom they come." Therefore, it was the task of the NNC to "unite and rule...under the banner of democracy." Underlining the necessity of this task, Davis described the Nazi Party as the "foul water threatening to sweep the world, to drive me from my

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<sup>99</sup> Davis to Brickner, April 8, 1938; John P. Davis to Barnett R. Brickner, July 11, 1938, part I, reel 12, frame 450-451; and A. Philip Randolph to John P. Davis, part I, reel 14, frame 672, all found in NNC papers.

home.” To deny African Americans’ responsibility in defending Jews was equivalent to asking, “me [to] wait until every dam against fascism in other sections of the world has been broken down.” “I would rather abate the flood,” he declared, “by helping my Jewish brothers in Germany plug the dikes in their dam, than to wait until they are all drowned before I begin defending myself.”<sup>100</sup>

In early March, a majority of Republicans and southern Democrats in the Senate enforced a forty-six day filibuster to the Wagner-Nuys Bill. Davis deliberately scheduled the conference to take place during this period in Washington, D.C. so as to exact maximum political pressure. For the NNC, the filibuster was “all the more serious in view of the murderous onslaught of fascist forces against the people throughout the world.” The forces of reaction have “dared to challenge the will of the American peoples and openly to show their determination to crush the people of our land by lynching and fascist violence.” The energy for an anti-lynching conference within the NNC’s D.C. council and Women’s Trade Union League was evident after nine members staged a picket outside the Rialto Theatre for the Washington Film Society’s private screening of “The Birth of a Nation.” One demonstrator waved a sign inscribed, “This is a Private Party—So Are Lynchings.” The film society responded, “the Film Society is concerned with the film as a medium, regardless of the accuracy or prejudice of the facts and ideas conveyed by it, or the propaganda objectives of particular films.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> John P. Davis to L.F. Coles, Nov. 18, 1938, NNC papers, reel 12, frame 542.

<sup>101</sup> John P. Davis to unknown [addressed only as “Dear Friends”], March 8, 1938, part 10, reel 15, frame 499; “Statement to the Public Adopted At National Negro Congress Conference on Anti-Lynching Legislation,” n.p., n.d. [March 1938], part 10, reel 15, frame 522, all above found in NAACP papers; Roy Stryker, et. al. to May Landweber, Feb. 15, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 1000; and “‘Birth of Nation’ is Picketed in Washington,” *New Journal and Guide*, Mar. 12, 1938, 5.



Though many in the Center-Left shared the NNC's enthusiasm, their commitment to a joint struggle was fleeting. Davis desperately sought the support from nationally recognized Rabbis but found scant support. Barnett R. Erickner of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and Chairperson of the Social Justice Commission in Cleveland declined Davis' invitation. Davis also appealed to Erickner for financial support but to no avail. "I...hope," Davis pleaded with Erickner, "that you will recognize the inseparability of our fight for the Anti-Lynching Bill from the fight for the protection of minority groups throughout the country against fascism." "We need the active support of the Jewish people of America for this cause," he beseeched. Erickner promised Davis he would address the issue at the next Rabbinical conference.<sup>102</sup>

Much of the unfavorable reaction to the anti-lynching conference stemmed from previous tensions between the NNC and Center-Left organizations such as the NAACP and SPUSA. The socialists' Washington, D.C. chapter sent only one delegate to the conference and failed to make the mandatory two-dollar pledge. The SPUSA sent a letter to Reverend Arthur D. Gray, head of the NNC's D.C. branch, evidently expressing disapproval of the pledge. A frustrated John P. Davis wrote the General Secretary, "The pledge was made subject to the approval of your organization." "Disapproval for any reason is, of course, the privilege of your organization," Davis wrote, but "It is the join responsibility of all the organizations in a positive way to see that the resolutions" be carried out. The General Secretary apologized for this oversight and assured Davis "we are entirely sympathetic with the aims of your organization and will undoubtedly be able to make further contributions in the future." Alfred Baker Lewis of the SPUSA's Negro

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<sup>102</sup> Barnett R. Erickner to John P. Davis, March 10, 1938, part I, reel 12, frame 443; Barnett R. Erickner to John P. Davis, March 15, 1938, part I, reel 12, frame 446; Barnett R. Erickner to John P. Davis, April 20, 1938; Davis to Erickner, April 8, 1938, all found in NNC papers.

Work Committee praised the NNC's work on the anti-lynching bill. In regards to additional financial support, however, "I am utterly unable to help further at the present time."<sup>103</sup>

Davis's relationship with the NAACP was more antagonistic. As early as January 1937, he advised all local councils to support the NAACP's lobbying for the anti-lynching bill and initiated discussions with White for how best to proceed with a conference. "The National Negro Congress," Davis wrote White, "is very anxious to be of effective support to the NAACP in its drive in the Anti-Lynching legislation." Davis invited White to provide his ideas and suggestions to him, A. Philip Randolph, and Thyra Edwards for how best to proceed. "It would be helpful," Davis continued, "to us to have a conference in order to determine how best our local councils can give support to the Legislative program of the NAACP." A plans for the conference fully materialized a year later, Davis again wrote White on behalf of the 130 white and black conference delegates, "We recognize the able leadership your organization has given to the fight for the anti lynching bill." "We pledge" he persisted, "the continued support of our national office as well as local councils in the struggle for the enactment of the anti lynching bill."<sup>104</sup>

In a curt reply, Walter White insisted that the proposed conference lacked the necessary publicity and suggested posting any engagement "until [the] situation develops more clearly." He assured Davis that the Association was planning its own "intensive efforts to give public further understanding of issues basic to other groups as well as the Negro in antilynching [*sic*] fight." Davis called White's bluff and postponed the conference from early to late March. White replied, "I must ask you to let us decide on the date and the nature of the conference. There are certain

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<sup>103</sup> Roland Parrish to John P. Davis, June 16, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 445 and John P. Davis to Roland Parrish, April 8, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 446-447; Alfred Baker Lewis to John P. Davis, April 15, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 915, all found in NNC papers.

<sup>104</sup> John P. Davis to Walter White, Jan. 15, 1937, part 10, reel 15, frame 442 and John P. Davis to Walter White, March 21, 1938, part 10, reel 15, frame 987, both found in NAACP papers.

plans now being made...the nature of which cannot be divulged.” In one last attempt, Davis suggested scheduling the conference for March nineteenth but no later “since already much time will have elapsed since the shelving of the bill.” He also warned of the “defeatist sentiment” of the black press and the “lull of silence” among the masses that would undoubtedly ensue if such as conference took place after the filibuster period.<sup>105</sup>

On March eighth, White discussed the matter with NNC Secretary Max Yergan. Though Yergan accepted White’s implacability, he expressed desire to maintain dialogue over “the developments in Africa and Europe which have a bearing upon our own situation here.” Yergan, a recent inductee of the CPUSA, well understood White’s political leanings. “You have made your own position very clear,” Yergan told White, “and I do not think there should be any difficulty whatever in making known your point of view to the National Negro Congress.” The NNC’s internationalism, however, was the primary reason for White’s obstinacy. In a private correspondence, White claimed to Charles Houston and Roy Wilkins that Davis’s hidden objective for the conference was to “chisel in for the National Negro Congress and the Communists on the fight for the anti-lynching bill.” Going further, White believed the NNC was using “mass pressure...to force the Association to abdicate to Davis in the anti-lynching fight.” Agreeing with White, Wilkins ordered Edward P. Lovett of the NAACP’s D.C. branch to withhold support. One week before the conference, the NAACP publicly announced its disapproval.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Walter White to John P. Davis, Feb. 26, 1938, part 10, reel 15, frame 494; John P. Davis to Walter White, Mar 1, 1938, part 10, reel 15, frame 496; Unknown [Walter White] to John P. Davis, March 1, 1938, part 10, reel 15, frame 498; John P. Davis to Walter White, March 8, 1938, part 10, reel 15, frame 502, all found NAACP papers.

<sup>106</sup> Walter White to Roy Wilkins and Charles Houston, March 8, 1938, part 10, reel 15, frame 506, Max Yergan to Walter White, March 8, 1938, part 10, reel 15, frame 519; Unknown [Roy Wilkins] to Charles D. Murray, March 10, 1938, part 10, reel 15, frame 510; Roy Wilkins to

In the NAACP's absence, the anti-lynching conference exuded a proletarian aura. The sizeable presence of delegates representing the workers' movement, for instance, gave the impression that the NNC was waging a working class resistance to lynching. Participants included Cedric Fowler of the CIO, David Brahn of the United Automobile Workers (UAW), and Gardner Jackson of the CIO's political arm Labor's Non-Partisan League. Though CIO President John L. Lewis and Philip Murray of the Steel Workers Organization Committee (SWOC) were unable to attend, both publicly condemned the "parliamentary trickery" of the Senate filibuster. One CIO official wrote Davis, "The continued delay of the legislation through the highly questionable tactics of a small [Senate] minority is a blot upon the record of our Congress." UAW President Homer Martin similarly condemned the congressional tactic and called on all CIO affiliates to take "action immediately" on the anti-lynching bill. Oleo Montgomery, one of the "Scottsboro Nine" serving his sentence laboring on a chain gain, sent a wire praising the convention. Even Edward P. Lovett commended the conference's dual focus on race and labor discrimination. "The National Negro Congress," he wrote Davis, "is largely responsible," in the "united front for fighting racial and class discrimination."<sup>107</sup>

The conference would also have not been possible without the contribution from radical Christian leaders. Convention speakers such as Bishop L.W. Kyles of the AME Zion Church, Reverend W.H. Jernagin of the National Baptist Convention, and Reverend Arthur D. Gray of the NNC's Washington, D.C. council bestowed a profound sense of unity between the workers'

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Edward P. Lovett, March 14, 1938, part 10, reel 15, frame 516; Walter white to Charles Houston, Roy Wilkins, and Thurgood Marshall, March, 29, 1938, all found in NAACP papers, and "NAACP Not Behind John P. Davis, *Afro-American*, Mar. 19, 1938, 14.

<sup>107</sup> Kathryn Lewis to John P. Davis, March 17, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 919; John P. Davis to Kathryn Lewis, Feb. 17, 1938, part I, 14, frame 919; "Asks CIO to Join Lynch Bill Fight, *Chicago Defender*, Mar. 26, 1938, 4; "NNC Meet Lays Plans for Mob Bill Drive, *Afro-American*, Mar. 26, 1938, 13; and "News From the Nation's Capital," *Chicago Defender*, Mar. 26, 1938, 21.

movement and the black freedom struggle. Outlining its official platform, the delegates pledged “its support to the Negro churches in their general program for the progress of the Negro people,” and called on all churches to, “continue their role of leadership by cooperating with the local councils in the fight for the enactment of the anti-lynching bill.” By the conference’s conclusion, all delegates avowed, “We declare it to be our purpose to join with other democratic forces to drive from political life those so-called representatives of the people who will dare to oppose the expressed will of the American people.” Senators Robert Wagner of New York and Joseph Guffey of Pennsylvania publicly offered their approval of these measures.<sup>108</sup>

In April, the NNC’s New York council held its own public protest against Nazi Germany’s annexation of Austria. At the Union Square, 8,000 demonstrators drew direct connections between Jim Crow and Nazism. Hundreds of delegates waved placards inscribed “Stop lynching—End Anti-Semitism!,” “Free the Scottsboro Boys,” and “Smash the Lynch Terror.” Each speaker expressed the conviction that “the fight for the Jews in Austria is directly linked up with the fight for Negro rights in America.” Similar to the Spanish Republican movement, the greatest contributions to the NNC’s fight against anti-Semitism came from the CPUSA and black churches. Speakers included Rev. John W. Robinson, Congressman Vito Marcantonio, Angelo Herndon, Walter Garland, and Jewish communist Israel Amter. These activists were all united in the conviction that anti-black violence as nothing short of an American-style pogrom.<sup>109</sup>

That same month, the SNYC described the fight against anti-Semitism part-and-parcel to the struggle for the independence of Spain, China, and the colonized world at its second annual convention in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Before more than 500 delegates, SNYC National

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<sup>108</sup> “Map Plans for New Antilynch Bill Campaign,” *Journal and Guide*, Mar. 26, 1938, 1.

<sup>109</sup> “8,000 Attend Anti-Lynch Bill Rally,” *Daily Worker*, April 14, 1938, 4.

Chairman and Virginian William Richardson declared, “To the youth of Spain, and of war-torn China, to the minority youth of Austria which has fallen before the barbarism of Hitler’s fascism, the oppressed youth in the colonies of Africa and the Caribbean...we pledge our solidarity as willing workers in the cause of advancing civilization.”<sup>110</sup> Secretary Edward E. Strong similarly warned that without a global resistance to Nazi Germany, the world “will witness an exploitation unprecedented in human history.” The Third Reich has “quenched in a flood of terror and archaic propaganda” in order to destroy “the hopes and aspirations of the Jewish youth.” Emphasizing anti-Semitism’s global significance, he addressed the isolationist sentiment within some black communities that contend “no matter how difficult our way may be in this American republic, we are at least free from the threat of fascist domination.” Strong responded to this assumption with vigor, “How erroneous is this impression!”<sup>111</sup>

Under the rallying cry “The Right to Live,” Strong scolded the “Goose-stepping nazis [*sic*],” who “strut without interruption to their tunes of disdain for the Jewish and Negro minorities.” Calling for global solidarity, Strong proclaimed that the Nazi Party under Adolf Hitler personified the politics of stifling “the minds of the German people with hatred and malice to destroy opposition to his own power.” Strong drew on this lesson for the domestic struggle, “This comes home to us as Negroes because of the rapid spread of this vituperation and venom and the lack of opportunities we have in our own native land.” The southern Democratic and conservative Republicans senators’ dismantling of the anti-lynching bill demonstrates the

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<sup>110</sup> William Richardson, “Annual Address,” *Official Proceedings*, 9, Strong papers, box 167-1, fol. 15.

<sup>111</sup> Edward E. Strong, “Annual Report,” *Official Proceedings*, 12, Strong papers, box 167-1, fol. 15.

“callous determination of men in our own country to tighten the chains of enslavement that bind us.”<sup>112</sup>

Once the Allied Powers decided to cope with Nazi Germany as opposed to resist it, the NNC expressed more fear than hope for the global Popular Front by 1938's end. An alarmed Max Yergan, for instance, decried the Munich Agreement between Great Britain and Nazi Germany as the “combination of the old forces of imperialism and its rejuvenated extension or duplication—fascism.” This moment marked a “sinister, threatening and universally challenging turn in the world struggle,” he spoke before the ALPD at Carnegie Hall. “For us Negroes,” he continued, “the Munich pact is the signal and the evidence of the consolidation of the forces of human oppression and exploitation against peace and against democracy.”<sup>113</sup>

Yergan, John P. Davis, and Edward E. Strong's warning of unimpeded anti-Semitic violence in Germany proved disturbingly accurate. Less than two weeks after the Munich agreement, citizens of Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland destroyed hundreds of synagogues and thousands of Jewish businesses during Kristallnacht (“Night of Broken Glass”). An additional 10,000 men were forced into concentration camps. An outraged Davis beseeched Yergan to address the “present Jewish Crisis” by holding a public meeting in Harlem under the sponsorship of the NNC's New York council. Davis was determined to publically showcase solidarity with Jews through mass protests. Leading an anti-Nazi rally, in his mind, would “have [a] telling effect in winning the support of the Congress even [from] conservative Jewish groups.” “It

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<sup>112</sup> Edward E. Strong, quoted by “Youth Congress Endorses Courier Campaign,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Apr. 16, 1938, 6.

<sup>113</sup> Max Yergan, “The Significance of the Munich Pact to the Negro People,” 1-2, Nov. 11, 1938, 1-2, Yergan papers, box 206-6, fol. 27.

would be a striking thing if Negroes on their own initiative held such a meeting,” he pressed Yergan.<sup>114</sup>

Along with the ALPD, trade unionists, black churches, and the Jewish People’s Committee, the NNC held a mass meeting at Columbus Circle in Washington, D.C. Here, Yergan characterized Nazism as proof that “no group-neither high nor low-neither rich nor poor-is free from the sufferings inflicted upon those who are moved by greed and the will to exploit and oppress.” This, he argued, brought forth the necessity for a “common front and common action” fighting for “the removal of the superficial barriers which separate all indifferent races who suffer or are liable to sufferings.” The “immediate task,” he concluded, “is to unite in order to sustain and increase their democratic rights.” The protesters pressed the Roosevelt Administration to immediately open its borders to German Jews as well as cease all trade agreements with the Nazi government. In two separate letters addressed to President Roosevelt, one from Davis and the other from Chicago organizer Ishmael P. Flory, the NNC pleaded, “A sense of decency forces us to join with other American citizens in urging you to take positive steps which will indicate to the Nazi rulers of Germany the disgust and disapproval with which the American people view these barbaric actions.” In a meeting with State Department advisor in European Affairs James Dunn, the church leaders insisted that “the American people wish to make their protest effective by offering more than sympathy.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> John P. Davis to Max Yergan, Nov. 18, 1938, part I, reel 15, frame 707; Max Yergan to John P. Davis, Nov. 19, 1938, part I, reel 15 frame 732-733, both found in NNC papers.

<sup>115</sup> John P. Davis, quoted by, “Protest Pour Into Capital at Hitler Terror,” *Daily Worker*, Nov. 17, 1938, 2; Max Yergan, “The Negro People of America and the Present Nazi Persecution of the Jews,” Nov. 16, 1938, Yergan papers, box 206-6, fol. 31; “Race Groups Hit Treatment of Jews,” *Atlanta Daily World*, Nov. 20, 1938, 1; and Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1987), 69-75.



In response to Kristallnacht, Democratic Senator Robert F. Wagner of New York and Republican Congresswoman Edith N. Rogers of Massachusetts introduced a bill in February 1939 to admit 20,000 German children, a number far beyond the existing quota system for Germans established by the nativist-driven Immigration Act of 1924. The Wagner-Rogers Bill immediately failed after the anti-Semitic Senator Robert R. Reynolds of North Carolina blocked the vote. The failure of both the refugee and anti-lynching bills testifies to the prevalence of anti-Semitism and Jim Crow throughout the 1930s United States. It also demonstrates the militancy of the black Popular Front's commitment to solidarity as well as its conviction in the interchangeability in black Americans, European Jews, and Spanish Republicans' oppression. Their own government, however, thwarted their hopes for a stronger resistance to fascism.<sup>116</sup>

## Conclusion

In *The Negro and the Democratic Front*, James W. Ford argued that the years 1937 and 1938 was a seminal moment for the National Negro Congress. Though the denial of the black working class's civil and labor rights persisted, American society witnessed a political realignment of racial, ethnic, and class groupings spawned by the anti-fascist movement. This consolidation, he argued, was principally the result of the NNC. "Only in unity of all the oppressed and exploited," wrote Ford, "is there the guarantee for the victory of progress over reaction!" The congress had demonstrated, he maintained, that the assault against democracy abroad was intertwined with African-American and working class liberation at home. "To fight for socialism we must fight for democracy, peace, and security," declared Ford. The struggle against fascism was the struggle for democratic rights for African Americans. "My people," Ford

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<sup>116</sup> Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 73-74.

wrote, “knows what fascism would bring...fascism would mean the systematic organization of terror and violence against us, would make lynch rule the law of the land.”<sup>117</sup>

Spanish Republicanism profoundly influenced why the NNC embraced democracy as the sole bulwark to fascism in the U.S. By directly contributing to the Loyalist cause, through combat and humanitarianism, congress officials and their allies emerged as seminal figures in the black freedom struggle. Women like Louise Thompson, Thyra Edwards, and Salaria Kea were indispensable figures in shaping the black Popular Front’s international protest by encouraging the NNC to develop a more holistic understanding of fascism’s global reach. Black Americans and Africans, they argued, were not the only groups who understood suffering and oppression at the hands of white supremacy and imperialism. Youth activists such as Edward E. Strong, Angelo Herndon, and Walter Garland were equally influential in expanding the NNC’s internationalism. By transcending divisions of race and ethnicity, the NNC expressed solidarity for all those fighting for democracy and freedom from fascism.

Congress officials were also keen in drawing sharp distinctions between Spanish fascism and Jim Crow. Though they pressured the Roosevelt Administration to provide military arms to the Spanish Loyalists as well as celebrated the ALB’s fight in the trenches, they also understood that the struggle for African American liberation was best served through non-violent direct action and parliamentary reform. The United Front of the working class against economic depression and the Popular Front of minorities against fascism and Jim Crow involved the full democratization of American society by advocating for the rights of citizenship guaranteed by the Constitution.

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<sup>117</sup> James W. Ford, *The Negro and the Democratic Front* (New York: International Publishers, 1938), 186.

These efforts also exposed the limitations to liberal democracy. While the NNC remained steadfast in its support for the CPUSA, its international program remained largely in line with President Roosevelt's objectives as evidenced by their enthusiastic support for his quarantine speech. Unlike the NNC, however, the Roosevelt Administration, along with the other democratic nations, were unwilling to take a leading role in hardening an alliance against Rome and Berlin. Driven by the fear of another world war, the democratic nations concluded that support for Republican Spain would only strengthen the fascist powers' resolve. Nor did the Roosevelt Administration accept the correlation between the insurgency in Spain and anti-Semitism in central and eastern Europe with Jim Crow. The refusal to assist the Spanish Popular Front as well as the denial of Jewish human rights and black American civil rights exposed the limits to the NNC's lobbying efforts.

The support for a refugee bill after Kristallnacht also exposed divisions within the civil rights community. By late 1938, the NAACP re-doubled its efforts in pushing for an anti-lynching law. Congressmen and women who expressed sympathy for European Jews while simultaneously ignoring the plight of black Americans rightfully flummoxed the Association. In a letter addressed to President Roosevelt, J.M. Ragland of the NAACP praised the Administration's "humanitarian efforts for the nationals of other nations," but also hoped that "these principles of justice will become applicable to our own dear native land." Others publicly ridiculed the NNC for its demand for a refugee bill for Jews. Poet Claude McKay wrote, "It is obviously ridiculous for a colored leader to call America a 'free haven' when millions of his own people do not enjoy freedom." Thus, the desire to consolidate power amongst all who suffered,

or would suffer, from the Axis Powers' imperial designs was not as a deeply shared belief that the NNC had initially hoped for.<sup>118</sup>

While the NNC grew immeasurably in strength during this period, it continued to face hurdles similar to 1935 and 1936. Leaders of the NAACP and SPUSA did feel more comfortable associating with the congress—evidenced by both Walter White and Norman Thomas's participation in the Philadelphia convention—but largely remained skeptical of its motives and tactics. The anti-lynching conference, John P. Davis envisioned, would demonstrate a unity of purpose among all civil rights organizations. The increasing strength of the Berlin-Rome Axis would, theoretically, incentivize the Center-Left to join the NNC in its demand for basic constitutional liberties. The congress's association with communists and communism, however, was unacceptable for the NAACP and SPUSA. Such sentiments would escalate exponentially as the global Popular Front fell under the heels of the Axis Powers by 1939.

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<sup>118</sup> Daniel Blakely, quoted by "Praise President's Humanitarian View," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov. 26, 1938, 14 and Claude McKay, "Author Assails Negro Congress For Message Sent to Washington on Jews," *New York Amsterdam News*, Nov. 26, 1938, 11.

**Chapter Three**  
**“The Yanks are not Coming”**  
**Factionalism, Persecution, and the Origins of Cold War Civil Rights, 1939-1941**

“All eyes are glued on Poland,” wrote renowned communist lawyer William L. Patterson. While the progressive world expressed “deepest sympathy” for the Poles, the reactionary world was consumed with “increasing fear.” That fear was driven by the prospect of Poland looking East toward the Soviet Union, a nation of “liberty and self-government, peace and equality of opportunity, jobs, and they developed their national culture in an atmosphere of socialism and peace.” The Poles, Patterson argued, could no longer trust the western democracies. After all, the UK and France had “betrayed Ethiopia, Spain, Austria and Czechoslovakia to the Rome-Berlin Axis.” The West’s hatred for communism and refusal to join the Popular Front “dictated that dastardly sale of countries and peoples.” A new line had been drawn, Patterson believed, between liberty on one hand and fascism on the other. The Soviet alternative, demonstrated by its actions in East Poland, was the most logical solution to war and fascism. “The establishment of democracy and peace in Poland will mean that world peace and democracy are closer,” he claimed. “Therefore it must of necessity help the Negro peoples.”<sup>1</sup>

Germany’s invasion of Poland became inevitable by 1939. The British and French’s proposal for a defensive pact with Romania that year convinced Adolf Hitler that only by occupying Poland could Germany launch a successful campaign in the West. Searching for the most cost effective method, Hitler offered the Soviet Union a sharing of the Polish spoils through a pledge of non-aggression. For Joseph Stalin, détente with Nazi Germany was a logical choice. The Soviet Union had previously offered an alliance with any central European nation, promising assistance in the event of German aggression. Fearful of Soviet influence, British

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Patterson, “The Sad Case of Poland,” *Chicago Defender*, Sept. 30, 1939, 15 and 19.

Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain balked. The French Popular Front, far more willing to ally with the Soviet Union against fascism, pressured both London and Warsaw to agree to such a deal. Enraged by Stalin's insistence on the right of transit for Red Army troops to cross Polish and Roman territory, the British and Poles refused. Without allies, Stalin turned to Hitler. With the non-aggression pact, not only would the Soviet Union occupy East Poland but also the Baltic states and Bessarabia. Such territorial expansion served the Soviet Union's desperate attempts to avoid war with Germany.<sup>2</sup>

The effects of the non-aggression pact—and the subsequent dividing of Poland—on the Popular Front were decisive and immediate. Following the pact, the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) denounced the Popular Front and forwent any distinction between capitalism and fascism. Avoiding any pretense of hostility towards Germany, the Soviet Union insisted that military engagement with the Rome-Berlin Axis would imperil the working class. After all, the French and British declared war on Germany in response to its invasion of Poland. Thus, the characterization of the conflict as an unjust imperialist adventure as opposed to a morally justified anti-fascist resistance bought the ill prepared Soviet Union much needed time.<sup>3</sup>

In response to the demise of the anti-fascist resistance, the Communist left faction of the Popular Front vocalized its condemnation of the West and admiration for the Soviet Union with much greater frequency. The Washington, D.C. branch of the American League for Peace and Democracy (ALPD), for instance, submitted a statement to its members outlying its position towards Nazi Germany's rise as an imperial power in August 1939. Emboldened by its occupation of Czechoslovakia and the Sudetenland, the Third Reich absorbed the Free City of

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<sup>2</sup> Antony Beevor, *The Second World War* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), 11-21.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 191-204.

Danzig, Poland. For the ALPD, the consequences were clear. “The demands of Hitler for the possession of Danzig and the Polish Corridor involve the destruction of Poland and the consequent strengthening of the war plans of German Fascism.” Similar to its actions during the Munich Agreement, “the ruling class of England and France...plan again to ‘appease’ aggression by surrendering Poland as they surrendered Austria, Czecho-Slovakia [*sic*] and Spain, as they are attempting to surrender China today.” The western democracies, through their refusal to join a collective security accord, had sold out the Popular Front.<sup>4</sup>

The Communist Left was not the only faction to express grievance with the Allied Powers. William Pickens of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) also protested the West’s actions, or lack thereof, in Spain. A collaborator of Thyra Edwards in the Negro People’s Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (NPC), Pickens promoted the Republican movement throughout 1938. Writing from Parpigan, France, he spoke of the abundance of food sitting idly in a market just four hours from Barcelona. The excess of food would immeasurably change Spaniards’ lives, Pickens insisted. “To me it looks very dumb,” he wrote, “that France and Britain will help Germany and Italy by permitting the people of Spain to be starved into submission.”<sup>5</sup>

While all identified the West’s complicity in Nazi Germany’s increasing strength, the Communist left also hailed the Soviet Union as the sole bulwark against imperialism and fascism. “It has served notice on British imperialism,” the ALPD described the non-aggression

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<sup>4</sup> Washington Branch: American League for Peace & Democracy to “Dear Members,” Aug. 25, 1939, Records of the Special Un-American Activities Committee, 1938-1945 (“Dies Committee records” hereafter), box 1, fol. Aug. 25, 1939 Press Release, Washington, D.C.: National Archives.

<sup>5</sup> “Pickens’s Picturesque Picku,” *Nashville Defender*, Oct. 27, 1938, Thyra Edwards Papers (“Edwards papers” hereafter), Scrapbook Concerning the Tour of the Negro People’s Ambulance for Loyalist Spain, Chicago: Chicago History Museum.

pact, “that the scheme of turning fascist aggression to the east is no longer feasible.” The pact, they insisted, was the last beckon of hope in achieving peace in Europe. “It has shown then that fascists can be met by a clear and forceful statement of policy in opposition to aggression.”<sup>6</sup>

The NNC’s communist faction also defended the non-aggression pact as a peace measure. Max Yergan, A. Philip Randolph’s successor as NNC President, equated Nazism with British imperialism as a basis for non-intervention. “It is the clear record of history,” Yergan spoke before a peace rally, “that the aggressions of Hitler and Mussolini [in Ethiopia] took place not despite the opposition, but as the result of deals and agreements arrived at by the governments of Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy.” The fight for Spanish democracy also fell upon the “connivance of Britain and France—and the indirect help of the government of the united States—to yield to and accept the fascist regime of General Franco.”<sup>7</sup>

In dramatic fashion, the NNC embraced an alliance with British imperialism in response to Germany’s eastern advance in June 1941. Now, Yergan proclaimed, “Never was the need for the Negro people to defend the United States greater than today when Hitler menaces the independence of this country and threatens the freedom and equality of all peoples.” The fluidity of the NNC’s stance towards war was clear evidence of its fealty to the Soviet Union by 1939. Its criticism of the West was also reflective of a legitimate grievance against the Allies for their anemic, if not emboldening, response to the Axis’s war plans. This conviction brought intense

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<sup>6</sup> Washington Branch: American League for Peace & Democracy to “Dear Members,” Aug. 25, 1939.

<sup>7</sup> Max Yergan, “Text of address by Max Yergan given at the Emergency Peace Mobilization, Sept. 1, 1940, 5, Max Yergan Papers (“Yergan papers” hereafter), box 206-6, fol. 18, Howard University: Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.



factionalism within the NNC. For it compelled African-American communists to portray Soviet policy as one built on peace and the preservation of democracy.<sup>8</sup>

Several studies detail the Cold War's impact on black international protest in the immediate post-war era.<sup>9</sup> Debates over the Soviet Union and the factionalism that followed within the Popular Front were also fueled by the rising fear of communism. Under the chairmanship of Democratic Congressman Martin Dies of Texas, the House Committee to Investigate un-American Activities (commonly referred to as the Dies Committee) investigated any organization deemed subversive, taking a particular interest in the anti-fascist movement. For the American right, a small cadre of communists dedicated to fomenting revolution secretly controlled the NNC, ALPD, Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and many others. This was an accusation with which the NNC was all too familiar. From 1935 to 1939, foes of the NNC routinely labeled the organization a communist front. The NNC responded to such claims with a collective rebuke. The Dies Committee's anti-communist crusade, in fact, engendered considerable harmony among congress leadership. The signing of the non-aggression pact and subsequent outbreak of war in Europe, however, exposed the NNC as an organization whose internationalism overlapped considerably with the Communist International. Consequently, non-

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<sup>8</sup> Max Yergan, "Some Problems of the Negro People in the National Front to Destroy Hitler and Hitlerism," n.p., n.d. [1941], Yergan papers, box 206-5, fol. 41, Howard University: Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Black Americans Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

communists within the congress concluded that the NNC was no longer a viable institution in the struggle of anti-fascism, racial justice, and union empowerment.

The idea that communism was a blight on the struggle for race equality was widely shared by those outside the National Negro Congress (NNC). For its founders, the American Communist Party (CPUSA) had demonstrated its genuine solidarity. NNC President A. Philip Randolph, lifelong member of the American Socialist Party (SPUSA) and American Federation of Labor (AFL), stood firm against the “‘red scare’ bogey” during the black Popular Front’s early years. Coming to his fellow NNC officers’ defense in 1936, Randolph assured, “Negroes who elect to be Communists need make no apology for it. That is their right. It is guaranteed by the federal Constitution. Communists are not criminals.” The essence of the black Popular Front, Randolph maintained, was to harmonize all desperate political factions dedicated to resisting fascism. Persecuting communists was antithetical to that struggle. “Can Negroes who are segregated, lynched, mobbed and jim crowed,” he asked, “yell like mad dervishes for the blood of Communists?”<sup>10</sup>

Incensed with the communists’ stance towards the non-aggression pact and fearful of government reprisals, the anti-Stalinist left now appropriated much of the burgeoning Cold War rhetoric. By 1940, A. Philip Randolph espoused a militaristic anti-communist stance. “Negroes who have...made basic progress under democracy,” he spoke, “are compelled by enlightened self-interest to help the United States win the cold war, and a hot one if it should come.” Randolph viewed it as a “moral responsibility” for African Americans to aid the nation’s “ideological war.” Anti-communism, however, was not solely a cynical political tactic but was also a genuine belief in liberal democracy. Though the United States routinely failed to live up to

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<sup>10</sup> A. Philip Randolph, “Randolph Says Race Congress Not Communist,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 29, 1936, 1 and 23.

its democratic ideals, workers and minorities “possess the right to fight for their rights.”

Conversely, “nowhere in the totalitarian Communist world do minorities or labor possess the right to fight for their rights.”<sup>11</sup>

For those who remained in the NNC, their support for communism was not solely driven by an infatuation with the Soviet Union but by a deep frustration with marginalization and extralegal violence in their own country. “History will judge the New Deal government not by what it did but by what it failed to do,” said Max Yergan. “Severe limitations under which Negroes live with regard to participating in existing jobs,” drove the NNC onto a more militant path. “The basic menace of segregation, lynching and all the other contradictions of the professed democracy of our country,” instilled a great delusion. Yet, their steadfast belief in the Soviet Union’s centrality to social equality compelled them to defend communism at all costs, exposing them to ideological contradictions. As John P. Davis once proclaimed in Leningrad, “long live the greatest of present day leaders of the working class, Joseph Stalin!” Thus, while the NNC’s national leaders, whether communists or otherwise, agonized under Cold War pressures, they played the decisive role in the black Popular Front’s decline.<sup>12</sup>

### **Searching for Communists**

In May 1938, Democratic House Representative Martin Dies of Texas was appointed to serve as chairman of a seven-person committee designed to investigate any political organization engaged in “un-American” propaganda activities. The objective of the investigation was three-

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<sup>11</sup> A. Philip Randolph, “Should Negroes Help the U.S.A Win the Cold War against the U.S.S.R.?,” n.p., n.d. [c1940s], Papers of A. Philip Randolph (“Randolph papers” hereafter), reel 30, frame 840.

<sup>12</sup> Max Yergan, “The Negro in the Vanguard of the Fight for Democracy,” speech delivered at the Mother Zion Church in celebration of Negro History Week, Feb. 11, 1940, 10 and 12, Yergan papers, box 206-6, fol. 31 and John P. Davis, “Statement of John Davis, Secretary of the American Negro Congress,” n.p., n.d. [1937], Files of the Communist Party of the USA in the Comintern Archives (“Comintern files” hereafter), fond 515, delo 4125.

fold: to understand the scope of un-American propaganda activities, to uncover the extent of foreign influence of said un-American organizations, and to aid congress by proposing legislation. The power of the Dies Committee was considerable. All investigative agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Postal Inspection Service (PIS), were authorized to work under the committee's behest. Representative Dies also held the power to subpoena witnesses.<sup>13</sup>

In a series of hearings throughout the early months of the Dies Committee's investigation, the chairman noticed something peculiar. "It became very evident to me," spoke Dies, "that there were certain groups and organizations...who were extremely anxious to investigate Nazism and Fascism and were willing to cooperate with this Committee to that end." The committee received numerous accounts of activities of the German American Bund (GAB) and its supposed connection to Nazi Germany. The testimony from former members as well as the details emerging from correspondence letters and photographs "tend to show a close relationship" between the GAB and the Reich. According to Dies, the relative efficiency with which the Dies Committee investigated the GAB was a cause for concern. While many were willing and able to assist in the investigation of the far right, "when it came to Communism they were either opposed to a real exposure or strangely indifferent."<sup>14</sup>

Activists' unwillingness to cooperate with the Dies Committee's investigation into communism was the principle justification for the unrelenting pursuit of the Popular Front. The political tactics of anti-fascists convinced Dies that "we must expose not only the Communists

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<sup>13</sup> "Heads Propaganda Quest," *New York Times*, May 29, 1938, 3 and "Maps Wide Inquiry into Propaganda," *New York Times*, Jun. 19, 1938, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Dies, "The Real Issue is Plain," made on the National Radio Forum arranged by the Washington Evening Star and broadcast over the National Broadcasting Company, Aug. 30, 1938, 731-732, Dies Committee records, box 1, fol. Press Releases 1938.

but those who think they are cleverly using the Communists for political advantage,” when in fact, “the Communists are using them to disseminate the Marxian doctrine of atheism and class hatred.” As a result, Dies expressed concern not primarily with the CPUSA but with more ideologically diverse groups within the left. Most members of the ALPD, he believed, were “entirely innocent and have been duped into joining” the Popular Front “on account of the lofty purposes which they [communists] profess.” Most members “are wholly unaware of any Communist influence.” The presence of communists within organizations such as the ALPD, as well as its policy agenda reflecting the larger goals of the CPUSA, indicated a broader conspiracy, quite possibly, by the Soviet Union. Communism, after all, need not require a large following but rather “a well trained and tightly organized minority” capable of secretly controlling other movements.<sup>15</sup>

The southern Democrat claimed to oppose fascism as much as communism. On one occasion, Dies even downplayed the plausibility of a communist takeover. It was “too old, its ways too well known, its anti-religious character too evident” for Americans to ever accept its proposals. “The danger from Communism,” therefore, “is the labor and progressive movement rather than the national as a whole.” This was supposedly the committee’s great fear. The rise of fascism in Europe was predicated on the influence of communism in the unions and their allies. Societal toleration of communism, therefore, engendered sympathy towards fascism among conservatives and industrialists. “America contains within her borders,” he explained, “some sort of ingredients that Hitler and Mussolini used for their brew in Europe.” That ingredient was the fear of socialism. Thus, the Dies Committee justified its unrelenting pursuit of the Popular Front under the banner of diffusing far right momentum. “Progressives and labor unions,” he warned,

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<sup>15</sup> Dies, “The Real Issue is Plain,” 732 -733 and Martin Dies, Address delivered over mutual Network, Oct. 31, 1938, 7, Dies Committee records, box 1, fol. Speeches 1938.

“have got to understand that there can be no cooperation or toleration of communists in our organizations.”<sup>16</sup>

For the time being, the black Popular Front proceeded undeterred by Dies’s warning. Standing before 20,000 CPUSA members at Madison Square Garden, James W. Ford warned of fascism’s growing prowess in the U.S. The Munich Agreement, he argued, “stimulated...the revival of the reactionary, anti-Negro, anti-Semitic, and anti-Catholic activity and encouraged the fascist-minded bourgeoisie and their reactionary accomplices.” One of the most dangerous consequences of Munich was the rise of anti-Semitism. The West’s conciliations, he argued, validated far right sentiment. “The struggle against anti-Semitism,” is therefore, “an integral part of our fight for a progressive America.” Max Yergan similarly spoke to the far right’s fabricated “connection between Jews and movements which they describe as subversive.” “Anyone at all intelligently familiar with the long campaign waged to discredit, debase and exploit the Negro people will see at once” the techniques of anti-Semitism. To combat fascism and all its portents, they pronounced, the U.S. must join the collective security alliance before it was too late.<sup>17</sup>

The fate of collective security was being determined in Spain. John P. Davis understood that the failure to lift the embargo would not only ensure a Nationalist victory but would also force the Roosevelt Administration to abandon the New Deal in favor of raising armaments in preparation for a continental war. Black anti-fascists, therefore, searched for additional ways to assist the democratic movement. By December 1938, the NNC agreed to help organize the “Lift the Embargo Conference” in Washington, D.C. alongside the ALPD and five pro-Spanish

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Dies, “speech files/press releases,” n.p. n.d. [1939], 2, Dies Committee records, box 1, fol. Undated 1939 Press Release.

<sup>17</sup> “Foster Urges U.S.-Soviet Collaboration,” *Daily Worker*, Jan. 24, 1939, 1 and 5; Speech of James W. Ford, -Lenin Memorial, Jan. 22, 1939, Claude A. Barnett papers (“Barnett papers” hereafter), box 342, fol. 8, Research Center: Chicago History Museum; and Max Yergan, “Democracy Knows no Race,” radio address, June 12, 1939, Yergan papers.

Popular Front organizations. “Loyalist Spain must not become another Czechoslovakia!!,” declared one of the organizational sponsors. Stressing urgency, Reverend Arthur D. Gray of the NNC and Harry Lamberton of the ALPD stated that an emergency conference addressing both local and global atrocities was desperately needed. “It is essential,” they wrote, “that we map out a program of action to protect the peoples of the world from Fascist aggression.”<sup>18</sup>

In the lead up to the conference proceedings, Thyra Edwards prompted consternation among her comrades for her stern criticism of the ALPD. She expressed frustration over, what she perceived as, the League’s anemic focus on white supremacy. Failure to address segregation in the nation’s capital and its effects on the black delegates, she warned, would invite a “broad attack” from African-American newspapers. This would “cloud the pertinent and extraordinary” objectives the conference was designed to address. She also disapproved of the NNC’s narrow framework for combating police brutality. Arguing with her fellow socialists, Edwards asserted that the utilization of police forces against black workers in picket lines, strike zones, hunger marches, and unemployment demonstrations evidenced the salience of class oppression in anti-black violence. John P. Davis reasoned that African-American deaths at the hands of police in D.C. were driven by their skin color, not their class. No major strike involving black workers, he

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<sup>18</sup> “Ship Ambulance Donated to Loyalist Spain,” *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 12, 1938, 4; Thyra Edwards to John P. Davis, Dec. 28, 1938, part 1, reel 11, frame 776; Unknown [name ineligible] to John P. Davis, Jan. 3, 1939, part 1, reel 11, frame 942; Joel Berrall to “Dear Friend,” Dec. 14, 1938, part 1, reel 12, frame 135; John P. Davis to Senator Alba Barkley, n.d. [1938], part 1, reel 12, frame 152; Joel Berrall to “Dear Friend,” Nov. 8, 1938, part 1, reel 12, frame 232; Reverend Arthur D. Gray and Harry Lamberton to “Dear Friends,” Feb. 23, 1938, part 1, reel 13, frame 201; all found in NNC papers.

noted, occurred during this period. Thus, “I should like you to tell me how else we could have done it,” he frustratingly wrote.<sup>19</sup>

Despite tensions between Edwards and her fellow congress officers, approximately 1,200 delegates representing unions, women’s clubs, youth groups, peace organizations, and churches gathered in the nation’s capital. At the Rialto Theatre, the conference commenced under the banner “Labor and Democratic Rights,” a discussion led by prominent union officials including B.F. McLaurin of A. Philip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. The delegates roared in applause upon hearing a telegram sent by Tom Mooney, the socialist and labor activist recently pardoned after serving a twenty-two year prison sentence in San Quinton. The ALPD’s Dr. Harry F. Ward summarized the platform as a fight in the defense of the Wagner Act and the unemployed, ending lynching as well as all forms of discrimination against African-Americans, and eliminating anti-Semitism. In a clear acknowledgement of the black delegates, the conference passed a resolution affirming the ALPD’s support for voting rights and an end to discrimination in D.C.<sup>20</sup>

In regards to foreign policy, the conference demanded an end to the embargo on Spain and the enforcement of one on Japan. Upon conclusion, more than 800 delegates swarmed the halls of Congress lobbying Senators and House Representatives. During a banquet honoring Arnold Donowa, an African-American physician and member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (ABL), civil rights activists stressed the importance of African Americans to this effort. “We owe it to ourselves, as a minority people, as an oppressed people, as a progressive-minded

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<sup>19</sup> John P. Davis to Thyra Edwards, Dec. 17, 1938, part 1, reel 13, frame 9-10 and Thyra Edwards to John P. Davis, Dec. 15, 1938, NNC papers, part 1, reel 13, frame 11, both found in NNC papers.

<sup>20</sup> “American League Peace Congress to Begin Work Today,” *Daily Worker*, Jan. 6, 1939, 2 and Lowell Wakefield, “Peace Parley Ends, Forges Vigorous Plan to Curb Aggressors,” *Daily Worker*, Jan. 9, 1939, 1 and 7.



people,” Donowa spoke, “to share the sacrifices of the democratic forces in Spain.” Connecting the fight against fascism in Spain against the fight against Jim Crow at home, Donowa proclaimed, “the extension of democratic rights [in Spain] depends on the proper exercise of democracy by our government.”<sup>21</sup>

The conference was not without infighting. Louise Thompson expressed displeasure with Thyra Edwards’s alleged behavior during programmatic debates over the issue of racial segregation and its place within the broader objectives of the convention. Patterson claimed Edwards unfairly accused ALPD members of harboring white chauvinism. Edwards consequently failed to adequately assist the League in addressing the difficulties black delegates faced. Edwards instead preferred to watch the League embarrass itself, Patterson claimed. Edwards maintained the position that she was simply noting that the ALPD’s stance on race equality had become “less vigorous and more apologetic” than in previous years. A Popular Front that subordinated the black freedom struggle would be “open to question and certainly subject to attack by the Negro People.”<sup>22</sup>

John P. Davis also took the question of African American involvement seriously and advised the ALPD on how to recruit African Americans. He was, however, complicit in the convention’s lethargic approach to the problem of a racially segregated delegation. Possibly influenced by the turbulence that occurred at the ALPD’s Pittsburgh convention the year prior, Davis maintained the position that forcing white-only hotels to accept black delegates would derail the convention proceedings. Instead, he proposed a “practical measure” of securing

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<sup>21</sup> Wakefield, “Peace Parley Ends, Forges Vigorous Plan to Curb Aggressors,” 7 and Arnold Donowa, quoted by “Surgeon who Aided Spain is Honored,” *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 21, 1939, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Thyra Edwards to “Jimmy” [James W. Ford], Jan. 26, 1938, Louise Thompson Patterson papers (“Patterson papers” hereafter), box 15, fol. 29., Emory University: Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

housing for black delegates in black communities. In regards to providing food, he suggested that “special arrangements” be made in select hotels where both black and white delegates could eat together in private dining rooms.<sup>23</sup>

Davis’s accommodation of D.C.’s racial structure did not evidence a shift to the political right, as Edwards described it. Nor did it indicate a pattern of the NNC softening its position on race equality within the Popular Front. Rather, the decision to forgo a struggle against segregation signified a growing weariness among the officers due to the congress’s constant lack of funds. “The National Negro Congress faces serious organizational problems,” Davis wrote an ALPD officer. The NNC could no longer afford to engage in any “special mobilization” of black delegates for other Popular Fronts. Consequently, he encouraged the League to take on the burden of requiring blacks participants on its own. By placing the responsibility of promoting black equality on a predominately white association, the D.C. convention consequently lacked the anti-racist vigor it previously exuded.<sup>24</sup>

Coinciding with the embargo conference, the Dies Committee submitted a rhapsodically toned report to Congress. The committee classified the NNC, ALDP, and nine other anti-fascist organizations as communist fronts. As for the NNC, many in the national executive committee “are outspoken Communist sympathizers, and a majority...are outright Communists.” The NNC, as well as all fronts, were engaged in “successful efforts to peacefully and progressively solve the economic problems of a people within the framework of a constitutional democracy government,” but were secretly under the control of a revolutionary vanguard. As such, the communists gathered “great and greater influence within, and ultimately control of such forces,

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<sup>23</sup> John P. Davis to Steve Nelson, Dec. 17, 1938, part 1, reel 14, frame 234-236 and John P. Davis to Steve Nelson, Nov. 9, 1938, part 1, reel 14, frame 237, both found in NNC papers.

<sup>24</sup> Davis to Nelson, Nov. 9, 1938.

and thus being able to influence the policy of the United States in accordance with Soviet interests.” This, the report concluded, was nothing short of a “struggle between democracy on the one hand and dictatorship on the other.”<sup>25</sup>

The Dies Committee’s sole witness against the NNC was Walter S. Steele, well known in rightwing political circles. Steele served as editor of the far right *National Republic* and chairman of the lobbying group dedicated to immigration restriction known as the National American Coalition on National Security. He also served as an advisory board member for an anti-Semitic political clique known as the Paul Reveres. His case against the NNC was partially based on speeches given by congress members affiliated with either the CIO or CPUSA such as John L. Lewis, James W. Ford, and Max Yergan. Steele, in fact, claimed Yergan was an “alien” from South Africa. In reality, Yergan was a native of Raleigh, North Carolina and served as a missionary for the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in South Africa during the 1920s and early 1930s. Steele was also interested in A. Philip Randolph’s keynote speech at the Philadelphia convention in which he hailed the legacies of eighteenth and nineteenth century black revolutionaries. Evidence also stemmed from NNC officers’ public writings on fascism and capitalism. Steele’s so-called revelations spanned over 400 pages of Dies’s initial volume of hearings.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted by “Negro Congress is Called the ‘Red’ Front,” *Afro-American*, Jan. 14, 1939, 13 and U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Report of the Special Committee on Un-American Activities, Jan. 3, 1939, Pursuant to House Resolution 282 (75<sup>th</sup> Congress) and House Resolution 26 (76<sup>th</sup> Congress), 1-4, Dies Committee records, box 1, fol. Original Report and Signatures, 1939.

<sup>26</sup> Unknown [John P. Davis] to Congressman Adolph J. Sabath, Feb. 1, 1939, NNC papers, part 1, reel 14, frame 887; “Negro Congress Leader Assails Dies Committee,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 11, 1939, 23; and Kenneth O’Reilly, “The Dies Committee v. the New Deal: Real Americans and the Unending Search for Un-Americans,” in *Little ‘Red Scares’: Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921-1946*, ed. Robert Justin Goldstein, 237-260 (New York: Routledge, 2014), 243.

Like Steele, Martin Dies considered immigration a national security threat. In his mind, “alien-minded groups and organized blocs” were at work in undermining constitutional government. The October Revolution, Dies warned, demonstrated how “a tightly organized minority can out-manuever an unorganized majority.” Leftist European immigrants were now seeking to replicate political terrorism through the Popular Front. Though communists constituted a minority in the anti-fascist movement, Dies acknowledged, the CPUSA successfully manipulated radicals and socialists in order to sow “chaos in America, out of which Communism hopes to emerge the victor.” “They join other organizations,” the plot follows, “such as the labor union, peace organization...in order to capture control.” This effort was not limited to the U.S. It was the communists in France who instigated the nation-wide strike, he warned, resulting in a communist dictatorship. “The communist influence imported to Spain from enslaved Russia,” Dies declared in a speech in New York, “doomed the Republic...and was responsible for the slaughter of a million Spaniards.” All signs pointed to a conspiracy by radical immigrants to foment chaos.<sup>27</sup>

Enraged by Dies’s tactics, John P. Davis wrote Speaker of the House William B. Bankhead stating that never at any time did the Dies Committee indicate any interest in the NNC nor were any members given the opportunity to confirm or deny Steele’s charges. For Davis, Steele and the Dies Committee’s interpretation of NNC literature was concrete evidence that both were determined not to investigate communism but rather to deny African Americans their constitutional rights. If the committee concerned itself with un-American activities, Davis insisted, “why did it not investigate the un-American conspiracy in the South to disfranchise

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<sup>27</sup> Martin Dies, “Special File/Press Releases & Speeches,” n.p., n.d. [1940], 3-9, box 1, fol. Undated, 1940 Press Release and Martin Dies, speech at Madison Square Garden, Nov. 29, 1939, 2, box 1, fol. November 30, 1939 Press Release, both found in Dies Committee records.

free-born Negro American citizens.” Davis also noted Dies’s consistent opposition to anti-lynching legislation. All evidence suggested that the congressman had “proved himself an enemy of the Negro people, an enemy of the Constitution of our country, [and] a protagonist of fascism and un-Americanism.”<sup>28</sup>

Under pressure from Davis, along with an additional 2,000 letters of protest, seven Congressional members demanded the Rules Committee cease funding for Dies’s investigation. Representative of eastern Pennsylvania James P. McGranery denounced the report and defended Davis along with members of the Philadelphia council. “No action by the Committee can rectify the wrong that has been done,” McGranery spoke. “I’m very much surprised that the Committee did not have before it a real Communist like Earl Browder,” he thundered. Under pressure from an African-American constituent, Representative Joseph B. Shannon of Missouri also came to the NNC’s defense. In a broader attack, Representative Kent Keller of Illinois introduced a resolution calling for the Dies Committee’s replacement with a new committee consisting of four additional members, presumably to be filled by progressives. Representative Vito Marcantonio of New York, a staunch supporter of the NNC, backed John P. Davis’s accusation against Walter S. Steele by linking him with the fascist organization known as the Silver Shirts. In so doing, Marcantonio accused Dies of shielding, if not abetting, the far right.<sup>29</sup>

Only three weeks after the congressional progressives’ failed attempt to thwart the Dies Committee, General Francisco Franco received official recognition as the legitimate government of Spain from Great Britain and France. In a desperate attempt to keep the embargo campaign

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<sup>28</sup>John P. Davis, quoted by “National Negro Congress Seeks to Block Dies Committee Funds,” *New Journal and Guide*, Jan. 21, 1939, 4.

<sup>29</sup>James P. McGranery, quoted by “House Progressives Block Move to Stampede Dies Fund Approval,” *Daily Worker*, Feb. 2, 1939, 1 and 5 and Adam Lapin, “Deaf to Protests, Committee Backs Dies,” *Daily Worker*, Feb. 3, 1939, 1 and 4.

alive, African Americans continued to press the polity on the repercussions of a Nationalist victory. “The colored people of America,” Paul Robeson wrote the NPC, “must ever keep in mind that the reactionary forces which are seeking to smash democracy in Spain are the same forces which would destroy our constitutional rights at home.” With the support from almost one hundred black political leaders, Thyra Edwards circulated a petition declaring the civil war as the “battleground where the issue between darkness and enlightenment is being decided.” The military success of the Axis-backed insurgency would embolden “every means, ideological, economic, social, to destroy minorities, of whom we are one.”<sup>30</sup>

Edwards and the NPC despondently accepted the Republicans’ defeat but resolutely determined to assist the refugee movement. For Edwards, the rapid succession of military conflicts in Europe overshadowed the glaring conditions of the Spanish refugees living in desolate abandonment in France. After the war’s conclusion, the government of Mexico offered resettlement for 25,000. It was vital that the NPC assist in the transition, Edwards believed. The refugees must “arrive with some tangible evidence that Negro Americas are their neighbor in the real sense of neighbor.” At an NPC conference held in New York in early August, everyone agreed to help raise funds to provide for transportation. Edwards left for Mexico the following month to document and promote the government’s humanitarian aid, leaving the student activist Pauli Murray in charge of the NPC. The committee even agreed to expand its human rights work by aiding other refugees left homeless from the Axis, appointing Max Yergan to travel to Europe in order to coordinate.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “Chamberlain Set to Accept Burgos,” *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1939, 5; “Robeson Warns of Fascist Peril to Negroes in Cable,” *Daily Worker*, Feb. 21, 1939, 2; and Quoted by “US Negro Leaders Join Drive Against Embargo on Spain,” *Daily Worker*, Feb. 18, 1939, 2.

<sup>31</sup> William Lloyd Imes and Thyra Edwards to Claude A. Barnett, Aug. 30, 1939, Claude A. Barnett papers (“Barnett papers” hereafter), box 342, fol. 8; “Italy is ‘Civilizing Ethiopia by

Edwards, once again, embarked on a nation-wide tour, giving lectures at universities and high schools on the need to relocate the more than half a million Spanish refugees. The fall of Spanish democracy, Edwards implored the audiences, did not portend the fall of the human rights struggle. Minority groups and democratic nations the world over must aid the Spanish anti-fascists through aiding the resettlement of refugees, she maintained. In Tampa, Florida, Edwards joined local unions and Popular Front organizations in a 5,000 strong demonstration demanding the lifting of the Spanish embargo. Beginning at the Labor Temple, the parade made its way to City Hall and the Court House Square. Included in the crowd were the Cigarmakers International Union and the International Longshoremen's Association, unions consisting of sizable African-American members.<sup>32</sup>

The Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) pledged full support to Spain as well. During its third annual conference in Birmingham, the international affairs panel unanimously urged the U.S. to join with the Soviet Union and the democratic nations in resisting the Axis. Under the leadership of African-American communist youth leader Dr. James E. Jackson, Howard Lee of the Young Southern Democrats, and Thyra Edwards, the panel also denounced Japan's murderous occupation of Manchuria. As the *Daily Worker* described it, the panelists "bitterly condemned the Japanese-fascist humbuggery that Japan is the friend of the darker races." In bombastic fashion typical of the black Popular Front, the panel warned that "agents" of

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Letting Disease Destroy Its People, Says African Prince," *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 12, 1939, 13; "Thyra Edwards in Mexico," *Afro-American*, Sept. 16, 1939, 1; and "Thyra Edwards Surveys Refugees in Old Mexico," *New Journal and Guide*, Sept. 16, 1939, 5.

<sup>32</sup> "5,000 Parade in Tampa, Fla. to Aid Spain," *Sunday Worker*, March 5, 1939, 1-2; "Thyra Edwards Speaks at Atlanta University," *Chicago Defender*, May 6, 1939, 23; "Thyra Edwards to Speak at Washington Hi," *Atlanta Daily World*, Apr. 27, 1939, 3; "Conditions in Africa and Spain Discussed," *Chicago Defender*, March 11, 1939, 4; "Asks Aid for Loyalists," *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 11, 1939, 3.

Japanese imperialism were lurking within universities and black communities in order to “win support among the Negroes for the murderous invasion of China.”<sup>33</sup>

While 1939 was a year marred by political and military defeat abroad, it was still one of solidarity within the black Popular Front in spite of a congressional investigation. John Lovell, Jr. of the NAACP’s D.C. branch wrote John P. Davis proclaiming that thanks to the NNC, “the united front for fighting racial and class discrimination in Washington is in better health now than at any time in the past.” The National Urban League’s Lester Granger, a key figure in the NPC and co-founder of the congress, was also praiseworthy. In a review of James W. Ford’s *The Negro and the Democratic Front*, Granger applauded all aspects of the CPUSA’s platform: an independent farmer-labor party, support for the union movement, the struggle against fascism, and cooperation among all minorities. Though a vocal critique in the past, Granger admired the CPUSA’s willingness to adapt to new social conditions. “With forces of reaction cohering into a dangerous fascist menace,” he explained, “it is essential that forces opposed to that fascism shall organize into a protection for Democracy.” Ford’s leadership in the NNC, Granger concluded, provided valuable lessons for any black figure who expressed reservation towards communism.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Fall of the Popular Front**

Esteemed figures like Lester Granger reassessed their position towards the black Popular Front after members of the NNC praised non-aggression between fascism and communism. At a mass meeting under the auspices of the CPUSA’s Harlem division, James W. Ford noted his

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<sup>33</sup> G. Egerton Harriman to John P. Davis, April 6, 1939, NNC papers, part 1, reel 16, frame 726 and Ben Davis, Jr., “Negro Youth Parley Hails Roosevelt Stand for Peace,” *Daily Worker*, May 2, 1939, 3.

<sup>34</sup> John Lovell, Jr. to John P. Davis, June 27, 1939, NNC papers, part 1, reel 17, frame 270; and Lester Granger, “Along the Party Line,” *Opportunity*, March 1939, 90-91, Records of the National Urban League (“Urban League records” hereafter), part 1, box N34, vols. 14-17, 1936-1939.



party's past support for armed struggle such as the Irish, Chinese, Ethiopians, and other African nations' war against colonialism. Such was the case throughout the Popular Front. The West, however, refused to join the Soviet Union in the anti-fascist resistance. "We Communists, of America and all countries," Ford explained, "wanted and did everything in our power to bring about the formation of a real anti-fascist front." The U.S., France, and Great Britain, instead, chose conciliation with the Axis. The Soviets, thus, "fought for years alone without a single great power coming to its support." This came to be the most vocalized rationale for the non-aggression pact. The Red Army's occupation of East Poland, communists in the NNC insisted, was a natural consequence of the West's failure to join the Popular Front.<sup>35</sup>

Max Yergan also expressed disillusionment with the West. "While we are justified in checking and overthrowing fascism," he explained, "when we aid the present Chamberlain government in England and the Daladier government in France, we are not aiding democracy." While the defense against fascism remained a priority, an alliance with the West was no longer tenable in the minds of the NNC's communist faction. When pressed on his position towards the Soviet Union, Yergan responded that the non-aggression pact was "the one great contribution to world peace and democracy to come out of the conflict thus far." The Soviet Union's occupation of East Poland, Yergan insisted, had not only halted fascism's reach but also exposed Great Britain, France, and Germany as the true aggressors. The imperial conflict, Yergan argued, was also the logical consequence of fascism, and military preparedness in the United States was in danger of following a similar pattern. "If the people permit constitutional liberty in this respect to

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<sup>35</sup> James W. Ford, quoted by "The Negro People and the Imperialist War," *Daily Worker*, Oct. 23, 1939, 4.

be overridden,” NNC Secretary Max Yergan spoke, “Europe’s lesson makes it clear that no other liberties may be retained.”<sup>36</sup>

The NPC adopted a similar position. Denouncing a *Pittsburgh Courier* editorial insisting on the war’s irrelevance to black America, the NPC emphasized the consequences of the European crisis for the black freedom struggle. After all, “it was the treachery of the British and French Tories which sold out Ethiopia to the butcher Mussolini,” and, “Chamberlain’s pro-fascist Munich line which betrayed Austria, Spain, Czechoslovakia into the hands of Hitler.” The coalescence of fascism and capitalism demonstrated the “triumphs of the Soviet Union in obtaining the non-aggression pact, thus shattering the fascist axis.” This diplomatic accord “stands out brighter than ever as a contribution to Ethiopian independence and to Negro rights.”<sup>37</sup>

Outraged by this report, Lester Granger called a meeting of the NPC’s national board members. As Pauli Murray described it, a financial emergency ensued as interest among African Americans dwindled after the non-aggression pact. Any plan of forming an organization devoid of any communists was also unpractical. As Murray described the situation, “By November it was clear to me that there was simply not enough interest within the Negro community to warrant a separate organization which was barely meeting administrative expenses.” As a result, Murray submitted a report claiming that the NPC was no longer able to pay for a full-time official and resigned. An aggrieved Granger resigned soon after. The “Who’s Who of Negro

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<sup>36</sup> Max Yergan, quoted by “Seven Negroes Aboard Liner from Europe,” *New York Amsterdam*, Oct. 7, 1939, 1; Max Yergan, quoted by Eugene Gordon, “Negro Leader Calls Present Conflict Imperialist War,” *Daily Worker*, Oct. 9, 1939, 2 and Max Yergan, speech delivered at the National Conference on Constitutional Liberties, June 7-9, 1940, 5, Yergan papers, box 206-6, fol. 30.

<sup>37</sup> Negro People’s Committee, quoted by “The Negro People and the War Situation,” *Daily Worker*, Sept., 9, 1939, 6.

notables,” as Murray described the NPC, was now over. Devastated from the fallout, Edwards remained in Mexico. Upon return in early 1940, she never served in the NNC again.<sup>38</sup>

Professor Willis N. Huggins was also once a staunch support for the black Popular Front and an active leader in the Hands-off Ethiopia Movement. Like Granger, Huggins now reviled the Communist left. If African-American communists in the NNC “were ever really ‘sold’ on Russia,” wrote Huggins, “this Nazi-Soviet accord gives them small comfort.” For the line drawn by the CPUSA evidenced its lack of interest for the black freedom struggle. Exceedingly smitten with the European revolutionary faith, black radicals now “find themselves out on the Communist limb and away off from home in terms of the true spirit and real purpose of democracy in America.” In biting inflection, Huggins encouraged them to “climbs down and come home. The latch string is loose and the key outside the door. Come on back into the fold and put shoulders to the wheel here in America.”<sup>39</sup>

William L. Patterson reprimanded Huggins’s attacks against African-American communists. Though he avoided discussing the non-aggression pact, for took great insult with Huggins’s perceived “un-American and subversive attacks upon Negroes.” For Patterson, Huggins’s critique was engaging in the righting’s bidding. The admonishment against communists and their allies was “nothing less than a report to the Dies committee.” The Communist left, Patterson rebuked with scorn, “know American imperialism. We have seen its courts in action, in Scottsboro, the Herndon case and the great fight of the N.A.A.C.P.” Attempts to discredit any organization engaging in anti-fascism were tantamount to a betrayal of black

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<sup>38</sup> “Red Deal Stirs Harlem Group,” *New York Amsterdam*, Nov. 18, 1939, 1; Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Harper & Row), 133-134; and Gregg Andrews, *Thyra J. Edwards: Black Activists in the Global Freedom Struggle* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 144-145.

<sup>39</sup> Willis N. Huggins, “Harlem Reds Out On Limb,” *Chicago Defender*, Sept. 16, 1939, 13.

America. “That is what lynching, mob violence, segregation and the chain gang amount to.”

“Communism in America,” Patterson insisted, “flows from the un-American practices of the Martin Dieses...and other lynch-supporters to whom the doctor sears allegiance.”<sup>40</sup>

The ALPD hoped to avoid factionalism by adopting a more measured position. In a letter addressed to all members, the national board reaffirmed its past support for the repeal of the various Neutrality Acts passed during the early and middle 1930s. “A victory for Hitler,” the board reiterated, “would destroy a democratic approach to the problems now oppressing humanity.” After the declaration of war in Europe, the board supported the Roosevelt Administration’s new policy of cash-and-carry, an agreement to sell non-military goods to the Allies under the condition that they pay immediately. Cash-and-carry, however, should last only six months so as to see if the policy is “really serving the purposes of democracy by extending economic aid to the British and French government.” “These imperialist forces,” after all, “were responsible for the Treaty of Versailles, the invasion of Ethiopia, the betrayal of Spain and Czechoslovakia.”<sup>41</sup>

The League also feared more aggressive interventionist policies for domestic reasons. “The hysterical intolerance...toward radical groups and aliens,” the board warned, “is evidence of what may be expected from a war-time [congressional] session.” Depriving constitutional liberties under the guise of a national security measure was a possible consequence, the board warned. “The talk about national unity,” they reasoned, “is limited to the dominant political and economic interests.” In order to confront what it described as “war hysteria,” the League

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<sup>40</sup> William L. Patterson, “Mr. Patterson Says Communists Are Red, Not Yellow, And Admonishes Mr. Huggins,” *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 21, 1939, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Harry F. Ford, “The Task for the American League for Peace and Democracy in the Present War Situation: A Statement to the Members of the American League for Peace & Democracy from the National Executive Board,” Sept. 23, 1939, 2, Dies Committee records, box 57, fol. Programs, American League Against War and Fascism.

maintained the position that only through popular consent of foreign policy decisions would prevent hyper-nationalism.<sup>42</sup>

The ALPD hoped to evade debate over the non-aggression pact all together. National Chairman Harry F. Ford acknowledged the intensely divergent opinions. While some considered the Soviet Union an aggressor and co-conspirator of Nazi Germany's war plans in Poland, others considered the non-aggression pact a measure necessary to defend socialism. A third faction insisted that the ALPD held no obligation to adopt a position at all. This was viewed by majority opinion as the most reasonable response. As a result, Ward informed League members that "we neither condemn or approve the actions of the Soviet Union." "Our members," he explained, "will have their own opinions on these matters and will express and implement them in their political organization outside the League." What mattered most was "not to let controversial issues arising out of shifting developments in Europe prevent us from working together with maximum energy on the immediate tasks of the League." Still, the ALPD's loyalties to the Soviet Union was clear. A high ranking ALPD officials stated, "if serious proposals of the Munich type were made, all League branches should immediately call meetings." In other words, diplomatic accords between the Axis and the capitalist nations deserved reprobation, but any Soviet involvement in German interests was met with dead silence. As the official stated, "The National Office has issued no general directive on the Danzig issue" for reasons that "there does not seem to be any action which the League as a whole could profitably take."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ford, "The Task for the American League for Peace and Democracy in the Present War Situation," 3-4.

<sup>43</sup> Ford, "The Task for the American League for Peace and Democracy in the Present War Situation," 4-5 and T.L. Harris to Lucy Hancock, Aug. 18, 1939, Dies Committee records, box 57, fol. Correspondence, NA, 1939.

While the black Popular Front failed to adopt a calculated approach, the ALPD was unable to provide guidance. The League underwent a steady decline of income by January 1940. To offset the costs, it was forced to reduce expenses by closing numerous offices, reducing its staff, and consolidating the national office with the New York office. In order to remain financially solvent, the League negotiated a loan of \$5,000 to be repaid over several months. The war in Europe, however, commenced much sooner than anticipated, resulting in a further decline in income. Additionally, the government demanded the League pay its social security and unemployment taxes since 1936, an amount of \$5,000. Consequently, the League looked to the NNC for financial assistance. With a depleted treasurer, the NNC was in no position to assist.<sup>44</sup>

The non-aggression served as a tremendous propaganda tool for the Dies Committee. Just days after Germany and the Soviet Union's diplomatic accord, CPUSA General Secretary Earl Browder provided an exhaustive two-day testimony. For Dies, Browder's defense of non-aggression meant that no communist "would dare condemn" the Soviet Union, which "shows the depths of cynicism to which the materialistic philosophy of communism sinks." The Party's deep loyalty to the Soviet Union was undeniable proof of the Popular Front's political allegiances. The fronts, or "transmission belts" as Browder described them, contained few Party members but acted as "devices for the transmission of Communist Party influence to large sections of our people," Dies wrote. "Well meaning Americans who reject the teachings of communism," Dies alarmingly concluded, "but who support the program of the Communist Party through their membership in these 'transmission belt' organizations, can no longer be in doubt regarding the real nature of these movement." Now was the time for these "gullible citizens, politicians and labor leaders who have served to advance the purposes of Stalin's propaganda machine in this

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<sup>44</sup> Walter Rautenstrauch to John P. Davis, Jan. 11, 1940, NNC papers, part 1, reel 18, frame 235.

country to clarify their position.” For Dies, progressives must either accept the consequences for their participation in the Popular Front or sever their connections.<sup>45</sup>

The SNYC’s Edwards E. Strong advised the committee to investigate the political regimes of the South. The denial of African-Americans’ right to vote, serve on juries, sit in legislative halls, or enjoy equal access to education were clearly un-American activities, Strong insisted. “As a Texan,” he wrote Congressman Dies, “you must know how Negroes are ‘Jim-crowed,’ lynched, and segregated in clear violation of the United States Constitution.” Also a native Texan, Strong described to Dies his first look at white supremacy in its most palpable expression. He recalled witnessing the lynching of black World War I veteran in Texarkana, “a reward for his participation in the war.” He offered the committee to provide testimony from southern blacks to corroborate these conditions. “The liberties of Negroes are very much more threatened by Klan-ism in America than by foreign ‘isms’ from abroad,” he insisted.<sup>46</sup>

Edward’s publicized letter was followed by praise for the NNC and ALPD from journalists. Referencing both organizations’ work in Washington, D.C., the *Chicago Defender* hailed the Popular Front’s organizational work on discrimination and police brutality. “We do not know,” the editorial wrote, “where Mr. Dies was during these struggles for the rights of the most forgotten sections of America, but he has made no effort to halt the murderous course of the district [*sic*] of Columbia police.” The NNC and ALPD’s ties to communism were not of the editor’s concern. “Black America has no quarrel with communism,” the article maintained. Rather, Congressman Dies’s appointment to the un-American Activities Committee poses the

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<sup>45</sup> Ernest Moorer, “Soviet Pact Aided U.S., Broke War Axis, Browder Tells Dies,” *Daily Worker*, Sept. 7, 1939, 1 and 6 and Martin Dies, address made over National Broadcasting Company, Sept. 17, 1939, 4-5, Dies Committee records, box 1, fol. September 17, 1939, Press Release.

<sup>46</sup> Edward E. Strong to Congressman Martin Dies, Oct. 31, 1939, Yergan papers, box 206-6, fol. 6.

greatest threat to black America. For it raises the question if a “certain element in Washington and elsewhere is not trying to bury the issue of lynching, Jim Crowism and segregation all together.”<sup>47</sup>

Undaunted, the Dies Committee called for a plausibly more credible witness. The African-American and Georgia native William O. Nowell was “one of the most important [witnesses] the committee has heard,” Dies claimed. An employee at the Ford Motor Company in Detroit since 1923, Nowell joined the CPUSA in 1929. Here, he claimed to have served in CPUSA’s Negro Committee and later organized the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC). In the Soviet Union, the *Chicago Defender* reported, he studied strategies of fomenting a “revolutionary uprising” such as “how to mobilize in blocks, street fighting, how to develop a general strike out of a local strike, how to wreck trains and other methods of revolutionary tactics.” The extravagant claims validated Dies’s insinuation of the CPUSA true motivations. By 1936, Nowell continued, the CPUSA charged him with organizing the NNC’s Detroit council whose aim was to “unite the southern and northern Race workers, intellectuals and professionals.” The NNC, as told by Nowell, was nothing more than a communist plot.<sup>48</sup>

John P. Davis dismissed Nowell’s testimony as a “monstrous lie” and a “wanton character assassination.” Nowell never held a local or national office in the NNC, Davis claimed, nor was he a delegate to the 1936 or 1937 national conventions. The *Daily Worker*, in fact, noted that Nowell was expelled from the CPUSA in 1936 for supposedly promoting factionalism between black and white employees. Afterwards, Nowell became a significant figure in the

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<sup>47</sup> “The Defense of American Democracy,” *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 11, 1939, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Congressman Martin Dies, Jr., quoted by “Dies Group Cools to First Lady Talk,” *New York Times*, Nov. 29, 1939, 15; “Dies Committee Reports to Congress,” *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 13, 1940, 9; and Special Committee on Un-American Activities, “The Dies’ ‘Red Paper,’” Dec. 1, 1940, Dies Committee records, box 1, fol. December 1, 1940 Press Release.



American far right. Soon after his expulsion, Nowell worked for Gerald L.K. Smith, president of the Share our Wealth Movement and eventual founder of the Christian Nationalist Crusade, as an advisor on promoting anti-communism and anti-unionism in black communities. Nowell was later shown to have worked as a labor spy for the Ford company and a paid witness for the government in deportation proceedings. In exchange for a yearly salary of \$5,400, Nowell repeated his testimony verbatim in every trial.<sup>49</sup>

Although Davis's official position within the party structure remains unclear, his ideological affinity was evident. During his overseas trip after the Philadelphia convention in late 1937, Davis attended the Soviet Union's twentieth anniversary celebration of the October Revolution. After witnessing a mass parade on the Red Square, Davis proclaimed to the Soviets, "tens of thousands of my people have watched with real understanding the struggles you have made...to build a poor undeveloped country into one of the leading industrial countries of the whole world." In a possible reference to the Soviet Union's contribution to Republican Spain, he also praised the communist nation as one of "the greatest forces for social good, for Democracy and for peace that the world has ever known." "I can say for my own people," he concluded, "long live the Soviet Union!, long live the memory of Lenin!, long live the greatest of present day leaders of the workers class, Joseph Stalin!"<sup>50</sup>

Pro-Soviet sentiment grew considerably by the late 1930s as a result of fascism's unfettered rise. In September 1939, the Soviet Union's parliament, then known as the Supreme

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<sup>49</sup> John P. Davis, quoted by "National Negro Congress Head Nails Dies 'Witness,'" *Daily Worker*, Dec. 1, 1939, 4; Glen Jeansonne, *Gerald L.K. Smith: Minister of Hate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 119; and Dave Riddle, Davis Elsil, and Steve Babson, *The Color of Law: Ernie Goodman, Detroit, and the Struggle for Labor and Civil Rights* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 259.

<sup>50</sup> Chatwood Hall, "Davis Helps Soviets Mark Anniversary," *Chicago Defender*, Dec. 4, 1937, 7; and Davis, "Statement of John Davis, Secretary of the American Negro Congress," 1-4.

Soviet, voted unanimously to expand the right to vote regardless of race, color, or creed.

Reporting from Moscow, African-American journalist Austin Worth celebrated the communist nation for achieving what “Georgia and Arkansas, Mississippi and Florida and the crest of the Bible Belt find impossible under their bourbon-landlord rule.” How a nation whose territory stretched from Europe to Asia successfully could enfranchise all national minorities, Worth asked. “Oppression of races and exploitation of man by man has been abolished, there are no possessing and nonpossessing classes, and equality of all rights have been granted to all citizens without any distinctions, racial or otherwise.”<sup>51</sup>

The outbreak of war intensified the investigation of any organization who vocalized this sentiment. Fulfilling the ALPD’s greatest fear, the Dies Committee capitalized on President Roosevelt’s executive order calling for the “strengthening of the national defense within the limits of peace-time authorization” in September. Under the guise of national emergency, Dies submitted a proposal to Attorney General Frank Murphy calling for listing the ALPD as a foreign agent. The League functioned, Dies wrote, in according to the wishes of the Comintern. During the Poplar Front, for instance, the ALPD was one of the Comintern’s many tools “upon the building of people’s front movements and governments” in capitalist nations. Strengthening his claim, Dies cited the Washington, D.C. branch’s forceful statement praising the Soviet Union’s actions in East Poland. Dies also subpoenaed Representative Vito Marcantonio. As head of the International Labor Defense (ILD) alongside William L. Patterson, Marcantonio denied any communist involvement. The public questioning, however, was clearly taking a toll on the congressman. Davis later wrote Marcantonio expressing his gratitude for his contribution to the NNC, which, “I know, [has] subjected you to tremendous pressure. I am simply writing this

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<sup>51</sup> Austin Worth, “Soviet Parliament,” *Chicago Defender*, Sept. 16, 1939, 15.

letter to say that your courage in the face of all forms of intimidation is heartening to all of us and deserves our warmest administration.”<sup>52</sup>

For the remainder of the year, the ALPD spent the vast majority of its time and resources combating the Dies Committee. The use of publicity, mailing, mimeographing and distribution entailed considerable financial hardship. This left the League unable to hold large mass meetings, its essential source of fundraising. The League was able to hold one fundraiser at the “Stop Dies Donor Dinner,” reducing its deficit to just over \$700. In the end, the executive board asked each member to pay one dollar in order to clean its debts. By February 1940, the Washington branch of the ALPD voted to discontinue all activities with the executive committee set to close two weeks later. All that was left for the national office to do was “wind up the affairs of the League satisfactorily.”<sup>53</sup>

More so than anti-communism, non-aggression forced the League to shut its doors. The ALPD reaffirmed the position that peace and democracy were the vital objectives of the anti-fascist movement. “Democracy and civil rights are under increasingly sharp attack from reactionary sources in this country as well as abroad.” All maintained the position that American involvement in the European conflict was a dangerous portent for the country as well. The preservation of civil and labor rights was now teetering on a knife’s edge, they warned. The question now, however, was whether or not the ALPD was the organization most capable of leading this struggle. The “sharp differences” within the League over how to address the

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<sup>52</sup> Congressman Martin Dies to Frank Murphy, Oct. 26, 1939, box 1, fol. October 26, 1939 Press Release; Vito Marcantonio, testimony to the Committee on Un-American Activities, Oct. 17, 1939, Records, box 62, fol. ILD Marcantonio Testimony, both found in Dies Committee records; President Franklin D. Roosevelt, quoted by “Emergency Proclamation,” *New York Times*, Sep. 9, 1939, 6; John P. Davis to Congressman Vito Marcantonio, June 19, 1940, NNC papers, part 1, reel 19, frame 897.

<sup>53</sup> Lucy Hancock to “Dear Member,” Feb. 2, 1940, Dies Committee records, box 57, fol. American League Against War and Fascism, Washington Branch.

changing circumstances in Europe rendered united action impossible. Demoralized, the League could no longer carry on.<sup>54</sup>

The outbreak of war in Europe and the gradual rollback of New Deal initiatives brought an existential crisis for the NNC by 1940. With the fall of the Popular Front, congress officials had no choice but to re-think their strategy towards global and national action. Some looked to the new social conditions as an opportunity. Attempting to reorganize and redouble its efforts, Max Yergan insisted that “the present situation both national and international provides just that set of circumstances needed to revive interest in the Congress.” The SNYC also insisted on formulating a new strategy. For Edwards S. Strong, the possibility of an American entry into the European conflict, combined with perpetual economic hardships, mandated that the SNYC “leave no stone unturned in our efforts to make a contribution in the welfare of young people in the South.”<sup>55</sup>

### **The Origins of Cold War Civil Rights**

With A. Philip Randolph presiding, the national executive board released a statement in February condemning the Dies Committee. “The unsuccessful attempt of the Dies Committee to smear the National Negro Congress is only one link in the chain of reactionary forces in America.” In September 1939, the board noted, the Dies Committee subpoenaed John P. Davis to testify but was never given the opportunity to appear. Why Chairman Dies would change course and refuse to hear Davis’s testimony, they asked. “Was it because Mr. Dies felt he might be the one to be embarrassed rather than our representative?” Or “was it because Mr. Dies is afraid of

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<sup>54</sup> “Report of the Executive Committee of the Washington Branch: American League for Peace & Democracy,” Feb. 1, 1940, box 57, fol. ALPD, Washington Branch.

<sup>55</sup> Max Yergan to John P. Davis, Oct. 18, 1939, NNC papers, part 1, reel 18, 151-152 and Edward E. Strong, quoted by “Youth Propose Dies Committee Investigation of Klan,” *New Journal and Guide*, Dec. 30, 1939, 3.

the persistent and ugly rumor that he is himself a member of the Ku Klux Klan?" Efforts to discredit the NNC will not stop "our struggle to win economic freedom and democracy." "We leave in the American people to judge by our deeds whether it is we or the Dies Committee who are un-Americans," the statement concluded.<sup>56</sup>

Defiant of government attacks, the NNC chose to hold the convention at the Department of Labor's Auditorium in Washington, D.C. In John P. Davis's words, the convention will "stamp out the rising tide of reaction in the United States Congress." With the presidential election approaching, the NNC determined to exact maximum pressure on the lawmakers responsible for eliminating the New Deal. "The heart of reaction is in Washington," Max Yergan spoke before the D.C. council. Randolph personally pledged a ceaseless struggle during this election year. In a fundraising letter, he assured, "the Third National Negro Congress...will be a truly effective weapon in the battle for the economic freedom of our people." "Let us join hands," he proclaimed, "and put these great plans for our future work over."<sup>57</sup>

The global crisis surrounding the convention planning added impetus. In a statement signed by Davis, Randolph, and NNC Treasurer U. Simpson Tate, the congress declared, "in a world ridden with war, it is time again to summon the Negro people and the friends of the Negro people to close ranks, join hands and courageously deal with the crisis which today threatens the security of every section of Negro America." Thousands of black workers were now unemployed from cuts to jobs programs. "From the throats of more than five million Negro wage-earners,"

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<sup>56</sup> National Executive Committee, quoted by "Negro Congress Executive Condemns Dies Committee," *Daily Worker*, Feb. 2, 1940, 5 and "Congress Charges Dies with Shielding Klan," *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 3, 1940, 2.

<sup>57</sup> "Max Yergan, quoted by "Yergan Scores Dies Committee in D.C. Speech," *Afro-American*, Feb. 17, 1940, 23; Congress Charges Dies with Shielding Klan," *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 3, 1940, 2; John P. Davis to Local Executive Board of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Alliance, Jan. 25, 1940, part 1, reel 14, frame 365-366; and A. Philip Randolph to Elwood M. Dean, Jan. 25, 1940, part 1, reel 16, frame 381, all found in NNC papers.

they thundered, “there comes today a single cry: ‘Give us a chance to earn our daily bread.’”

Those who yearned for war were the ones seeking to, once again, thwart proposed anti-lynching legislation. Members of Congress were utilizing “the threat of war as a smoke-screen behind which to attack our living standards and civil liberties.”<sup>58</sup>

Enraged by the New Deal’s rollback, the failure to pass an anti-lynching bill, and preparation for war, many within the NNC welcomed John L. Lewis’s invitation to join the CIO’s political arm known as Labor’s Non-Partisan League. In Lewis’s words, a political collective of farmers, industrial workers, African Americans, and youth would force Congressional leaders to “devote themselves to establishing the highest degree of security, of happiness and freedom for its citizens.” “We do not want foreign ventures,” he maintained. Max Yergan heralded Lewis’s stance. “For what he stated constitutes the basis of human progress and of national and international peace.” Fashioning this sentiment into policy, the NNC and its allies in the CIO embraced a far more confrontational stance. Six of the most powerful CIO unions held a conference pledging to take a leading role at the D.C. convention. Encouraged by militant unions’ support, Robert S. Robinson of the NNC’s Los Angeles council declared, “It’s time the Negro people take an independent political role with labor.”<sup>59</sup>

The CIO’s Labor’s Non-Partisan League was originally designed in 1936 to galvanize the working class as well as raise money on behalf of President Roosevelt’s reelection. Naturally, the NNC desired to work alongside the League in this effort. “We have watched with deep interest your gallant fight to ride our nation of poverty and suffering,” congress officers wrote Roosevelt

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<sup>58</sup> A. Philip Randolph, John P. Davis, and U. Simpson Tate, quoted by “National Negro Congress Calls Capital Convention for April,” *Daily Worker*, Feb. 20, 1940, 5.

<sup>59</sup> “CIO, AFL Unions Rally in Support of 3<sup>rd</sup> Negro Congress,” *Daily Worker*, April 15, 1940, 5; Robert S. Robinson, quoted by “Negro Urges Race Stand with Labor for Peace, Jobs,” *Daily Worker*, April 23, 1940, 3; “Negroes’ Support is Asked by Lewis,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1940, 5; and Yergan, “The Negro in the Vanguard of the Fight for Democracy,” 12.

in 1938. “We pledge to you our support for every progressive measure undertaken by you.” By 1940, however, the NNC felt betrayed. Consequently, the NNC now formed a left opposition alongside the Non-Partisan League. “Attacks by the Dies Committee, assaults on the Wagner Act, anti-trust indictments against trade unions...these things are not isolated events,” the National Maritime Union’s (NMU) Joseph Curran spoke to the NNC, “they are part of a general drive against the American working people...a drive which certain forces believe necessary if we are to be drawn into the war.”<sup>60</sup>

The resolutions adopted at the D.C. convention conveyed this collective outrage. One condemned the administration for supplanting its “concern for the welfare of the people” in favor for the “extension of trade advantages to the British and French.” “The war cannot receive consideration of the Negro people,” it continued, “because we have ourselves not yet secured full citizenship rights.” Though the NNC refused to adopt an isolationist position, it forwent much of the anti-fascist internationalism that defined its principles from 1935 to 1939. In Article II of the NNC’s Constitution, the congress pledged to “promote the cause of peace” and “to oppose imperialist wars and oppression.” A small faction led by A. Philip Randolph introduced a series of resolutions presumably to ameliorate the anti-Roosevelt fervor. The resolutions committee denounced the proposals as attempts at “disrupting the internal harmony of our Congress.” Terrified, Edgar G. Brown of the United Government Employees Association stormed the stage pleading with the majority black audience to resist what he perceived as the CPUSA’s monopolization of resolutions, an accusation with credibility due to William L. Patterson serving

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<sup>60</sup> Eastern Regional Conference, National Negro Congress to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, n.d. [1938], part 1, reel 14, frame, 905; John P. Davis to Eli Oliver, Oct. 11, 1938, part 1, reel 14, frame 320; “The Resolutions of the Congress,” n.d. [1940], 1, part 1, reel 19, frame 115-120; and Joseph Curran, “Address of Joseph Curran, President of the National Maritime Union to the Third National Negro Congress,” n.p., April 28, 1940, 6, part I, reel 18, frame 327-332, all found in NNC papers.

as chairman. “God help the Negro, if we do not stand by the policies of President Roosevelt who now has us at peace,” Brown warned. Delegates booed and hissed, forcing Randolph to pound the gavel. “I speak for the Negro people,” Brown spoke before exiting the podium, “although probably not for some of the white Communists in the audience.”<sup>61</sup>

As the crowd settled, Reverend Gray handed the podium to John L. Lewis. As if speaking at a political convention, Lewis condemned the disenfranchisement of African Americans and promised the CIO’s dedication to its overthrow. “Let there be no mistake about it,” he promised, “labor will not rest until the right to vote becomes the right to every citizen.” After pledging support to the black freedom struggle, Lewis transitioned to the issue of war. “If it is our mission to save Western civilization, then let us begin by saving it right here on our own country,” he thundered. Though he shunned the European and Asian conflicts, he also avoided any appeal to isolationism. “Let no one doubt that the sons of American working men and women will be first in line should the integrity of our nation be attacked.” Referencing World War I, however, Lewis noted with resentment, “the failure to solve domestic problems can often be obscured by the excitement of a foreign war.” It is easier, he protested, to foment nationalism among all during times of war than it is to arouse solidarity among working people during times of economic upheaval. “The temptation is strong to forget the hard difficulties of unemployment of the aged, of ill health, of housing” under the weight of a foreign conflict. Only under the collective voice of the working class can the nation avoid the drumbeat of militarism.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> “The Resolutions of the Congress,” 1-3; “Constitution of the National Negro Congress—Article II,” NNC papers, part 1, reel 18, frame 842; Edward G. Brown, quoted by “National Negro Congress Attacks FDR; Pledges Aid to Communists,” *Associated Negro Press*, n.d. [1940], 12, Barnett papers, box 342, fol. 7; and Resolutions Committee, quoted by “Negro Congress Adjourns in Spirit of Full Unity,” *Daily Worker*, April 30, 1940, 1 and 4.

<sup>62</sup> John L. Lewis, “Text of Lewis Speech to Negro Congress Delegates at Washington Conference,” *Daily Worker*, April 27, 1940, 4.



Lewis concluded his outreach with an attack against the Roosevelt Administration. Reading from the Democratic Party's platform of 1936, Lewis reminded the audience of the unfinished fight for full employment. "We believe that the party should meet its obligation as set forth in this platform," Lewis argued, "Yet at no time since 1936 has even this obligation to the unemployed been fulfilled." Only by avoiding war will full employment come to fruition, he argued. Avoiding any mention of wagging a presidential campaign, Lewis instead demanded "that the political leaders of the nation stand by and deliver or give way to those who can." This effort necessitated "ceaseless influence of American citizens like you and me." "Only when these economic and political evils are wiped out," he concluded, "will the Negro people be free of them."<sup>63</sup>

A. Philip Randolph followed with a far more sobering account of the international crisis. The League of Nation's failure to "rally the moral forces of the world against" the Axis Powers and their imperialist designs spawned a "tribal fury of competition and rivalry for place, prestige and dominion in world power-politics." Relating the imperial conflict to the black freedom struggle, Randolph warned that the Axis Powers empowered the rise of American fascism. The Dies Committee, he proclaimed, is "the normal outgrowth of an era of capitalist decline as manifested in the present crisis." As such, the Dies Committee operated as "a violent expression of an accelerated tendency of militaristic capitalism, the first fruit of a nascent fascism." If the Dies Committee charges communists as foreign agents responsible for strikes and protests, he explained, then "all minority groups, such as Negroes, foreigners, trade unions, Jews and Catholics are eligible victims of this unreasoning hysteria." "Hence, minority groups, trade

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<sup>63</sup> Lewis, "Text of Lewis Speech to Negro Congress Delegates at Washington Conference," 4.

unions and lovers of democracy, whether you like Communists or not, have no alternative except to strive for the death of the Dies' Committee.”<sup>64</sup>

Randolph then spoke to the role of communism and its purported contributions to the fight for racial equality. Randolph considered the non-aggression pact a logical response by Russia to maintain its territorial integrity. However, this did not follow that the Soviet Union's preservation of its “national interest was, or is, compatible with world peace and democracy.” Like all empires, the Soviet Union “seeks the extension and expansion of its power over weaker peoples, regardless of color” despite its anti-racist and anti-colonial professions. African Americans and colonized nations must, in this respect, reject communism. The CPUSA “is controlled and dominated by a foreign state.” The NNC must “reject the collaboration or aid from Nazis, Communists, or any other foreign government.” “And in war,” he continued, “between the United States and Nazi Germany, the Negroes will take up arms against Germany. In a conflict between the United States...and the Soviet Union, the Negro people will go to war against Russia.”<sup>65</sup>

While Randolph defended any African American's right to join the CPUSA, he insisted that the NNC must maintain its political independence. “We, the delegates to this Congress,” he demanded, “have the moral responsibility and obligation thoroughly to fix in the mind of the public the unequivocal and definite fact and the National Negro Congress is not a Communist Front.” “If we don't do this,” he warned, “we would betray the faith the people have placed in us.” “Hence, our task is to wipe out the stigma of the Communist Front charge” by reaffirming its commitment to “the liberation of the Negro people, sustained by Negroes' resources.”

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<sup>64</sup> A. Philip Randolph, “The World Crisis and the Negro People Today,” n.p., n.d. [1940], 3-7, Randolph papers, reel 31, frame 434-446.

<sup>65</sup> Randolph, “The World Crisis and the Negro People Today,” 10-19.

Pledging loyalty to the United States, Randolph concluded, “We hail Franklin Delano Roosevelt...as the greatest living champion of peace, democracy and goodwill...We hail the struggle in America against Fascism, Communism and dictatorship!...Forward to peace, freedom and plenty!”<sup>66</sup>

The audience responded to Randolph’s speech with a deafening silence, giving way to only sporadic shouts of approval. According to Ralph Ellison, the crowd was initially eager to hear the “deep, resonant voice” in the hopes he it would “confirm the faith that had led them to make him their president.” As Randolph spoke, however, “his voice droned out abstract phrases; statistics rolled forth; the speech became involved and through it sounded unmistakable notes of Red-baiting.” Eventually, the audience became restless. “They had heard these arguments before,” he wrote, “arguments that sounded strange in the mouth of one who was supposed to be their leader.” Though many walked out in protest, Ellison remained seated in order to fully understand Randolph’s combative temperament. He could not. For this reason, Ellison “had sat through the address with a felling of betrayal.” “I did not realize it,” he concluded, “but I had witnessed a leader in the act of killing his leadership.” William L. Patterson similarly considered Randolph’s plea for the NNC to avoid the CPUSA out of political convenience as “evil in its pessimism” and “vicious in its defeatism.”<sup>67</sup>

Unfazed, Randolph calmly turned and asked for the report of the nominating committee, announcing Max Yergan as the next President. Accepting the honor, Yergan made the case for non-intervention. Devoting his entire speech to an exposition on the war in Europe, he warned of militarization’s potentially grave impact for African Americans. The very nature of the conflict

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<sup>66</sup> Randolph, “The World Crisis and the Negro People Today,” 23-24.

<sup>67</sup> “Communism Causes Split in Congress,” *Chicago Defender*, May 4, 1940, 1; Ralph Ellison, “A Congress Jim Crow Didn’t Attend,” *New Masses*, May 14, 1940; and William L. Patterson, “The Lynch Mob’s Rope Will Yet Be Destroyed,” *Daily Worker*, May 2, 1940, 7.

between fascism and capitalism entails an unending imperial struggle, resulting in the exploitation of all. In a blatant equivocation of the warring parties, Yergan proclaimed that both the Allies and Axis “resort to ruthless territorial expansion, both seize the goods of other people, both exploit racial, cultural and religious differences.” “Both are destructive of human rights,” he continued, “and depend upon undemocratic, anti-social procedure for their expansion and their maintenance.” American engagement with these imperial forces would only intensify oppression at home. “War subjects the people to the avalanche of propaganda, and hysteria such as even this country has known for the past months.” War conditions, he argued, favor the reactionary efforts of the Dies Committee to suppress dissent and thwart democracy. Only under conditions of peace, he concluded, can democratic rights extend to all.<sup>68</sup>

John P. Davis’s speech the following day set the tone for the remainder of the convention. He seconded the decision to join the Non-Partisan League and youth movements in order to collectively protest the “disastrous policy” of the Roosevelt Administration “taking sides” in the European war. “The Yanks are not coming,” he thundered. Self-evidently enraged by Randolph’s anti-Soviet sentiment, Davis went on a diatribe, “I firmly believe,” he insisted, “that the Negro will refuse to follow American imperialism in an attack upon the Soviet Union, will refuse to fall victims to anti-Soviet adventures, [and] will refuse to join America or world imperialism in any attack against the Soviet People.” He hailed the communist nation for its “many nations and people busy and working in amity, collaboration and peace” as well as for “their deep friendship and aid to all oppressed peoples.” The delegates responded to Davis’s speech with zeal. According to one report, “Delegates climbed upon seats, slapped backs, waved

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<sup>68</sup> “Randolph Quits National Negro Congress,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 1, 1940, 1 and 6 and Max Yergan, “The Negro People Fight for Peace,” n.p., April 27, 1940, 7-10, Yergan papers, box 206-6, fol. 37.

hats and handkerchiefs, yelled, stamped and whistled.” Marking a new chapter in the NNC, the reporter concluded, “From then on the cause of the conservatives, the New Deal supporters, and the Randolph faction was a lost one.”<sup>69</sup>

After the fallout, Randolph clarified his position. While he reiterated his opposition to the Soviet Union for its actions in East Poland and Finland, as well as Joseph Stalin’s purges, his primary concern stemmed from the political optics that emerged from the D.C. convention. For him, the NNC failed to disprove the Dies Committee’s allegations. “In fact,” he wrote, “the Congress has brilliantly succeeded in giving the charge every appearance of truth and validity.” Randolph insisted that the CPUSA was a “definite menace and a danger to the Negro people and labor” as a result of the convention proceedings. The approximately 300 white delegates forced the communist platform onto the NNC’s agenda. For Randolph, it was “perfectly ridiculous and distressing, if not comical, to observe the white delegates dominating the applause for Communists’ policies and tactics.” Randolph, thus, portrayed communism as a distinctly white ideology so as to deflect accusations of far left militancy against African Americans. “The Negro people,” he explained, “cannot afford to add to the handicap of being black, the handicap of being red.”<sup>70</sup>

Beginning with a false report from the *New Journal and Guide*, rumors circulated that the NNC had officially adopted a resolution opposing war between the United States and the Soviet Union. If such a war were to occur, the resolution supposedly stated, African Americans would refuse to enlist. In reality, no such resolution was even discussed let alone adopted. Not once did the NNC’s constitution even mention the communist country. Despite the paper’s acknowledged

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<sup>69</sup> “Lewis Urges Voters to Quit Roosevelt,” *Afro-American*, May 4, 1940, 1 and 6.

<sup>70</sup> A. Philip Randolph, “Why I Would not Stand for Reelection as President of the National Negro Congress,” *American Federationist*, July 21, 1940, box 342, fol. 7 and “Randolph Hits Critics in Negro Congress Affair,” *Chicago Defender*, May 25, 1940.

error, the report sent shock waves throughout the black political community. Former NNC supporter William Pickens declared “such a pronouncement is moral and real treason.” In a slightly thuggish tone, Pickens wrote, “why these fellows could vote and still live, is because this country” allows them to express “such fooling dreams.” If war between the two nations were to occur, “there will be abundant rooms in jail for the whole small bunch of them.” In a Sunday sermon, Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a previous supporter of the NNC in New York, similarly condemned the congress and called for all “people who are disloyal to the U.S.A. [to] leave these shores at once.”<sup>71</sup>

After the fallout from the D.C. congress, the NNC’s image as a communist organization became devastating. Congressman Arthur W. Mitchell of Illinois, the only African-American currently serving in the House of Representatives, condemned the congress as an anti-government organization controlled by the CPUSA. “I believe that communism,” he spoke on the House floor, “is seeking through its agents to disrupt the good feeling between the two races in this country.” Like Randolph, Mitchell condemned the white radicals in the NNC who sought “to take advantage of whatever dissatisfaction exists among the Negroes and are seeking to use the Negro as a tool against this government.” Directing his ire towards John L. Lewis, Mitchell considered the CIO head the “most dangerous outstanding leader in America today.” An appeal by Lewis to the NNC, Mitchell argued, was a deliberative attempt to form a communist

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<sup>71</sup> William Pickens, “Negro Congress Nonsense,” *New Journal and Guide*, Jun. 1, 1940, 8; John P. Davis, “The Open Forum,” *New Journal and Guide*, June 8, 1940, 6; “Secretary Davis on the Record,” *New Journal and Guide*, June 8, 1940, 6; and “Dr. Powell Would Deport Reds and Youth Congress,” *Afro-American*, June 29, 1940, 24.

dictatorship. “The Negro stands loyally by the American flag,” he reassured his white colleagues, “and will give his blood and his life to protect it against any foe.”<sup>72</sup>

White congressional members seconded Mitchell. Democratic Representative Robert G. Allen of Pennsylvania denounced the NNC’s pro-Soviet stance as constituting a “treasonable” offense. Republican Hamilton Fish of New York warned that “Communists have done everything in their power to exploit the injustices or inequalities that may exist among the colored people.” The NNC’s resolutions personified this tactic, he claimed. Democrat of Mississippi William M. Colmer predicted mob violence against the ones “responsible for stirring up turmoil.” “As one who comes from the South,” he spoke, “I desire here and now to warn these self-styled leaders to stay out of the South with that kind of inciting propaganda.” “The white people of states like Mississippi,” he warned, “will not tolerate the communistic aggravation of the Southern Negroes.”<sup>73</sup>

Fearful of white violence, some depicted the NNC convention as a gathering of white communists and not a genuine expression of African-American grievances. Cornelius Maiden, an official AFL observer of the convention and chief southern field organizer for African-American AFL unions, despondently reported “our National Negro Congress has been utterly destroyed by the white Communists and CIO members from the East.” Black southern workers would never join the likes of John L. Lewis and his backers in the CPUSA, he promised. Fearing accusations of anti-Americanism, Maiden assured, “our freedom was given to us by those of this country who were willing to go to war in order to set us free.” “I wish to say most emphatically,”

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<sup>72</sup> Arthur W. Mitchell, quoted by “Mitchell Blasts Negro Congress from House Floor,” *San Antonio Register*, n.d. [1940], Barnett papers, box 342, fol. 7.

<sup>73</sup> Robert G. Allen, Hamilton Fish, and William M. Colmer, quoted by “Solons Say Negro Congress Ruled by Radicals,” *New Journal and Guide*, May 11, 1940, 3.

he emphasized, “that the Negroes of the South will respond to the call of the Commander-in-Chief.”<sup>74</sup>

In September, Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Union voted to bar all communists from office or committee membership at its biennial convention. Using the rhetoric of the Dies Committee, the union denounced the “trojan horse” of subversive ideologies. In protest of “Fifth Column” elements lurking within the union movement, the resolution declared, “It is the general and iron-clad religious habit and policy of Communists to follow the dictates and line of the Communist party.” The CPUSA, in turn, demands all to “subordinate and sacrifice the interests of the trade union or any organization” at the behest of the Soviet Union’s foreign policy goals.<sup>75</sup>

By 1940’s end, Congressman Dies heralded his committee for its invaluable efforts in dismantling the Popular Front. “This was more difficult,” he wrote, “than the breaking up of the Nazi Front.” Anti-fascists, he reminded, “exercised real political influence” through its scores of individual and organizational members. “But one by one,” he bragged, “we took its component organizations and showed by incontrovertible evidence that each was a tool of Stalin’s revolutionary conspiracy.” Though he acknowledged the non-aggression pact’s detriment, he insisted, “long before...we had exposed the hypocrisy of the People’s Front in its pretended espousal of democracy.” In reality, the non-aggression pact brought upon the NNC what Dies never could have. Even he acknowledged that the CPUSA “was about to gain its greatest influence in the United States by attempting to represent itself as the spearhead of an ‘anti-

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<sup>74</sup> Cornelius Maiden, quoted by “Southern Negroes Will Not Follow Reds, Maiden Says,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 2, 1940, 1 and 6.

<sup>75</sup> All quoted by Ted Poston, “Porters’ Union Bars Reds,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sept. 21, 1940, 1 and 2.



Fascist' movement" prior to non-aggression. The communist Left was the author of the NNC's ostracism.<sup>76</sup>

### **War and Jim Crow**

"The U.S. government is oiling the machinery for defense," wrote the *Chicago Defender*. The rise of military Keynesianism bestowed government subsidies worth billions of dollars to segregated (in some cases with entirely white workforces) heavy industries in aircraft, steel, and shipping. "Are our people likely to be forgotten in this feverish preparation for war?," the *Defender* asked. What was needed more than ever, the paper demanded, was government action to end Jim Crow in the Roosevelt Administration's National Defense Program. Such action "is an essential phase in the mobilization of the people's morale for national defense." Anti-discrimination in the defense industry would now become the NNC's primary battlefield.<sup>77</sup>

A key concern for the NNC after the D.C. convention was to formulate a clear position on war and its importance to the black freedom struggle. "Unless our representative could be very alert in representing the true position of the Negro people in regard to the whole question of national defense," a delegate wrote President Max Yergan, "he might embarrass us." To clarify its objectives, John P. Davis outlined the two overarching objectives: "the united effort of the Negro people and the friends of Negro freedom to win economic and social justice" and "to keep our country out of war." African Americans fought in every war since the Revolution, the D.C. convention's resolution on imperialism stated. And yet, none are less "jim-crowed, lynched, held in peonage, disfranchised and discriminated against in their native land." The Roosevelt Administration's abandonment of the New Deal in favor of militarization only hardened

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<sup>76</sup> Martin Dies press release, National Broadcasting Company, Dec. 2, 1940, 1-5, Dies Committee records, box 1, fol. Dec. 2, 1940 Press Release and U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Report of the Special Committee on Un-American Activities, 1.

<sup>77</sup> "Jobs and Defense," *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 5, 1940, 14.

segregation and discrimination in both heavy industry and military institutions, the NNC insisted. With war looming, the congress determined to overthrow Jim Crow in the industries that stood to capitalized most from war mobilization.<sup>78</sup>

In light of this new reality, Max Yergan asserted that “the possibility of our country entering the present war as an ally of the British rulers is perhaps the most urgent and far-reaching issue the Negro people face today.” Though hardly an isolationist, Yergan insisted that only under peace will African Americans overthrow white supremacy. “On the eventuality of peace or war,” he declared, “depends [on] the possibility of carrying forward the struggle for fuller democracy or turning to fascist dictatorship in America.” “We denounce their [Nazi Germany’s] brutal persecution of the Jewish people,” Yergan reassured, “and we hope....that the yoke of these oppressors will be thrown from the shoulders of the German and Italian people.” However, “we must likewise condemn, and desire to see ended the destructive and oppressive imperialism personified in the ruling forces of Great Britain.”<sup>79</sup>

Civil rights organizations, he noted, considered war against the Axis an opportunity for black workers to secure jobs in the armament industries. Concurring, he acknowledged, “it is essential that, with defense plans already far advanced, masses of Negro workers be given equal opportunity to share in the training and job program.” The NNC, however, was unable, or unwilling, to reconcile its anti-war stance with its support for African American employment in

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<sup>78</sup> “The Resolution of the Congress,” 1-2; W.A. Hunton to Max Yergan, July 30, 1940, part 1, reel 18, frame 855; and Max Yergan to “Dear Delegate,” May 7, 1940, part 1, reel 19, frame 121, all found in NNC papers.

<sup>79</sup> Max Yergan, “Democracy and the Negro People Today,” (Washington, D.C.: National Negro Congress, Oct. 16, 1940), 8-10, Dies Committee records, box 89, fol. Negro Front Organizations and Pamphlets on Subject of Negro; Max Yergan to all delegates, May 7, 1940, NNC papers, part I, reel 19, frame 121; and “Proposed Memorandum of Agreement between the National Negro Congress and Labor’s Non-Partisan League,” May 6, 1940, NNC papers, part 1, reel 19, frame 873-876.

industries financially benefitting from war. Thus, while the NNC's national leadership placated the communist line by condemning military intervention, it did not dare obstruct the fight for black workers' rights to attain employment in the burgeoning factories.<sup>80</sup>

To accomplish the task, congress officers formulated a six-month plan to rally African American voters behind progressive candidates for city, state, and national office. Accomplishing such a goal required a "well-knit national organization capable" of organizing black communities. Consolidating their efforts, national congress officers concentrated their attention on thirteen states while allowing local councils from five other states to operate independently. In all cases, African American approximated at least five percent of the voting population in overwhelmingly urban districts. The congress also planned for six state conferences in Maryland, California, Pennsylvania, New York, Illinois, and Michigan.<sup>81</sup>

Given the wide condemnation of the NNC by revered figures such as A. Philip Randolph, the NNC sought any organization willing to assist. This brought the NNC ever closer to CPUSA-aligned organizations such as Louis T. Patterson's Internal Workers Order (IWO). The IWO's Negro Commission was particularly "anxious to establish close working relations" with the NNC. To accomplish this, Davis suggested Patterson hire one of the NNC's most gifted organizers Ishmael Flory of Chicago's Southside. "This would establish a liaison between the two organizations and make it possible for I.W.O. branches to secure membership and cooperation from our local councils throughout the country," Davis wrote. Increasing membership in both organizations would be "most important in terms of the trade union

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<sup>80</sup> Yergan, "Democracy and the Negro People Today," 11.

<sup>81</sup> "A Six Months Plan of War for the National Negro Congress, July 1, 1940 to January 1, 1941," 1, part I, reel 19, frame 283-289 and John P. Davis to John T. Jones, Sept. 30, 1940, part 1, reel 19, frame 866, both found in NNC papers.

movement and in terms of the coming national elections.” The IWO also distributed 300 copies of Davis, John L. Lewis, and Max Yergan's D.C. speeches at its fifth national convention.<sup>82</sup>

Another key component to the NNC's strategy was creating a youth division to work alongside the Non-Partisan League. Led by Louis E. Burnham, the youth division organized African American students around issues of war, conscription, and employment. Maximizing their efforts, Burnham and Max Yergan attended the convention of the American Youth Congress (AYC) in the hopes of pushing the young radicals to embrace civil rights. While the national defense program reach nineteen billion dollars, “jobs for Negro youth, and the civil liberties of the people have struck a new low level,” John P. Davis wrote the AYC. Instead of forcing defense industries to desegregate their workforces, “both major political parties promise us conscription and involvement in unjust foreign wars.” At the AYC conference in New York, Max Yergan also emphasized the “particular handicaps” of the African American youth. Employment discrimination “constitutes one of the most serious indictments of democracy in our land, and becomes the first charge upon our effort to raise the general level of employment.” Only by “concentrating on the battlefield which exists here in America,” will the fight for quality emerge victorious.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Samuel C. Patterson to John P. Davis, May 27, 1940, part I, reel 19, frame 587; John P. Davis to Samuel C. Patterson, part I, reel 19, frame 588; John P. Davis to Herbert Benjamin, June 24, 1940, part I, reel 19, frame 594-595; and John P. Davis to Samuel C. Patterson, Dec. 14, 1940; part I, reel 19, frame 588, all found in NNC papers.

<sup>83</sup> “A Six Months Plan of War for the National Negro Congress,” John P. Davis, “Minutes of the Meeting of the Administrative Committee of the National Executive Board—National Negro Congress,” June 9, 1940, NNC papers, part I, reel 19, frame 295-298; “Mitchell Favors Selective Draft,” *New Journal and Guide*, Aug. 27, 1940, 1; “Negro Congress Convenes,” *Chicago Defender*, April 27, 1940, 1; and John P. Davis to Norman Spelrein, May 4, 1940, NNC papers, part I, reel 18, frame 671; John P. Davis to Joseph Caiden, July 3, 1940, NNC papers, part I, reel 18, frame 677; and Roy Lancaster to Louis Burnham, Aug. 2, 1940, NNC papers, part I, reel 18, frame 763.

This coalition of African Americans, youth, and CIO unions officially adopted its anti-war stance at the AYC conference by declaring, “we refuse to be driven down the same path as in 1917,” where the “cry was ‘preparedness and ‘German spies.’” Today the slogan “is ‘National Defense and ‘Fifth Column.’” Condemning the New Deal’s militarization, the youth insisted “we stand ready to defend the true interests of our country, but not to protect the investments of a few in Europe and the Far East.” Though the AYC denounced military intervention, it also formed an “Anti-Fascist Youth” division designed to provide humanitarian aid to those in Europe and Asia. The AYC also denounced the Dies Committee and “all the other warmongers” for their suppression of political minorities. “Destruction of political rights of the Communists,” they roared, “has meant destruction of all organization of the people.” Mostly because of the NNC’s involvement, the AYC also adopted resolutions proposing both an anti-lynch and anti-poll tax bill. Most consequential, the AYC denounced racial discrimination under the national defense’s training program and promised to join the NNC’s in this effort.<sup>84</sup>

Soon after, the NNC, AYC, and Non-Partisan League agreed to conduct an “emergency peace mobilization” conference set to take place on Labor Day in Chicago. Out of this peace conference emerged the American Peace Mobilization (APM). For the NNC, the APM was a crucial vehicle for enforcing anti-discrimination in defense industries and armed forces. The NNC, for instance, described the Chicago conference as “striking two blows in a single week” at the Roosevelt Administration’s “continued segregation of Negro troops” as well as for “dropping

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<sup>84</sup> All quoted by N.Y. Youth Parley Closes With Pledge Against War,” *Daily Worker*, May 27, 1940, 1; Max Yergan, “speech given by Max Yergan at the Congress of New York Youth, American Youth Congress, at Mecca Temple,” May 24, 1940, 2-7, Yergan papers, box 206-6, fol. 4; “American Youth Congress Cabinet Minutes,” Sept. 27, 1940, 2-3, NNC papers, part I, reel 18, frame 713-717; and American Youth Congress, “Youth Congress Lauds Steps to Curb Discrimination in Defense Training Program,” Nov. 28, 1940, NNC papers, part I, reel 18, frame 679-680.

all pretense of attempting to secure passage of the anti-lynch bill.” Extralegal violence against African Americans, one African-American APM member argued, produced “situations destructive to the morale and detrimental to the preparations for national defense.”<sup>85</sup>

Journalists and other observers unanimously considered, excluding the *Chicago Defender*, the peace rally a communist front. Pushing back against claims of anti-Americanism, Max Yergan thundered, “the Negro people have defended and will always defend our country and its democratic institutions.” Thus, “it need hardly be pointed out that Negro Americans need no lesson in patriotism or Americanism from men like Congressman Martin Dies.” Peacetime conscription, however, was a direct assault on African Americans. For it “will mean the curtailment and possible loss of the limited democratic rights which Negroes enjoy today.” Conscribing black youth into the “vicious caste system” of the armed forces would only harden “the predatory forces in America.” Opposing the drafting of soldiers was “the best present-day Americanism. To oppose the draft is to work for peace and for that liberty and freedom guaranteed by the American Bill Rights.”<sup>86</sup>

The peace convention’s open hostility to the Roosevelt Administration deeply isolated the CIO’s militant faction. In a letter addressed to hundreds of his fellow union officials in New York, Joseph Curran asked for assistance in funding the Chicago convention. Dozens of locals, including Sidney Hillman’s powerful Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, denounced the peace meeting as a communist front. Enraged by Curran’s proposal, an official for the

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<sup>85</sup> Reverend John B. Thompson, *American Peace Mobilization* (Washington, D.C.: American Peace Mobilization, n.d. [1940]), 1, NNC papers, part I, reel 18, frame 440-442; John P. Davis to Frederick V. Field to Harvey O’Conner and Ishmael F. Flory, Oct. 16, 1940, NNC papers, part I, reel 18, frame 571-572; “Peace Mobilization Group Flays Roosevelt’s Policy,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 26, 1940, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Yergan, “Text of address by Max Yergan given at the Emergency Peace Mobilization,” 1, 5, and 8 and “Peace Mobilization, *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 17, 1940, 14.

Amalgamated promised to “lead a fight against Communist control” at the CIO’s next New York state convention. Angered by what they perceived as an attempt by communists to monopolize the CIO’s leadership, thirty-six officers wrote Senators D. Wroth Clark of Idaho and Gerald P. Nye of North Dakota demanding them to withdraw their participation at the peace conference to which they eagerly obliged. As a result of the overwhelmingly hostile view of the APM, the initial estimation of 15,000 delegates dropped to approximately 1,200.<sup>87</sup>

The forceful condemnation by CIO leadership (excluding John L. Lewis) of the APM was undoubtedly influence by the political climate in Washington. By the winter of 1940, Dies asserted that the CPUSA was entrenched in at least ten CIO unions engaging in organizational work in the defense industries within the prime goal of sabotaging American national security. In its 1,000-page “Red Paper,” the committee explained the communists’ agenda as engaging in “subversive infiltration into the armed forces of the country,” its “plans to sabotage national defense,” and “concentration of its efforts in the basic and war industries of the country.” Such plans were designed to utilize “civil war as the weapon with which its end are to be sought.” In the spring of 1941, Dies subpoenaed an APM member, Sarah V. Montgomery, and demanded she turn over all financial records and minutes of meetings of the D.C. branch. Refusing, Montgomery stated, “Your Committee has summoned us for the purpose of smearing; for the purpose of chocking off opposition to the so-called lend-lease bill which would bring war and fascist dictatorship to this country.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Quoted by “Call ‘Peace’ Mobilization,” June 6, 1940, 12; “Union ‘Peace Front’ Splits C.I.O. Here,” Aug. 26, 1940, 1 and 6; “Demand Senators Shun ‘Peace Front,’” Aug. 27, 1940, 23; “‘Sabotage’ of C.I.O. Charged by Curran,” Aug. 28, 1940, 13; and “Peace Delegates Fight Draft Bill,” Sept. 1, 1940, 10, all found in *New York Times*.

<sup>88</sup> Special Committee on Un-American Activities, “The Dies’ ‘Red Paper,’” Dec. 1, 1940, 1, box 1, fol. December 1, 1940 Press Release and Dies Committee press release, Nov. 25, 1940, 1, box 1, fol. November 25, 1940 Press release, both found in Dies Committee records; and Sarah V.

While the NNC's national leaders focused on electing city and state candidates endorsed by the Non-Partisan League, local councils focused on grassroots efforts. The NNC's Los Angeles council, for instance, partnered with CIO heads and community representatives to form a grievance committee, calling upon the LA County Board of Supervisors to issue a resolution banning discrimination in aircraft industries. For months, according to council president Robert S. Robinson, the aircraft industries such as the Vultee Aircraft Corporation, "hide their jim-crowism by passing out a couple of bread crumbs to Negro workers." Along with the heads of the state CIO and the United Auto Workers' aircraft division, Robinson presented "irrefutable evidence" of discrimination to the County Board of Supervisors. Convinced, the board passed an anti-discrimination resolution and agreed to call on the state legislature to outlaw discrimination in heavy industry all together. Unsatisfied, the NNC council held a legislative conference under the direction of Revels Cayton, secretary of the San Francisco-based Maritime Federation of the Pacific and member of the NNC. The convention concluded that nation-wide action was needed. "The aircraft industry is reaping huge profits from the defense program," thundered Robinson, "and in real fifth column fashion stages shutdown strikes against efforts to limit their profits."<sup>89</sup>

Three weeks later, African American trade unionist Valree Gilkey of Stockton, California was assaulted by police while selling the state CPUSA's *People's World*. According to the local ILD, the officers "pinned [Gilkey] against a plate glass window, and as he struggled to avoid being smashed into the glass, both officers started to hit him." One officer "went to the patrol

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Montgomery, "Statement of Mrs. Sarah V. Montgomery Before the Dies Committee, March 4, 1941, NNC papers, part I, reel 18, frame 522.

<sup>89</sup> "Fight Ban on Race Labor in Aircraft Work," *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 31, 1940, 7; "Negro Congress Plans War on Local Ku Klux Klan," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 11, 1940, 1; "Negro Congress, C.I.O. Union to Launch Job Drive," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 13, 1940, 7; and Robert S. Robinson, *Jim Crow in National Defense* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Council of the National Negro Congress, Aug. 2, 1940), 27.



car, secured his night stick and hit Gilkey three blows on the head” while the “second officer threw him to the pavement.” “The first officer kicked Gilkey in the genitals, kicked him in the ribs, and jumped up and down on him while he was on the ground.” Eventually, “Gilkey managed to push them off and rose to his feet, dazed, with blood spurting from his head, and in the presence of some 200 to 300 witnesses waited for the patrol wagon to come.” Gilkey did not receive medical treatment for his laceration to the scalp and cheek until he was bailed out of jail two days later. John P. Davis wrote Senator Sheridan Downey warning, “Local councils of the National Negro Congress...representing many thousands of Negro voters, are deeply incensed over this un-American activity.”<sup>90</sup>

The NNC was convinced that such actions would encourage African Americans to elect anti-war New Dealers. Because of its strict non-partisan policy, however, the NNC refused to endorse President Roosevelt Republican’s opponent Wendell Willkie. NNC Vice-President Charles A. Lewis did attend the Republican National Convention. Speaking before the Platform Committee, Lewis implored the Republicans to revitalize the legacy of Abraham Lincoln and Thaddeus Stevens by adopting the NNC’s eleven-point program. John L. Lewis, on the other hand, threw his full support behind the Republican. Thus, while the NNC continued to operate after the November elections, Lewis and the CIO left suffered a humiliating defeat. Though Roosevelt’s margin of reelection was smaller than that of 1932, African Americans and the working class remained his most loyal base of support. “But this is not to be interpreted in any way as a lack of deep appreciation [of black Americans] for the outspoken position taken by Mr. Lewis,” John P. Davis tried to reassure a Non-Partisan League official. African Americans, he

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<sup>90</sup> Ruth P. Brudney to John P. Davis, Aug. 14, 1940, part 1, reel 19, frame 537-538; John P. Davis to Senator Sheridan Downey, Aug. 22, 1940, part 1, reel 19, frame 539; John P. Davis to Adele R. Young, Aug. 22, 1940, part 1, reel 19, frame 540; and John P. Davis to John T. Jones, Sept. 30, 1940, part 1, reel 19, frame 866, all found in NNC papers.

claimed, “could not see the steady trend towards retrenchment of WPA and other labor and social services.” Rest assured, “it is clear to us that the resentment of the Negro People against the betrayal of their interests by the Roosevelt administration will grow.” For the “callous refusal of the administration to act...promise to make this betrayal clear.”<sup>91</sup>

Davis’s postulation never came to fruition. After the election, the Non-Partisan League’s top legislation official resigned in a public letter in which he lambasted John L. Lewis for supporting Willkie. Isolated more than ever from the labor movement, Lewis resigned his presidency of the CIO. His resignation settled nothing in regards to anti-communist investigations. In the spring of 1941, Representative Dies wrote Lewis’s successor Philip Murray insisting “the welfare of organized labor, to say nothing of our national security, depends upon your meeting the issue of communism in the C.I.O. squarely.” Angered by Murray’s refusal to dismiss his fellow officers, Dies wrote, “you are unwilling or unable to rid your organization of communist influence which are doing irreparable damage to the majority of your members.” “The future of the laboring people in your organization,” Dies threatened, “depends upon the way in which you meet the issue.” “Regardless of your evasion and abuse,” he reassured Murphy, “I intend to continue to bring to your attention and to the attention of the House of Representatives and the whole situation which the foregoing facts reveal.”<sup>92</sup>

The Dies Committee took a keen interest in the Los Angeles CIO. Here, the UAW’s Aircraft Division organized a twelve-day strike at the Vultee Aircraft Corporation, prompting

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<sup>91</sup> John P. Davis to John T. Jones, Nov. 25, 1940, NNC papers, part 1, reel 19, frame 843-845; Steven Ernest Martin, “The Rhetorical Leadership of John L. Lewis,” (dissertation: Pennsylvania State University, 2006), 140-164; and Charles A. Lewis, “Statement of the National Negro Congress to the Platform Committee of the 1940 Republican Convention,” n.d. [1940], part I, reel 20, frame 24-25

<sup>92</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Quadrangle, 1977), 360 and 364 and Martin Dies to Philip Murray, March 28, 1941, Dies Committee records, box 2, fol. Press Releases, 1941 # 1.

Representative Dies to label the four strike leaders communists whose purpose was to “sabotage” the West Coast defense industry at the behest of the Soviet Union. Recently appointed Attorney General Robert H. Jackson backed Dies, “alien agitators and Communist sympathizers are largely responsible for continuance of the dispute.” Charges of communist affiliation of at least one strike leader emerged from the testimony of John P. Frey of the AFL Metal Trades Union. Wyndham Mortimer of the UAW, one of the our accused, attacked Dies as “one of the worst enemies of the labor movement.” Once the strike ended, approximately eighty percent of the workforce returned. Enraged by the work stoppage and the millions of dollars sacrificed, the FBI reportedly took “a lively interest in who works the military plans and what is each person’s background,” receiving some cooperation from union officials frustrated by the strike leaders.<sup>93</sup>

The relationship between communists and the CIO and APM in Los Angeles was far more complex. Less than a month before the Vultee strike, for instance, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) submitted a report detailing communist involvement in local unions and peace clubs. During a two-hour interview with Albert Patrick, African American APM member and signer of a petition for a peace parade, the police stated “that the object of the parade request [as told by Patrick] was to protest the discrimination against the negro race in the air craft industries and in the army and navy.” “He further stated,” the report continued, “the negroes were about to be drafted into military training, but there was no possibility of any of them ever

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<sup>93</sup> Warren B. Francis, “Vultee Strike Led by Reds,” Nov. 26, 1940, 1 and A column 4; Wyndham Mortimer, quoted by “Strike Chiefs Dendy Red Ties,” Nov. 26, 1940, 1 and A column 3; and “Vultee Goes Back to Work Day; “Revolt on C.I.O. Reds in Southland Pictured,” May 30, 1941, 1A, 3; “Dies Renews Red Charge,” March 21, 1941, 6; and *Vultee Goes Back to Work Day and Night*, Nov. 28, 1940, 1, all found in *Los Angeles Times*.

becoming officers or being given an equal chance with white men in a competitive examination in military training school.”<sup>94</sup>

When asked about the APM’s affiliation with the CPUSA, Patrick stated, “Everyone who tries to fight anything is called a Communist—if there are any communists in the Organization, I don’t know who they are.” When asked if he was troubled by the possibility of communist involvement, he responded, “If there were only a few in the Organization it would make no difference, but if I knew that the Organization was being led or dominated by Communists, I would have nothing to do with it.” He further stated, “that he had no faith in any report made by the Dies Committee and that Dies, himself, had always discriminated against the Negro Race.” After accounting for the various unions, peace clubs, and individuals associated with the APM, the report concluded that the organization was a “consolidation of various communistic and anti-war and anti-fascist groups.” Yet, the report was also unable to “determine whether any prominent or known communist hold any official office or position or are represented through any of the affiliated organizations.”<sup>95</sup>

Securing employment was the prime motivation for African Americans to join the APM, and partnering with communists and other radicals was an accepted means to achieving this end. At the NNC’s Michigan state conference in April 1941, for instance, Reverend Charles A. Hill hailed the diversity of the both the Detroit and state council, all composed of CIO and AFL locals, the NAACP, the Civil Rights Federation (CRF), and the Workers’ Alliance. Together, they patterned with the UAW in its requirement drive, formed a committee to combat police

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<sup>94</sup> J.C. Ferges and Otto Frank to Captain Edgard Edwards, “Officer’s Report Concerning Investigation of the American Peace Mobilization of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Assembly District and the American Peace Crusade,” Oct. 5, 1940, 1, Dies Committee records, box 84, fol. American Peace Mobilization.

<sup>95</sup> Ferges and Frank, “Officer’s Report,” 6.

brutality, and supported the CPUSA's right to run for elected office. "Thus we have built up a tradition of militancy in the solution of the problems confronting our people." The most pressing problem, Hill emphasized, was securing employment in the defense industries. The "complete protection of the Negro in the so-called national defense program" was of the upmost importance. As John P. Davis declared, "There is no more fundamental question facing the Negro today than those of jobs."<sup>96</sup>

Throughout 1941, the NNC continued to organize African Americans against discrimination in the armed forces. The War Department's statement justifying Jim Crow, in the words of Max Yergan, "is a shameful slander against American citizens...It is an acceptance of an age old system of Jim Crowism in Americans." The Baltimore council, for instance, protested the local Red Cross Medical Service for its refusal to accept blood donations from African American for soldiers and sailors on the basis of avoiding the "mix the blood of Negroes and whites." The protest received national attention, securing John P. Davis a meeting with Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy. In New York, 300 attended a demonstration sponsored by the local NNC council denouncing the treatment of black soldiers at Fort Bragg. The "star of the program" Robert Starr spoke of his protest to his local draft board for segregating soldiers. When asked why he would fight only in an integrated army, the young white man responded, "prejudice is unnatural...it's taught to us just as in Germany."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Detroit NNC council, "Negroes and National Defense," n.p., April 8 and 9, 1941, 1-16, NNC papers, part 1, reel, 19, frame 104-112 and John P. Davis, quoted by "Davis Decries U.S. Bias at Negro Congress Meet," *Chicago Defender*, March 15, 1941, 3.

<sup>97</sup> Red Cross Medical Service, quoted by "Other Papers Say," *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 22, 1941, 14; "War Department Urged to Abolish 'Ridiculous' Practice of Refusing Blood of Negro Donors for Defense," *Cleveland Call and Post*, Sept. 20, 1941, 1; Roger Starr, quoted by Bernice Calvin, and "Mass Meeting Scores Release of Brutal FT. Bragg M.P.'s," *Cleveland Call and Post*, Sept. 6, 1941, 1 B.

By May, the NNC organized and demonstrated against more than one hundred industries all while Congressman Dies publicly declared the congress “a Trojan horse organization controlled by Moscow” for “exploiting race issues” in the defense industry. As John P. Davis noted in February, not only were African American denied jobs in defense industries but were also seldom afforded the opportunity to enroll in training programs. In Los Angeles, for instance, Robert S. Robin noted that the local offices of the National Youth Administration, a New Deal initiative designed to provide employment industries for young workers, openly denied training to non-whites. Nevertheless, the NNC refused to cease its efforts. The Los Angeles council, in cooperation with AFL and CIO unions secured an anti-discrimination clause by the Douglass Aircraft Company. In Philadelphia, the council registered several hundred skilled black workers, determined to find them employment. The Baltimore council fought the Glenn Martin Aircraft company to open its doors to black employers.<sup>98</sup>

In June, A. Philip Randolph and his March on Washington Movement (MOWM) threatened a mass all-black demonstration at the nation’s capital, forcing the Roosevelt Administration to issue an executive order creating the Fair Employment Practices Committee. Given the NNC’s difficulties in the defense industry as well as the humiliation it endured from the Dies Committee, Randolph’s ability to force President Roosevelt’s hand was a glowing achievement in the anti-discrimination struggle. Less than a week before Roosevelt’s order, the NNC pointed to the Vultee Aircraft Corporation’s intransigence as evidence of much-needed federal action. However, John P. Davis criticized the executive order for failing to establish

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<sup>98</sup> Max Yergan, “The Negro Faces a Future,” n.p., Nov. 10, 1940, 10, Yergan papers, box 206-6, fol. 32; Negroes in Defense Industry,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, Nov. 22, 1941, 8; Adam Lapin, “Negro Congress Gets Evidence of Nationwide Discrimination in War-Contract Industries,” *Daily Worker*, Feb. 2, 1941, 5; Martin Dies, quoted by “Tampa a World Part, Afro Finds,” *Afro-American*, Feb. 15, 1941, 9; “Dies Agents Charge APM Exploiting Race Issues,” *Afro-American*, May 31, 1941, 8.

penalties for corporations that violated the order. Additionally, the order was not retroactive nor did it provide official guidelines for how a worker could express redress. Soon after the executive order, the NNC wrote President Roosevelt declaring that the initiative clearly authorized contracts without “provisions against discrimination,” which violated the “spirit of your executive order.”<sup>99</sup>

Nevertheless, the NNC eagerly used the legal framework of the Fair Employment Practices Committee in order to publicly expose the aircraft industries’ Jim Crow practices. The congress launched additional jobs campaigns on the West Coast as well as auto factories in Detroit and Chicago and steel factories in the Midwest and Baltimore. Due to the grassroots work of the NNC’s LA council, along with the national office’s publicity efforts, the Vultee Aircraft Corporation relented and agreed to hire black skilled and unskilled workers. Thus despite the ill feelings harbored between the NNC and MOWM leadership, Erik Gellman writes, “the two groups in 1941 waged complementary fights to gain access to war industries jobs.”<sup>100</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Despite the significant gains made in the defense industry, Max Yergan warned that to “barter the right of employment in exchange for supporting a war,” would be disastrous for the black working class. In Yergan’s statement was an explicit admission that the NNC’s microscopic focus in the defense industry was depleting the congress’s resources in the “normal participation in the job-life of the country.” Yergan’s emphasis on non-defense industries was

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<sup>99</sup> “What Would Lincoln Have Done About Jim Crow,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, June 21, 1941, 1 B; John P. Davis to Philip Murray, June 26, 1941, NNC papers, part I, reel 18, frame 930; See “Huge Pay Loss if Aircraft Bias Stands,” *Chicago Defender*, May 31, 1941, 5; “Hit Sabotage of No Jim Crow Order,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 8, 1941, 1; and “Shipbuilders Defy F.D.’s Anti-Bias Order, Says NNC,” *Afro-American*, Oct. 4, 1941, 15.

<sup>100</sup> Erik Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 160-162 and 191.

also an acknowledgement of the inherent contradiction in the NNC's jobs program. How could the congress denounce the war as imperialist while simultaneously fight for jobs in industries profiting from war? "The Negro people must insist on jobs while at the same time opposing this imperialist war and our intervention in it." After all, "It is a war which cannot possibly serve to strengthen democracy or to liberate the people, for it is an instrument of oppression of the people the world over."<sup>101</sup>

The NNC's contradictions were resolved in response to Operation Barbarossa, Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Soon after, the NNC's Edward E. Strong and Coleman Young joined 1,000 delegates at the American Youth Congress, mapping out a program of anti-discrimination in employment, civil rights for draftees, and enforcing President Roosevelt's executive order. All were designed to "protect our national interests and our security which are menaced by fascists." After a "spirited debate," the plan also called for the "cooperation with the people of Britain and the Soviet Union who are fighting to end Hitler's threat of world conquest." The NNC soon followed with a plea to Roosevelt for extending the Lend-Lease Act to Ethiopia, a foreign policy initiative the NNC routinely denounced as "imperialist." In cooperation with the British empire, African American soldiers and pilots, they argued, could be transported to Ethiopia via British-occupied Somaliland."<sup>102</sup>

The NNC's about face did not go unnoticed. Renowned sociologist Horace R. Cayton claimed the NNC was "doomed." The resignation of A. Philip Randolph, Lester Granger, and others were keenly aware of the black Popular Front's "impending shift" towards the CPUSA and the militant faction of the CIO. In order to receive aides from the Allies, he predicted, the

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<sup>101</sup> Max Yergan, "Defense Industries Not Only Place Where Negro Should Demand Work," *Cleveland Call and Post*, May 31, 1941, 1 B.

<sup>102</sup> American Youth Congress, quoted by "Youth Congress to Continue Fight on Fascism and Bias," *New Journal and Guide*, July 19, 1941, 20.



Soviet Union would order the CPUSA to abandon the black freedom struggle. Thus, “the Negro Congress will stand in the way of losing a portion of its support.” Once the Soviet Union gets what it wants, “the desertions will be wholesale.” He sarcastically suggested non-communists to should band together. “Then when Lewis dismisses the National Negro Congress, go to him and ask for support.” “If you do this soon enough and have a good enough argument,” he wrote, “the big fellow may put you on his payroll—that is, if you can stand the company.”<sup>103</sup>

John P. Davis embarked on a dangerous proposition at the Washington Convention. By further allying itself with the Labor’s Non-Partisan League and the CPUSA (mostly for financial reasons), the NNC had no choice but to embrace the Communist left’s position on non-aggression. Davis’s almost statement alleging African American disloyalty to the United States in a hypothetical war with the Soviet Union ignited an unnecessary wrath of furry onto the NNC, polarizing the black Popular Front. Though hardly the end, the Washington conference marked a sharp rebuttal from some its former members. For some, the NNC’s defense of the Soviet Union was a byproduct of its political audaciousness. Lest Granger, for instance, pondered after A. Philip Randolph’s resignation, “perhaps it was an unrealistic and dangerous plan to set up a national organization that tried to over the whole front of the Negro’s battle for economic and social emancipation.” Such ideological zeal, he determined, was bound to lead to factionalism. Unlike most anti-communists, Granger predicted a bright future for the congress. “It has a vitally important job to do in the field of labor’s education.” “Until other organizations are ready to

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<sup>103</sup> Horace R. Cayton, “Negro Congress Doomed,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sept. 6, 1941, 13.

move into this field and show at least as much accomplishment as the Congress can point to,” he wrote, “their criticism of the Congress’s effort is in some ways a criticism of themselves.”<sup>104</sup>

The NNC’s future would come under the leadership of a new generation by 1942. Davis resigned his position as National Executive Secretary and joined Representative Vito Marcantonio’s office. In an interview with the FBI in the early 1950s, Davis acknowledged his affiliation with the CPUSA, albeit an informal one. The CPUSA never controlled the party, he insisted, but was rather a reliable financial donor. Davis’s support for the CPUSA and Labor’s Non-Partisan League during the non-aggression pact was a calculated, albeit deadly flawed, decision. Once the party, again, reversed its position from anti-war to supporting all-out aid to the Allies, Davis was exhausted. Compromised by his fateful decision, Davis decided to save the NNC by leaving it in the hands of the youth leaders by 1942.<sup>105</sup>

With the collapse of capitalism and subsequent rise of fascism, combined with anti-communist persecution at home, many within the NNC looked to the Soviet Union with sincere belief in its preachments. The *Afro-American*’s Ralph Matthews accurately summarized the global scene. The Soviet Union was perceived as “a society in which color, race and religious prejudices were abolished because the rivalries and hatreds created by greed for wealth and power were supposed to be eradicated.” The principle support for communism derived from the “fear of Nazism and Fascism which through the machinations of Hitler and Mussolini, showed a trend back toward the dark ages and the subjugation of the people by vicious regimentation and oppression.” The non-aggression pact, however, induced a “shock from which it will not soon recover.” No longer could communism be seen as the “protector of downtrodden humanity.” The

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<sup>104</sup> Lester Granger, “The Negro Congress—Its Future,” *Opportunity*, June 1940, 166, National Urban League Records (“Urban League records” hereafter), Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress.

<sup>105</sup> Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*, 144.

NNC's Communist left, on the other hand, defended the Soviet Union's action in East Poland. A majority of the black freedom struggle's leadership would soon not forget the NNC's defense of the communist nation, nor would it escape the eye of the state for the remainder of its existence.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ralph Matthews, "Communism Had Strong Hold On Intellectual Leaders," *Afro-American*, Dec. 30, 1939, 12.

**Chapter Four**  
**“Make Philadelphia A Workers’ Town”**  
**Building a United Front in the City of Brotherly Love, 1935-1940**

The *Pittsburgh Courier*’s George S. Schuyler observed with astonishment over the “spontaneous growth” of the National Negro Congress (NNC) demonstrated at its second national convention in October 1937 in Philadelphia. In partnership with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the NNC placed social equality of the black working class in its program front and center. Conversely, the more “respectable” National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Schuyler condemningly wrote, “has been negligent in fostering and promoting labor education.” The NAACP’s local branches “rarely leap to life” and are “satisfied to slumber away surrounded by increasing segregation and discrimination.” Even in the mind of the iconoclast and United Front-skeptic, Schuyler described the NNC’s assault on Jim Crow through working class mobilization the embodiment of the “more militant leftist leadership which an increasing minority of the Aframericans [*sic*] are demanding.”<sup>1</sup>

The black freedom struggle of interwar Philadelphia catapulted the NNC to national prominence. The NNC’s Philadelphia council (PNNC) championed black working class populism by defining both racial and economic justice as two aims of the same struggle. Few studies document the history of black working class activism in Philadelphia during the Popular Front. Those that do pay only cursory attention to the black radicals of the PNNC.<sup>2</sup> As a result,

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<sup>1</sup> George S. Schuyler, “Views & Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 30, 1937, 10.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, James Wolfinger, *Philadelphia Divided: Race & Politics in the City of Brotherly Love* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Paul Lyons *Philadelphia Communists, 1936-1956* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Stanley Keith Arnold *Building the Beloved Community: Philadelphia’s Interracial Civil Rights Organizations and Race Relations, 1930-1970* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014); Robert Gregg, *Sparks from the Anvil of Oppression: Philadelphia’s African Methodists and Southern Migrants, 1890-1940* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Matthew J. Countryman, “Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia, 1940-1971” (dissertation, Duke

African Americans' contribution to the local Popular Front struggle remains obscure. The PNNC was truly unlike any of its early twentieth century contemporaries. The NAACP and the overwhelmingly white American Communist Party (CPUSA) possessed neither the ability nor the willingness to immerse their organizers in black working class communities. As opposed to both organizations' deeply embedded hierarchal structures, the PNNC was built from the ground up. Local activists within the council sought alliances with both CIO lodges and community leaders in order to incorporate black workers into the United Front campaign waged by the CIO. The sporadic yet tenacious networking among these few individuals sought to unite the black and white working class in order to build a "workers' town" in the City of Brotherly Love.<sup>3</sup> Through conferences, mass protests, publications, town hall meetings, strikes, and day-to-day outreaches, PNNC activists and their labor allies rejected the respectability politics associated with the early twentieth century by fighting for an egalitarian social order based on the precepts of Industrial Democracy.

From 1935 to 1936, Philadelphia emerged as one of the most active centers in the Hands off Ethiopia movement. Italian fascism demonstrated, in the minds of many, the parallels between global oppression and the local conditions of Jim Crow. Out of this realization emerged a resonate Pan-African political consciousness. This global solidarity embraced elements of both

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University, 1999); Karl Elis Johnson, "Black Philadelphia in Transition: The African-American Struggle on the Homefront During World War II and the Cold War Period, 1941-1963" (dissertation, Temple University, 2001); Justine T. Gammage, "Fighting for Economic Stability in a Time of Uncertainty: African American Economic Development in Philadelphia, 1940-1970" (dissertation, Temple University, 2011); Marcus Anthony Hunter, "In Search of *The Philadelphia Negro*: Black Philadelphia and Urban Change, 1900-2000" (dissertation, Northwestern University, 2011); and Clemmie L. Harris, "Race, Leadership, and the Local Machine: The Origins of the African American Struggle for Political Recognition and the Politics of Community Control in Philadelphia, 1915-1968" (dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> "Crowd of 2,000 Demonstrate for Peace in Auaker City," *Afro-American*, Aug. 10, 1935, 13.

black nationalism and socialism. The latter was championed predominately by Philadelphia labor organizer Benjamin D. Amis. A member of the CPUSA for almost ten years, Amis dedicated his work by incorporating African Americans into the workers' movement. His efforts, however, were hindered by the inability of CPUSA leadership to organize black workers in large numbers as well as the practice of segregation in the craft unions of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). By 1935, Italy's invasion of Ethiopia radicalized many within the black community, opening a window of opportunity for leftists and labor unionists. In order to galvanize activists of the Hands off Ethiopia movement into a United Front, Amis and others maintained that overcoming oppression required unity of the entire working class.

The Hands off Ethiopia movement demonstrated to many Philadelphians the necessity of building citywide networks of protests. By harnessing anti-fascism into a broader movement for economic justice, Amis organized various African-American community leaders from churches, fraternal lodges, and unions into a black Popular Front. Deeply impressed by the mass-based protests, NNC Executive Secretary John P. Davis lobbied Amis to organize the Philadelphia council. Anxious to transform the city's anti-fascist movement into a permanent United Front, Amis readily agreed. The Philadelphia NNC, in fact, considered working class justice intrinsic to the fight against the "oppression of colonial nations throughout the world."<sup>4</sup> The PNNC quickly elected educator and union leader Arthur H. Fauset as council President. Under the widely respected community leader Fauset, the PNNC emerged as one of the most active councils in the history of the NNC.

At the conclusion of the NNC's first national convention on February 1936 in Chicago, the PNNC quickly began coordinating strategies for direct-action against racial discrimination in

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<sup>4</sup> PNNC quoted by, "National Congress Group to Attack Philly Jim Crow," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Jan. 4, 1936, 13.

both the service industry and state employment. By revitalizing the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” movement, the PNNC demonstrated its ability and willingness to protest on behalf of black workers. The council’s defense of Samuel Watson galvanized activists across the state of Pennsylvania as well. Supporting Watson, an industrial worker in Lancaster threatened with lynching by a state judge, earned the PNNC respect from more moderate anti-racist organizations such as the NAACP. Despite its aggressiveness and determination, however, the PNNC also faced skepticism by those who deemed the United Front too militant. The PNNC was, thus, isolated in its call for the unionization of all workers in mass industry.

From 1937 to 1938, the NNC’s Pennsylvania councils found an ally in the CIO. Under the leadership of John L. Lewis, the CIO embarked on the most militant workers’ movement since the International Workers of the World (IWW). Given the prominence of steel in Pennsylvania, the CIO’s Steel Workers’ Organization Committee (SWOC) determined to organize both black and white workers on an equal basis. Given the overwhelming representation of whites in the CIO’s administrative board, John P. Davis lobbied the SWOC to hire African-American members of the NNC to work on a full time basis. Realizing the necessity of recruiting black workers, SWOC President Philip Murray hired organizers such as Amis and black communist Benjamin Careathers of Pittsburgh. Activists such as Amis, Careathers, and many others made the SWOC’s work in Pennsylvania possible. Impressed by the NNC’s organizational abilities, Michal Quill of the militant Transport Workers’ Union (TWU) of New York looked to Philadelphia to wage its next United Front battle.

The organizational strength demonstrated by the state’s CIO and NNC councils made Philadelphia the ideal city for the congress’ second annual convention. The momentous event boasted thousands of spectators with almost twice as many delegates of the Chicago convention.

Unlike Chicago, the Philadelphia convention represented more prominent unionists such as Pennsylvania's Lieutenant Governor and senior official for the United Mine Workers (UMW) Thomas Kennedy and the SWOC's Philip Murray. The considerable presence of black and white unionists as well as the favorable media coverage by African-American newspapers forced the more moderate anti-racists such as the NAACP's Walter White, President of Tuskegee Institute F.D. Patterson to participate in the convention proceedings. Soon after the convention, the PNNC and its CIO allies received a public endorsement from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

From 1939 to 1940, the PNNC witnessed a sharp decline in labor activity. Both the PNNC and the national office were haunted by a dearth of financial resources. Consequently, Davis heavily pressured the councils to raise funds. The PNNC, however, routinely struggled to fill its coffers, antagonizing relations between Davis and Fauset. Once Fauset resigned in protest in the Spring of 1939, the PNNC was left without one of the city's most respected union officials and community leaders. During the PNNC's financial crisis, the Pennsylvania CIO suffered a series of political defeats. For the AFL, anti-communism was a powerful weapon to use against figures such as Lewis, Kennedy, and Quill. As the CIO declined, the state's NNC councils were left without their greatest ally. Factionalism within both the NNC and CIO drastically intensified after the signing of the non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, rendering both organizations severely impaired.

From the Hands off Ethiopia movement to the early stage of the Second World War, the PNNC waged a systematic battle against discrimination and exploitation. By building broad alliances, council leaders such as Amis and Fauset made vital contributions to the CIO. The organization of black industrial workers, in fact, would not have been possible without the PNNC. The Philadelphia convention, with the support of the CIO, was not only a momentous



opportunity for the PNNC but for the national office as well. The critical success of the Philadelphia convention propelled congress members to the national stage. Capitalizing on the momentum, the SWOC held its first convention in the state capital of Harrisburg with thousands of steel organizers in attendance. With the support of the NNC, SWOC officials such as Amis organized hundreds of black workers into CIO lodges. By the end of 1938, however, the PNNC underwent increased scrutiny by anti-communists. This, combined with the CIO's political setbacks and the NNC's lack of finances, slowed the council's work to a crawl by the onset of the Second World War. Thus, the non-aggression pact between fascism and communism did not end the PNNC but rather intensified its ongoing process of decline.

### **The Rise of the Black Popular Front**

As fascism spread from Europe to the Abyssinian Kingdom, a solidarity movement emerged in Philadelphia's black community. For some, the Italian-Ethiopian War ignited a racial consciousness that painted Pan-African images glorifying Ethiopia's redemption from the imperial machinations of Benito Mussolini. Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 sparked a profound Pan-Africanist impulse within black Philadelphia. At the height of the conflict, a journalist humorously noted that many white Philadelphians began referring to their fellow black citizens as "Ethiopians" as opposed to traditional racist epithets. Six citizens, including one reverend, declared "We are willing to go at any time to aid Abyssinia by returning to Ethiopia, our mother land." "Should we go," they proclaimed, "we hope never to return to this country." Others championed Ethiopian human rights in order to globalize the black freedom struggle. "Every member of our race should try in some manner to aid in protecting and developing Abyssinia," declared another, "In doing that, there will be those who will help us in this country to wipe out lynching." Black Philadelphians' response to the war, thus, varied. While some

defined Pan-Africanism in opposition to the Western world, others saw Pan-Africanism as an opportunity to revolutionize social relations from within. Nevertheless, the war had radicalized the community by emphasizing fascism's relevance to the black community.<sup>5</sup>

For African-American communists, leftists, and radical unionists, anti-fascism was an opportunity to incorporate the black masses into the burgeoning militant workers' movement. Prior to fascism's rise, anti-racist organizers such as Benjamin D. Amis grew frustrated with the inability of radical organizations such as the CPUSA to harness black working class militancy in Philadelphia during the Great depression. In order to overcome the racial barriers between the militant left and black working class, Amis fused his United Front principles with the Pan-Africanist ideals that the "Hands off Ethiopia" movement inspired. By harmonizing Pan-Africanism with socialism, Amis interpreted fascism in ways that conditioned the rise of the black Popular Front.

The Pan-Africanism that Ethiopia inspired at home posed a theoretical dilemma for African-American members of the CPUSA. The writings of Philadelphia communist organizer Amis on Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), for instance, dripped with disdain. In Amis' mind, cross-class racial solidarity, a central principle of many Pan-Africanists, was a retreat from the United Front. By positioning race over class, Amis wrote, "Garveyism preaches hatred of white workers by Negro workers." His critique of Garveyism marked a central theme throughout his activist life. Social equality could never come from race-first principles. Only through a unified workers' movement can the "fight for the

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<sup>5</sup> J. Robert Smith, "Looking Over Philly," *Afro-American*, Nov. 2, 1935, 13; George O. Gaines et al., quoted by "Six From Philly Will Fight," *Afro-American*, Mar. 16, 1935, 4; and William Dwight, quoted by "Would Die for Abyssinia," *Afro-American*, Mar. 16, 1935, 4.

national aspiration of the Negro masses” be realized. Garveyism, in Amis’ mind, was the mirror image of white chauvinism.<sup>6</sup>

During the Hands off Ethiopia Movement of 1935 and 1936, however, Amis and others within the left embraced certain Pan-African tenants. Amis’ first community organizing imitative in Philadelphia, in fact, began with his Philadelphia Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia (PCDE). Here, Amis called on “all colored persons to turn their eyes to their motherland.” The committee routinely addressed Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie as “Your Majesty” and characterized itself as “persons of African descent, residing in the United States of America.” Such statements hardly reflected the traditional CPUSA line. Instead, the committee espoused an Afrocentric Judeo-Christianity. “We pray,” the committee wrote Selassie, “that the God of Abraham, the Father of us all, will rightly endow Your Majesty with the courage of a David, the strength of a Samson, the wisdom of a Solomon, and the faith of a Job.”<sup>7</sup>

At first glance, Amis’ rhetorical ingenuity marked a tactical shift. As historian Mark Solomon noted, “For American Communists, any attempt to define the Ethiopian conflict as a race war was an egregious error that would obscure its imperialist nature...yet that is what seemed to be happening.” For Amis, however, Italian imperialism evidenced the necessity of building a black Popular Front. “It is the fascist rulers,” Amis insisted at the local CPUSA headquarters, “who are the most chauvinistic and most imperialistic.” Pan-Africanism, thus, provided Amis the galvanizing force that communism could not. As original chairman of the CPUSA’s League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR) in the late 1920s, for instance, Amis and

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin D. Amis, “Fight Against Garveyism,” *Daily Worker*, June 25, 1930, Benjamin D. Amis papers (Amis papers hereafter), box 1, fol. 11, New York University: The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin D. Amis, quoted by “Philly Group Seeks Ethiopia’s Envoy,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Jan. 18, 1936, 9, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 11 and Jeannette E. Brown to Haile Selassie, Oct. 28, 1935, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 7

others struggled to organize black workers. Party leadership, according to Harry Haywood, treated the LSNR as a “clearinghouse” for civil rights initiatives that, in the minds of white leaders, absolved themselves of further action. Amis was furious but, according to Haywood, lacked respect from his white comrades. The Hands off Ethiopia movement, thus, brought to bear the “peculiar role” of the black working class in the Hands off Ethiopia Movement. By appealing to an African Diasporic solidarity, Amis reached an audience that was previously unreceptive towards class struggle.<sup>8</sup>

Anti-fascism encouraged numerous activists to fuse the black freedom struggle with the workers’ movement. In the city’s Scottish Rite Cathedral, labor organizer Ella R. Bloor equated Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia with Jim Crow in the AFL. “The colored people will handle the situation themselves,” if oppression endures, she warned. “Make Philadelphia a Workers’ town” another audience member declared. Such statements found a receptive audience in religious communities. Attesting to the Popular Front’s appeal, the A.M.E. Ministerial Union of Philadelphia officially endorsed the black-Labor alliance. Affirming his support, esteemed reverend and Democratic State Representative Marshall L. Shepard proclaimed that African Americans have fallen victim to “the ‘master class’ psychology, which makes us of no value in fighting for and with an underprivileged group.” Sounding like a member of the CPUSA, Shepard declared, “Our sympathies must lie with labor and not with capital.” “It is stupid,” he

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African American, 1917-1936* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 271; Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago, IL: Liberator Press, 1978), 352 and Benjamin D. Amis, “Unite Toiler for Peace,” report to the district convention, June 6, 1938, 2.

thundered, “to allow powerful interests to divide us. There is absolutely no salvation for the Negro apart from the poor white people.”<sup>9</sup>

Anti-fascism and support for the labor movement within the black community revealed the power of the black Popular Front. Along with other pro-Ethiopian organizations in the city, Amis demanded that Mayor Samuel Davis Wilson use the power of his office to thwart the plans of the American Friends of Italy from collecting funds to help Italy’s war effort. Amis also chaired a delegation of “workers and progressives” that provided aid to the Spanish Red Cross. Speaking on behalf of the International Workers Order, the Women’s League, and the Workers’ Alliance, Amis donated funds to the loyalist forces of Spain. Representing the Spanish Popular Front government, Pedro Alvarez expressed “great pleasure” in receiving aid from Philadelphian activists. In a statement to Alvarez, Amis declared, “we people, representing working class organizations of North Philadelphia...express our international solidarity.” Like Ethiopia, Amis hoped for a “speedy termination of the violent attacks by the Fascists and military generals” in Spain. His statement ended with a Spanish battle cry, “All power to the People’s Front Government. Crush the traitors. Democracy shall triumph. Long live the People’s Front Fatherland.”<sup>10</sup>

Anti-fascism generated a common purpose for various walks of political life. In August 1935 at the Reyburn Plaza, 2,000 demonstrators displayed banners carrying slogans such as “Hands off Ethiopia,” “Down with the Bosses,” and “Bury the War Mongers.” The

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<sup>9</sup> “Strike Suggested to Save Herndon from Chain Gang,” *Afro-American*, Nov. 2, 1935, 13; unknown, quoted by “Crowd of 2,000 Demonstrate for Peace in Quaker City,” “Philly A.M.E. Preachers Endorse Nat. Congress,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Jan. 18, 1936, 14; “Wrong Kind of Education Bane Of Negro In United States, Says Penna. State Representative,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jan. 23, 1936, 20.

<sup>10</sup> “Select Group to Solicit Aid of S. Davis Wilson,” *Philadelphia Independent*, Jan. 19, 1936, box 1, fol. 11 and “Philadelphia Groups Give Aid to Spain,” *Daily Worker*, Aug. 14, 1936, n.p., Amis papers, box 1, fol. 11.

demonstration signified an emerging political awakening throughout the city. Standing on the stage together, W.H. Wickman of the League for the Defense of Ethiopia and C. Lippa of the Italian Working Men's Progressive Institute declared, "Local Italians are not in favor of Mussolini's actions, but are sympathetic with Ethiopia." Lippa's assurances were likely inspired by previous tensions between the city's black and Italian population. Two months prior, approximately 100 black residents along with CPUSA members demanded that the city block an Italian victory parade. African-American attorney G. Edward Dickerson declared "There is a feeling among many negroes and whites that a gross injustice has been done to our race, openly by Italians, and secretly by some other countries." Despite such incidences, Wickman, Lippa, and Edward's open solidarity with concerned whites evidence a genuine attempt to foster interracial solidarities.<sup>11</sup>

Inspired by the organic development of Hands off Ethiopia Movement, Amis and the PCDE harnessed Pan-Africanism's influence in order to build a broad coalition of anti-racists and labor organizers. In an flyer addressed to churches, lodges, clubs, fraternal societies, trade unions, and working class organizations, the PCDE encouraged these community organizers to emphasize the "ways and means of placing before the public the plight of Ethiopia." In an act of solidarity, the PCDE organized a town hall meeting attended by both local activists such as Crystal B. Fauset and national figures in the defense of Ethiopia such as Willis N. Huggins. The creation of a broad coalition based on the principles of both anti-fascism and the United Front was a teachable moment for African-American communists such as Amis. In an address delivered to the CPUSA, Amis enthusiastically proclaimed that the militant defense Ethiopia

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<sup>11</sup> C. Lippa, quoted by "Crowd of 2,000 Demonstrate for Peace in Auaker City," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Aug. 10, 1935, 13 and G. Edward Dickerson, quoted by "Philly Public Hits at Italian Demonstration," *Chicago Defender*, May 16, 1936, 9.

among the black population evidenced “the deep anti-fascist tendencies that exist among broad sections of the population.”<sup>12</sup>

National Executive Secretary of the NNC John P. Davis was deeply influenced by the Philadelphia Popular Front. Throughout 1935 and 1936, Davis became convinced in black citizens’ role in the protest “against the plunder of Ethiopia and the deeper exploitation of Negro people throughout the world.” With the goal of building NNC councils spread throughout the nation, Amis agreed to organize the PNNC. Amis and the other committee members subsequently elected Arthur H. Fauset, husband of Crystal B. Fauset, as council president. As Vice-President of the local American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and elementary school principle, Fauset’s appointment marked a stark shift in black political leadership. For Fauset, black intellectuals of the early twentieth century ignored the underwriting cause of economic exploitation. “All the skill gathered in years of specialized experience in school or shop, amount to very little,” he wrote. Never will African Americans earn citizenship rights as long as they continue to lack economic power. Only by becoming “an indispensable asset to the new economy,” will the black masses achieve full equality. Such an effort required nothing short of a revolution in black thought. “Just as the Russians have turned their faces from the past in order to harness the power,” he wrote, “the Negro...is called upon to...turn his back upon timeworn formulate and hollow shibboleths.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Philadelphia Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, “Unite For Peace: Join Ethiopia Day-Peace Parade and Mass Meeting,” (Philadelphia: PCDE, 1935), n.p., Amis papers, box 1, fol. 7; Philadelphia Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, “A Call to a City Wide Conference for the Defense of Ethiopia,” (Philadelphia: PCDE, 1935), n.p. Amis papers, box 1, fol. 7; and Amis, “Unite the Toiler for Peace,” 8.

<sup>13</sup> “National Negro Congress: Report of National Secretary,” June 19-20, 1936, 7, Papers of the National Negro Congress (“NNC papers” hereafter), part I, reel 2, frame 211-240; Benjamin D. Amis to John P. Davis, Dec. 10, 1935; Arthur H. Fauset to John P. Davis, n.d., NNC papers, part 1, reel 5, frame 101; “Philly Committee Begins Work on National Congress,” *Baltimore Afro-*

Fauset's work in the AFT made him uniquely qualified in coordinating the necessary day-to-day activities. One PNNC volunteer, for instance, described Fauset as possessing an "adroit handling of committees, intelligent interpretation of purpose and program, clear understanding of principles, intelligent insistence upon adherence to these principles, [and] adroit handling of personalities." The *Philadelphia Tribune* described Fauset's contributions to the PNNC as providing it with "the full power of his well trained mind." With Fauset in charge, John P. Davis insisted that the Philadelphia council had "the power to stir to the very roots of souls [of] the teeming masses," and pose a "challenge to the false leadership of two generations."<sup>14</sup>

Fauset's responsibly extended far beyond Philadelphia. From 1935 to 1937, Fauset also served as Vice-President of the Third Regional District Committee (the "Eastern Region"). Fauset was charged with forming local councils in Philadelphia, Wilmington, Delaware as well as Atlantic City, Bordentown, Trenton and Camden, New Jersey. Davis' expectations of the councils were immense. Each was tasked with forming labor committees for the purposes of organizing the black working class into industrial unions, but this required constant fund raising. In order to pay for this vast initiative, Davis charged Fauset with absorbing numerous pre-existing groups to join the councils and subsequently charge them membership fees. Such efforts had to be made, Davis insisted, in order for the national office to properly function. "The responsibility of the maintenance of the National Office," Davis wrote Fauset, "Becomes a responsibility of all local councils." Fauset countered that individual members were already paying fees to their original affiliations and was, therefore, impossible for the third district to pay

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*American*, Dec. 28, 1935, 13; and Arthur H. Fauset, "Educational Procedure for an Emergency," *Opportunity*, Jan. 1933, 21 and 22, NUL records, part I, box N33, fol. *Opportunity*, Vol. 10-13, 1932-1935.

<sup>14</sup> James H. Young to John P. Davis, Jan 8, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 8, frame 171-173; "Under the Microscope," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 27, 1936, 4; and John P. Davis to Arthur H. Fauset, Feb. 6, 1936, NNC papers, 1, reel 5, frame 92.



its regular quota. “We are beginning to feel the strain of it,” he once confessed. Davis, however, never eased off. In one instance, Davis warned “what a serious blow to the prestige of a growing People’s Movement this would be,” if the councils failed to make regular payments.<sup>15</sup>

Work in Philadelphia pressed on. Fauset assured Davis that Philadelphia “will be among the leading centers of the country in its activity in Congress proceedings.” The *Tribune* published countless articles informing its readers of the PNNC’s goals and its first annual convention set for February 1936 in Chicago. The editors worried, however, that the Philadelphia council’s attempt to promote ideological diversity while simultaneously prioritizing working class objectives presented difficulties. Such a massive and diverse convention in Chicago, the editors wrote, had the potential of “degenerating into a gab-fest.” Nevertheless, the paper took solace noting that the NNC was not designed to usurp existing organizations such as the NAACP. On the contrary, the goal was to unite all civil rights organizations and labor unions into one cohesive federation. In the end, the editors concluded, “We trust that it will be possible to find some way to have whatever resolution or other decisions which are arrived at [are] translated into action.”<sup>16</sup>

The Philadelphia NNC burned with energy for a movement unlike any kind since the International Workers Order (IWO) of the 1910s and 1920s. Though congress activists were not the original authors of this nascent political philosophy, they did harness it into a cohesive political struggle against depression and fascism. The committee’s goals were wide ranging but

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<sup>15</sup> Arthur H. Fauset to John P. Davis, July 15, 1936, part 1, reel 4, frame 811-812; John P. Davis to Arthur H. Fauset, Nov. 28, 1936, part 1, reel 4, frame 793; John P. Davis to Ethel Clyde, n.d, part 1, reel 4, frame 419-421; John P. Davis to Arthur H. Fauset, April 10, 1936, part 1, reel 4, frame 21; and John P. Davis to Arthur H. Fauset, Oct. 5, 1936, part 1, reel 4, frame 828, all found in NNC papers; and “Arthur Fauset, Vice Pres. Of Nat. Congress,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Mar. 26, 1936, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur H. Fauset to John P. Davis, Jan. 1, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 5, frame 100 and “The National Negro Congress,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jan. 9, 1936, 4.

all were seen as necessary for “cleansing” the city of Jim Crow. The fight for employment opportunities, equal pay, and better working conditions were essential platforms for the United Front. Economic demands coincided with civic ones as well. The fight against lynching, police brutality, discrimination in the voting booth, and the subjugation of women were battles that needed to be fought in order to wage what they viewed as the larger battle for the working class. In the words of NNC president A. Philip Randolph, civic institutions were the only areas in which workers’ “economic power may be built.”<sup>17</sup>

Black Philadelphia’s response to the Ethiopian crisis was a teachable moment for African-American communists and leftists. After years of unappreciated travail within communist circles, Amis found the opportunity to organize the black community on the basis of race *and* class. As a leading figure in the defense of Ethiopia, Amis discovered that race was not just a tool of the ruling class and liberal bourgeoisie but an instrument in the liberation of the black masses. This was the basis for the PNNC. For Amis, the PNNC demonstrated that “representatives from every walk of life” could formulate a “unified counteroffensive” against white supremacy and exploitation. Everyone within the council agreed on a “socio-economic content” of mass resistance, which “gives all indications that there is in the process of formation, under a new type of leadership, a powerful driving force.” This new leadership had “the vision that the road to full equality leads to a break with the old line methods, to independent and intelligent action.” Not all of Philadelphia’s black community, however, shared the congress’ methods of anti-racist activism. Throughout 1936, both city officials and more moderate anti-

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<sup>17</sup> “Plan to Send Delegates to Race Congress,” *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 25, 1936, 17; Philadelphia NNC, quoted by “National Congress Group to Attack Philly Jim Crow;” and A. Philip Randolph, “The Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress,” (Washington, D.C.: NNC, Oct. 14, 15, 16, 1936), 10, NNC papers, part 1, reel 2, frame 248-270.

racist organizations expressed reservations, if not outright hostility, to the populist sentiment the PNNC represented.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Philadelphia National Negro Congress**

Local politicians viewed the black Popular Front with hostility. Mayor Wilson, for example, caused uproar by charging African-American public relations executive Joseph V. Baker with appointing an emissary to the PNNC. In what was described as a “hotbed” of attacks and counter attacks, journalist and PNNC member J. Robert Smith chastised Mayor Davis for attempting to co-opt the council. Baker, the self-described “publicity man,” defended his involvement, “I was not in any way attempting to assume the Committee’s duties.” Despite his promises, Smith, along with every other council member, declared that Baker “can do us more harm than good.” Rancor with Mayor Davis lasted throughout the council’s existence, but such defiance against the local Democratic machine demonstrated the PNNC’s political independence and assertiveness.<sup>19</sup>

The PNNC’s defiance against the Democrats grabbed the attention of national civil rights figures. Mass enthusiasm for militant protests provided a new opportunity, they concluded, to lead an independent political movement. Approximately 8,000 residents attended a Philadelphia NNC-sponsored rally to discuss Jim Crow in both the Republican and Democratic Parties. Only a labor party, James W. Ford declared, could provide blacks a “Civic Haven.” In attendance were prominent figures such as Marshall Shepard, the *Baltimore Afro-American*’s William N. Jones, academic Ralph Bunche, and Pennsylvania district organizer for the CPUSA Pat Toomey. In an

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<sup>18</sup> Benjamin D. Amis, “National Negro Congress Writes Page in History of Race People Marks Dawn of New Era in Struggle for Democracy and Against Lynching and Jim-Crow Practices,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 27, 1936, n.p., Amis papers, box 1, fol. 31.

<sup>19</sup> All quoted by “Mayor’s ‘Publicity Man’ is Dropped at Heated Session of National Negro Congress,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 6, 1936, 2.

effort to recruit a black rank-in-file, Toomey promised that the PNNC would consider “every phase of Negro activity.”<sup>20</sup>

In preparation for the Chicago convention, the committee invited 300 delegates representing more than 100 organizations. Broadening the black community’s philosophical horizon, Native Ethiopian and doctor Charazan Annunico declared, “As long as we are fighting in Africa the Negroes of America will be fighting too.” Ceasing the momentum, William N. Jones praised the city’s activism for demonstrating “more constructive activity for the Negro masses than in any other portion of the country.” He implored the audience to solidify its base by appealing to the white working class. Samuel C. Patterson, member of the NNC’s New York City branch, chastised some black organizations for failing to embark on this challenge and implored them to break from the self-segregationist tradition in black politics. This kind of racial exclusion within both black communities and their political representatives was “fostering Fascism in the United States.” This immense departure from previously held political ideas, the call for a United Front with the white working class at home and colonized people worldwide, marked a new chapter for the city.<sup>21</sup>

The eighty-two strong Pennsylvania delegation enjoyed wide power and influence during the Chicago conference proceedings. For his part, Amis served on a morning discussion panel titled “Aid to Ethiopia.” The panel included renowned Ethiopia activists such as Amis, the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia’s (PCDE) Willis N. Huggins; medical doctors Julian Lewis and Arnold Donowa; foreign news editor for the *Chicago Defender* Metz P. Lochard; and Ethiopian diplomat Lij Tasfaye Zaphiro. As both regional and local officer, Fauset

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<sup>20</sup> All quoted by John A. Saunders, “Labor Party Cited Negro Civic Haven,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jan. 30, 1936, 2, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 11.

<sup>21</sup> All quoted by “Speaker Lauds Uprising of Unity Among Negroes at National Regional Congress,” *Philadelphia Independent*, Feb. 9, 1936, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 11.

was given the privilege to serve as the Chairman of the General Resolutions Committee, which officially outlined NNC objectives. On the second evening, he presided over a more intimate “General Session.” Here, the panel placed black workers at the center of both national and global struggles: “Negro Youth Demands A Hearing;” “Trade Union and the Labor Party;” “The Plight of South African People;” and “Sharecroppers Demand the Right to Organize.” Such eclectic topics for discussion evidence the convention’s boldness.<sup>22</sup>

The delegates returned from the Chicago convention “inflamed with desires to do bigger and better things for the progress and good of the race.” Communist youth activist Angelo Herndon galvanized the Third Regional District by insisting “Militant action is necessary.” The young audience even drafted a resolution denouncing Italy’s bombing of Red Cross stations in Ethiopia. “I am ready to go and to give my life, if necessary,” one audience member declared. Amis’ Ethiopia committee along with the League Against War and Fascism and Rising Sun Club pooled their limited resources together and sent a telegram to British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin protesting England’s appeasement of Italy. At a local U.N.I.A. hall, James W. Ford warned that blacks must prepare for any action taken against them “as was taken against the Jews in Germany.” American fascists, Ford warned, were “trying to keep the colored groups from getting together and becoming affiliated with other sympathetic groups.”<sup>23</sup>

Though initially skeptical of the militancy, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP met with Davis and others in Washington, D.C. in early March. In this meeting, Davis highlighted the NNC’s

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<sup>22</sup> “Fight for Negro Rights!: Official Program of the National Negro Congress,” Feb. 14, 15, 16, 17, 1936 (New York: Stern Printing Co., 1936).

<sup>23</sup> “Negro Congress Delegates Express Views of Session,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 27, 1936, 20; Angelo Herndon, quoted by “Militant Youth Idea Voiced in Herndon Talk,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Apr. 23, 1936, 2; “National Negro Congress: Report of National Secretary,” June 19-20, 1936, part I, reel 7, frame 93, “Organizations Score British Ethiop Policy,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jun. 25, 1936, 11; and James W. Ford, quoted by “Natl. Congress is Lauded by Communist Aid,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Apr. 2, 1936, 2.

desire to form local councils that would organize grassroots initiatives throughout the country. The councils, Davis promised Wilkins, were not designed to overshadow the NAACP chapters. The Philadelphia branch similarly pledged that its working class activism “will not supersede the interest taken” by the NAACP but rather “aid them in their work instead.” An impressed Wilkins described the councils as an “Indication that this Congress is not precisely like other conferences that have been held on the Negro. The Board of Directors remained unconvinced. A discouraged Wilkins assured Davis that the association was still considering an endorsement of the resolutions. If they chose to, the directors would allow its branches to affiliate with the councils. “This action,” Wilkins wrote Davis, “is not all that I had hoped it might be, but it is certainly very far from a refusal to cooperate. I think it is a good beginning.”<sup>24</sup>

The trial of Samuel Watson provided an opportunity for the NAACP and NNC Philadelphia branches to work together. The fifty-six year old Watson worked in Columbia, a small town surrounded by mills and industrial plants. Local industries hired most of their workers, including Watson, from nearby Lancaster. Situated between Philadelphia and Harrisburg, Lancaster was historically known as “one of the most industrious and progressive cities in Pennsylvania.” One afternoon, two white women entered Watson’s Lancaster home and left approximately thirty minutes later. A neighbor called the police, and all three were subsequently arrested. Despite everyone’s denial of wrongdoing, Watson pled guilty, without advice of counsel, to “enticing minors for immoral purposes.” Disgusted with Watson, presiding Judge Benjamin C. Atlee declared, “It is no credit to the people of Columbia that they allowed you to be here in court today. Had they lynched you, they would have been justified...It is most

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<sup>24</sup> Roy Wilkins, supplementary memorandum to the Report on the National Negro Congress, March 10, 1936, NAACP papers, part 10, reel 15, frame?; Roy Wilkins to John P. Davis, March 11, 1936, NAACP papers, part 10, reel 15, frame?; and “National Congress Move is Launched in Philly,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Dec. 21, 1935, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 11.

fortunate for you that this offense occurred North of the Mason and Dixon Line. No court has to bother with cases of your kind South.”<sup>25</sup>

The statement sent shockwaves through the state. Congressman Shepard filed a petition demanding Atlee’s impeachment with the endorsement of both the *Christian Recorder* and *Philadelphia Record*. Together, the NNC and NAACP branches filed a joint petition in support of Shepard, containing approximately 25,000 signatures. “The eyes of the legislators,” Fauset wrote Davis, “nearly popped out when they saw...the resentment of the masses.” Efforts by the NNC and NAACP received wide approval from the black community. A Lancaster activist credited the NNC for having help “awaken the interest of the most of the responsible leaders” in the community. Determined to eradicate white supremacy in the judicial system, Lancaster’s black residents rallied around the “only real New Deal Democrat” Judge H. Clay Burkholder for reelection. After discussing the Lancaster situation in a mass meeting in Philadelphia, Fauset declared “the people of this city look more to the NNC than to any other set-up.” Fauset’s bravado aside, the *Tribune* did encourage the PNNC to “Keep up the fight,” because “Officials pay little attention to the protests of colored people.”<sup>26</sup>

The Committee on Judiciary General created a nine-member sub-committee to determine Atlee’s future. The Democratic majority sub-committee initially favored an impeachment trial but feared reprisal from their white constituents. Instead, they decided to simply accept an apology from Atlee and recommend a censure by the House for his conduct. Such a decision

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<sup>25</sup> Raymond Pace Alexander, “Judicial Tempter: A Review of the Judge Atlee Impeachment Case in Pennsylvania,” *Opportunity*, Aug., 1936, 263-264, NUL records, part I, box N34, fol. *Opportunity*, Vols. 14-17, 1936-1939.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur H. Fauset to John P. Davis, Aug. 4, 1936, NNC papers, part 1, reel 4, frame 834; J.G. Eddy to John P. Davis, Sept. 27, 1937, NNC papers, part 1, reel 9, frame 804; Arthur Huff Fauset to John P. Davis, July 7, 1936, NNC papers, part 1, reel 5, frame 80; and “Keep up the Fight,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Aug. 6, 1936, 4.

from the Democrats, in the words of renowned African-American attorney Raymond Pace Alexander, showed that “When vital issues...affecting the fundamental rights of the Negro come in conflict with dominant interest and potent institutions of the other race...the Negro finds himself without friends and supporters.”<sup>27</sup>

As the PNNC gained strength during the Atlee debate, the local Democratic machine drastically increased its vocal opposition. The Atlee scandal, combined with Governor Howard Earle’s failure to appoint a black attorney to a judgeship, thwarted any hope for a Democrat-PNNC partnership. Constant pressure by the PNNC as well as its refusal to tow the party line frustrated Democrats. The PNNC, for example, proposed to the Republican Party to adopt an enforcement amendment to the 1935 Equal Rights Law against the Democrats’ wishes. One Democratic representative was reported to have said, “Our party has been embarrassed enough with colored people’s bills.” Enraged by the council’s disobedience, John B. Kelly, chairman of the Philadelphia Democratic City Committee lashed out, “Anything that Arthur Huff Fauset is for, I am against.”<sup>28</sup>

Skepticism and hostility towards the PNNC’s actions was not confined to the political class. An educator at heart, Fauset fought for education reform by working with Floyd L. Logan of the Educational Equality League. Together, Logan and Fauset protested the public library’s refusal to hire African Americans. In response, Mayor Wilson’s secretary asserted, “the mayor has done enough for the colored people of Philadelphia.” Wanting to continue the fight, Fauset suggested an “investigation” into the public schools system’s textbooks for racial bias. This was farther than Logan would go. “I am in favor of the National Negro Congress,” said Logan, “if it

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<sup>27</sup> Alexander, “Judicial Tempter,” 266.

<sup>28</sup> “Kelly, City Democratic Head, Bitterly Attacks Fauset in Refusing Democratic Aid,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 13, 1937, 1 and 20.



does not usurp the rights of existing organizations.” Logan was “not anxious in joining the NNC” due to its ambitious agenda. “I am afraid that they are trying to do too much without having set up a permanent organizations,” Logan declared.<sup>29</sup>

Logan’s concerns were legitimate. The NNC councils did suffer from overlapping and contradicting balances of power, which made its ambitious goals difficult to achieve. Amis, while serving on the local council (which theoretically worked at the behest of the regional district) also served on the National Executive Committee. Unlike local or regional officers, members of the Executive Committee were appointed at the national leaders-only conference in Cleveland and, thus, not elected officials. Davis invited Fauset, indicating his desire to appoint Fauset on the committee. Fauset, however, was unable to attend. As a result, he suggested a complete revamping of the NNC bureaucracy. Fearing Amis’ power, Fauset demanded that national members such as Amis be elected “almost entirely” from the local and regional officers. Davis appreciated Fauset’s frustrations with the councils’ structure, but financing dominated his list of priorities.<sup>30</sup>

Embittered by both parties’ complicity in the Atlee debacle, Amis ran for Auditor General on the communist ticket in the fall of 1936. Without a significant reprisal by the Republicans against Atlee, Amis feared the conservatives’ actions would “incite the hoodlum elements” of Philadelphian society and lead to violence. The Republicans, he argued, turned away from the “great emancipator” of Lincoln and towards “labor haters and blood-thirsty

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<sup>29</sup> Louis Wilgarde, quoted by “Mayor has Done Enough, League President is Told,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Mar. 21, 1936, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Arthur H. Fauset to John P. Davis, n.d., part 1, reel 5, frame 81; Arthur H. Fauset to Benjamin D. Amis, Mar. 12, 1936, part 1, reel 3, frame 517-518; John P. Davis to Arthur H. Fauset, July 13, 1936, part 1, reel 5, frame 87; U. Simpson Tate to Arthur H. Fauset, Jan. 9, 1936, part 1, reel 4, frame 866; and John P. Davis to Arthur H. Fauset, May 12, 1936, part 1, reel 4, frame 920, all found in NNC papers.

lynchers.” The Democrats, on the other hand, offered a “few concessions,” but remained tied to the southern aristocracy. Northern Democrats, in fact, proved only slightly more acceptable than their southern counterparts. The Democrat-dominated capital of Harrisburg maintained an “uncanny silence” during the Atlee case. Such action by the Democrats was enough reason for Amis to support communists Earl Browder and James W. Ford in the presidential election.<sup>31</sup>

Amis’ support for the CPUSA was not fully reciprocated as local headquarters provided only a nominal contribution to the council. For Amis, the CPUSA’s obligation to the congress was to play an “independent role” by rallying its rank-in-file behind the PNNC. A frustrated Amis, however, chastised his comrades at the 1936 Plenum of the Philadelphia District for failing to support the PNNC objectives. While black organizers continued to form the council and outlines its objectives, the CPUSA “has lagged in the rear of these movements.” By attributing the CPUSA lack of support for the PNNC to both racism and apathy, Amis directly confronted the communists for their insincerity and hypocrisy. While espousing revolutionary slogans, the CPUSA continued to perform in a “sluggish” and “disgraceful” manner when it came to black community outreach. “We cannot be satisfied with such a situation in the Philadelphia District,” he demanded, “It requires an immediate change.”<sup>32</sup>

Tensions within the PNNC were present as well. John M. Marquess of the fraternal organization known as the Elks was the only other Philadelphian serving on the national committee. Davis envisioned the Elks’ role, as for all fraternal organizations, as providing a more mass-based campaign for civil liberties. Defending civil rights laws, supporting the anti-lynching campaign, and securing relief for the unemployed should become “rally points” for all

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<sup>31</sup> Benjamin D. Amis, radio speech for candidate for auditor general, Oct. 22, 1936. Amis papers, box 1, fol. 14 and “Communist Open Campaign,” *Defender*, July 11, 193, 16.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin D. Amis, “Some Serious Question Concerning Our Negro Work in the Philadelphia District,” n.d. [1936], Amis papers, box 2, fol. 12.

fraternal groups. Davis, however, sensed Marquess' frustration with the more radical elements of the PNNC. Marquess once admitted to Davis that the Philadelphia council "has a system all of its own, the philosophy of which I fail to comprehend." His colleagues found his local efforts lacking as well. According to Fauset, Marquess "had little time to do anything in the local work." Amis was, thus, the only active Philadelphian serving the NNC on a national level at the time.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the disappointments and frustrations, the PNNC did achieve early victories. In the Spring of 1936, Fauset along with thirty-five civic groups and churches agreed to investigate employment discrimination in the city's private and public sector. Forming the North Philadelphia Allied Committee, under the auspices of the PNNC, activists promised to "Wage War on Discrimination." The committee endorsed the boycotting and picketing of any store engaged in biased hiring practices. Fearing a boycott by black customers, the Woolworth 5 and 10 Cent retail store agreed to hire two African-American women as clerks. The *Tribune* highlighted the significance of such action due to the fact that Woolworth's black employees were historically relegated to porter and janitorial positions. The committee also convinced the State Employment Office to hire an additional seven black clerical workers. In light of such action, the *Chicago Defender* noted the potential of things to come from Popular Front militancy. "I seriously doubt whether there is any single committee in all of Philadelphia which has been so consistent and whole-hearted in its efforts," one journalist reported. The committee's efforts prove that "through cooperative effort we can make progress."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> John P. Davis to John M. Marquess, April. 30, 1936, part 1, reel 6, frame 694; John M. Marquess to John P. Davis, April 28, 1936, part 1, reel 6, frame 692; and Arthur H. Fauset to John P. Davis, March 11, 1936, part 1, reel 4, frame 819-820, all found in NNC papers

<sup>34</sup> "United Group Victory Seen in No. Philly," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jun. 11, 1936, 2, Arthur Huff Fauset to Esther McNeille, Oct. 26, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 9, frame 1073-1074; "North Philly to Wage War on Discrimination," *Chicago Defender*, Mar. 14, 1936, 12; "Colored

From 1935 to 1936, the PNNC and its allies succeed and, at times, failed in forming a Popular Front. By defending Samuel Watson as well as organizing jobs campaigns in the service industry, the PNNC galvanized both the black community and more moderate anti-racist organizations and community leaders around its objectives. Of all the local councils organized by the summer of 1936, John P. Davis declared the “Philadelphia organization of the local council has been most encouraging.”<sup>35</sup> However, the PNNC’s radicalism and disparate methods of organization engendered suspicion. Various organizations looked upon the left-liberal alliance with skepticism. The CPUSA, conversely, was the ideal partner for the PNNC in waging a United Front of the working class. The Party’s inability, or unwillingness, to fully immerse its policy platform with the PNNC deeply frustrated congress officials such as Amis. By 1937, however, the council found an ally in the CIO.

### **The Pennsylvania Workers’ Movement**

Under the leadership of John L. Lewis, the CIO initiated the organizational drive of non-skilled workers in industrial production. In a call to the United Front, Lewis proclaimed to the steel workers to “throw off their shackles of servitude.” The calls for militant direct action on behalf of the working class, according to the *Pittsburg Courier*, “are creating a new attitude on the part of Negroes” towards unions. Black workers’ reexamination towards organized labor imparted an additional sense of insurgency to NNC activists. Not only did the CIO epitomize the NNC’s call for a United Front, the potential of black-labor alliance also provided additional members to the congress’s rank-in-file. “A real trade union base,” Davis described the NNC. Of key importance for Davis was to recommend CIO officials to hire NNC officials to work full and

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Employees [*sic*] Increased in State Employment Office,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 8, 1936, 2; and “Numerous Activities of North Allied Committee,” *Chicago Defender*, Jun. 6, 1936, 7.

<sup>35</sup> “National Negro Congress: Report of National Secretary,” 17.

part time for the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). By integrating the NNC with the steel workers' movement, black officials provided vital organizational leadership for the mostly white CIO administrative leadership. As one SWOC official in Buffalo wrote Davis, "It [CIO] cannot organize the negro without negro organizers. Because the white organizers cannot gain the confidence of the black workers, as his black brother can."<sup>36</sup>

Seizing the momentum, Davis assigned Fauset a "special task" in nearby Steelton. With a black population around 2,500, Davis surmised that at least 500 African Americans were employed in the steel industry. At least fifty, he argued, should be organized into the SWOC. The problem for Fauset, as for all NNC officials, was financing. To create another labor committee from scratch in Steelton would require money that the NNC did not have. The CIO, however, provided some funds through the SWOC. Thus, the more workers the NNC organized into the SWOC, the more financial support the SWOC provided. Financial backing also enabled the NNC to hire more organizers. This relationship, Davis argued, allowed the NNC to pay its bills as it continued to expand its activities in the industrial city centers and their suburbs.<sup>37</sup>

Fauset's mission was to set-up a labor committee that would survive in his absence. He contacted community leaders in Steelton, mostly ministers and SWOC officials, for help. Together, they conducted a town hall-style union meeting of approximately twenty-five citizens. The community's receptiveness convinced Fauset that "There is every reason to believe that in a short while it will be possible to recruit a sizable group from this area into the CIO." The citizens

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<sup>36</sup> John L. Lewis, "Industrial Democracy in Steel," Jul. 6, 1936, NNC papers, part 1, reel 9, frame 449-457; Al Anderson, "Efforts to Organize Steel Men Interests Race," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Aug. 1, 1936; Robert W. Bagnall, "Bagnall: Sees Waste in NNC Work," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 7, 1937, 4; John P. Davis to Arthur H. Fauset, Jul. 22, 1936, NNC papers, part 1, reel 5, frame 78-79; and Louis W. Holley to John P. Davis, Oct. 28, 1936, NNC papers, part 1, reel 5, frame 683.

<sup>37</sup> John P. Davis to Arthur H. Fauset, Jul. 22, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 78-79; Arthur H. Fauset to John P. Davis, July 23, 1936, part 1, reel 5, frame 80; and John P. Davis to Arthur H. Fauset, July 10, 1936, part 1, reel 5, frame 89, all found in NNC papers.

of Steelton even agreed to help form a labor committee in Harrisburg. He did, however, express reservations. "They [steelworkers] are in the very center," wrote Fauset, "of trade-union reaction insofar as the bosses are concerned." Consequently, much work had to be done, he claimed, in educating the workers whom he perceived as conservative and ignorant of the trade union movement.<sup>38</sup>

Amis expressed indignation towards Fauset's perceived soft bigotry of low expectations. He was unimpressed with Fauset's organizational abilities and even suggested that he made only a token effort in Steelton. Sensing an opportunity, Amis suggested to both Davis and the Pennsylvania CIO committee that he become a full time member of the SWOC. Amis grew frustrated with the pace of the local committee after his failed candidacy for auditor general. "I am much dissatisfied," he wrote Davis, "with the progress that we are making here." Philadelphia, he warned, was far behind in the steel drive compared to others industrial cities such as Chicago and Cleveland. Classifying the steel drive as the "necessary foundation for the Congress Movement," Amis offered to travel not just to Steelton but other working class towns such as Chester and Coatesville as well.<sup>39</sup>

Amis was an ideal candidate for the SWOC. Even J. Finley Wilson, president of the Elks, declared his support "heart and soul." Only a successful unionization drive, Wilson wrote Amis, will black workers "ever expect to get justice" in "an age of mass production and...the survival of the fittest." Despite the frequently challenging partnership between radicals such as Amis and moderates within the Elks, Wilson's support evidenced a growing consensus during the Popular Front over the need to foment a more working class perspective for racial justice. Sensing Amis' drive and ambition, Davis recommended the SWOC to hire him to work throughout eastern

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<sup>38</sup> Arthur H. Fauset to John P. Davis, Aug. 12, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 5, frame 810..

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin D. Amis to John P. Davis, Aug. 20, 1936, NNC papers, part 1, reel 3, frame 572.

Pennsylvania. Amis, Davis argued, would provide an “effective campaign of education” for both black and white trade union locals.<sup>40</sup>

The CIO-NNC steel initiative fueled black working class radicalism. “The Negro steel worker is becoming more and more union-minded,” the *Tribune* observed. Given the predominance of steel, the NNC and SWOC viewed all of Pennsylvania their stomping ground. Amis, along with five other SWOC field workers, formed the Committee for the National Conference of Negro Organizations (CNCNO). The committee’s sole task was to incorporate black steel workers into the CIO. Roger Laws, member of the NNC Pittsburgh council, informed Davis of such plans as far back as October 1936. Attesting to the NNC’s influence, Laws asked Davis to “advise us” to help in the local drive to “organize the unorganized Negro.” The Pittsburgh council, under the leadership of black communist organizer Ben Careathers, was in fact the principle sponsor of the SWOC’s first annual convention in Pittsburgh on February 1937. Standing before a mostly black audience represented by the National Urban league, the AME Zion Church, the Ebenezer Baptist Church, the National Association of Colored Women, the Communist Party, and the National Negro Congress, SWOC director Philip Murray beseeched black political leaders to, “pour your soul and your heart and your mind and your body and your blood and your life into this great crusade to organize the colored workers in the great steel industry.” Despite the high profile organizations represented at the SWOC conference, the *Courier* noted the “dominance of the steel worker himself.” The workers set the tone.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> J. Finley Wilson to Benjamin D. Amis, Feb. 9, 1937, part I, reel 8, frame 716 and John P. Davis to Clinton Golden, Oct. 12, 1936, part 1, reel 5, frame 434-435, both found in NNC papers.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Laws to John P. Davis, Oct. 19, 1936, NNC papers, part 1, reel 10, frame 251-252; Roger Laws to John P. Davis, Oct. 19, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 6, frame 231; and Benjamin Careathers to John P. Davis, March 5, 1937, NNC papers, part 1, reel 9, frame 399; and “Phil Murray Urges Negro Workers to Join Great Steel Industry Union,” *Pittsburgh Courier*,

The SWOC, however, faced titanic challenges in Pennsylvania. The *Courier's* George S. Schuyler warned of perilous developments between black and white steel workers in Johnstown, a Pittsburgh suburb. Only a small handful of black workers joined a CIO-backed strike at the Bethlehem Steel Company. The CIO was “shocked and puzzled,” he reported, “by the failure of their black fellow workers.” After all, blacks worked the “most miserable and exhausting jobs” in the mills which “sprawls like some puffing, Mesazoic [*sic*] monster stuffed with the blood” of their labor. Such conditions hardly inspired company loyalty among black workers. Unionists, he reported, blamed the lack of solidarity on the recently arrived southern migrants. Because of their so-called ignorance of trade unions, many were either hired as strikebreakers or persuaded by the company to work during the strike. Schuyler, however, defended their decision. White workers, he argued, “have never helped the local Negroes in their struggle for equal citizenship rights. Nor have they ever insisted the Negroes be given a wider variety of employment.” Neglected by the unions, black workers reached the rational conclusion that loyalty to the company would avert harsh recrimination if not lead to better jobs and safer working conditions.<sup>42</sup>

During the strike, Schuyler came across Houston Underwood, a black steel worker and SWOC organizer. “The finest type of labor unionist,” Schuyler described him. Unlike Schuyler, Underwood defended the CIO. “I feel that my interests lie with the working class,” he insisted. In fact, his main concern was not with the CIO but with black workers. He confessed, “I have done organizing work among both white and colored, but have had little success with my people.” For black organizers like Underwood, the CIO confronted a working class conflict not simply between black and white but within the black working class itself. Some, for instance,

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Feb. 13, 1937; and Roger Keeran, “The International Workers Order and the Origins of the CIO,” *Labor History*, 30, No. 3, (Summer 1989): 392.

<sup>42</sup> George S. Schuyler, “Race Feeling Tense Where C.I.O. is Flaunted, Schuyler Finds,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Jul. 24, 1937.



viewed the CIO unfavorably. “It’s a Bolshevik movement,” a black steel worker in Warren, Ohio described the CIO. Schuyler himself described the Johnstown CIO strikers as “Slavs and others of alien extraction” who have no such “claim on the Negroes’ allegiance.” The dangerous blend of nativism, anti-communism, as well as legitimate skepticism by blacks made for a toxic counteroffensive for the SWOC.<sup>43</sup>

Schuyler revised his judgment after observing the Philadelphia CIO headquarters less than a month later. The city and its surrounding suburbs, he wrote, were a “beehive of activity.” Union endeavors were particularly wide-ranging in Chester, a large industrial satellite that drew significant numbers of recent migrants from Philadelphia. It was here that the CIO initiated its first drive to organize workers in mass production in the state. Chester was an ideal place for the NNC and CIO to start. Every steel, oil refining, and textile company in Chester employed a significant number of African Americans. However, nearly one third were unemployed, and many enjoyed only part time or irregular employment. Of those who were working, sixty-eight percent received less than twenty dollars per week.<sup>44</sup>

The steel drive was not the first time the left attempted to forge working class solidarity in Chester. Instigated by the local *Chester Times*, white residents threatened to lynch a black worker who fled the well-known “appalling dilapidation and lack of sanitary convenience,” in his neighborhood by moving into a majority white section in 1930. The local CPUSA used the opportunity to demonstrate against the confinement of black workers “into segregated ghettos where they are robbed and exploited at will.” Approximately 300 black and 100 white workers

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<sup>43</sup> Houston Underwood, quoted by Ibid and “James W. Ford’s Name Mentioned in Charges Against Reds in CIO,” *Chicago Defender*, Jun. 12, 1937, 4.

<sup>44</sup> George Schuyler, “Schuyler Finds Philadelphia Negro Workers are Rallying to ‘New Deal’ Call of Unions,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Aug. 14, 1937; “C.I.O. Seeks to Win Chester Workers,” *Philadelphia Record*, Jan. 25, 1937, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 11; and Paget, “The Plight of the Pennsylvania Negro.”

attended the CPUSA-organized meeting to support their fellow worker and protest the “lynching spirit.” After the meeting was “brutally broken up” by police officers, the workers regrouped and defied the police by marching to the local CPUSA headquarters to carry on the protest.<sup>45</sup>

Amis and other black SWOC officials sought to revive this political tradition. Chester native John O. Smith, for example, worked in the mills for more than fifty years and was the oldest steel worker in attendance at the SWOC convention. Under his leadership, the entire workforce of the Chester Tube and Pipe plant organized. Both the General and Penn Steel plants signed contracts with the CIO as well. Labor victories, however, did not lead to better housing conditions. Homes in the town’s Southside continued to suffer from decaying infrastructure, “the equal of which will be found nowhere else in the United States.” Nevertheless, the empowerment of Smith by the NNC demonstrated a significant achievement in self-empowerment. Such dedication to black workers, Schuyler noted, was “not the type commonly associated with labor unions.”<sup>46</sup>

The Sun Shipbuilding Company proved more difficult. Few steel workers enjoyed the benefits of their white counterparts but those who did, according to Schuyler, were “expected to keep the less fortunate Negro in line for the company.” Less than 200 out of 1,000 black employees joined a CIO strike as a result. Similarly at the Congoleum Corporation, a sheet and tile manufacturer, a small number of black employees were provided decent jobs and were, therefore, “accordingly satisfied.” Many black leaders, he reported, even supported Congoleum’s

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<sup>45</sup> Paget, “The Plight of the Pennsylvania Negro” and “Cops Stop Anti Lynch Meet, *Pittsburgh Courier*, Jan. 4, 1930 and “Cops Stop Anti Lynch Meet.”

<sup>46</sup> Schuyler, “Schuyler Finds Philadelphia Negro Workers are Rallying to ‘New Deal’ Call of Unions;” “Workers Support CIO Plan,” *Afro-American*, Feb. 13, 1937, A16; Orrin Evans, “Steel Industry is Approaching Crisis,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 4, 1937, 24; “What Chester Makes...,” *Chester Times*, May 4, 1946, NUL records, part I, reel 16, frame 72; and Schuyler, “Schuyler Finds Philadelphia Negro Workers are Rallying to ‘New Deal’ Call of Unions.”

company union over the CIO. The company, they pointed out, paid relatively decent wages and employed black foremen. Companies often utilized such tactics after the passage of the Wagner act. By keeping a small group of workers satisfied, the company unions could increase their chances in the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections.<sup>47</sup>

Reverend and CIO-backer J. Pius Barbour chastised the town's black community for its lack of militant leadership. Only he and one other minister opened their churches for union meetings. Amis, Barbour claimed, was one of the few SWOC officials making a significant effort while the local community leaders "do not lift a finger." Many of the state's more affluent black leaders were sharply divided over the CIO's rhetoric of "economic emancipation." Pittsburgh's first black Judge Homer S. Brown, for example, praised CIO tactics for highlighting the AFL's racial exclusion. Conversely, Philadelphia's G. Edward Dickerson considered CIO tactics antithetical to the rule of law. Because of "violent opposition" by Dickerson and others, the National Bar Association (NBA) voted against a resolution endorsing the CIO at its annual conference in Philadelphia. Radicals like Barbour attributed such actions to classism in the black political establishment. "They have the utmost contempt for the masses," he thundered.<sup>48</sup>

Effective community leadership was at times in short supply. Suspicion by some towards the NNC and SWOC in Chester meant organizers like Amis were on their own. In Johnstown, the black working class itself was hostile as evidenced by Underwood's formidable hurdles. Work by the Philadelphia NNC and its labor allies throughout 1937, however, demonstrated that a devout sense of ideological commitment and effective organizing could achieve significant

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<sup>47</sup> Schuyler, "Schuyler Finds Philadelphia Negro Workers are Rallying to 'New Deal' Call of Unions."

<sup>48</sup> J. Pious Barber, quoted by Ibid; John L. Lewis, quoted by "Unionization of Colored Steel Workers Anticipated," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 11, 1937, 3; Ed R. Harris, "C.I.O. Opposed by Nation's Lawyer," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Aug. 12, 1937; and Schuyler, "Schuyler Finds Philadelphia Negro Workers are Rallying to 'New Deal' Call of Unions."

gains for workers. Despite uneven progress in the city and its suburbs, the CIO's efforts demonstrated to Schuyler that the "Negro workers...are living up to the tradition of intelligent militancy." "Whatever the outcome of its [the CIO's] effort," he concluded, "the influence will long be felt in the labor movement."<sup>49</sup>

The steel crusade paralleled the CIO's drive in Philadelphia's transport industry. The NNC took great interest in Michal Quill's Transport Workers Union (TWU) during its first organizing drive in the spring of 1937 in New York. Attempting to broaden its base, Quill reached out to the Harlem Labor Committee and the local NNC to help recruit black transport workers. The TWU gave its public endorsement of the anti-lynching bill in the *Transport Bulletin* as well. Harlem's prominent communist lawyer and NNC member Benjamin J. Davis noted the TWU's greatest hurdles in New York was overcoming the "hostility on the part of the white workers who have centuries of chauvinist teaching behind them." The TWU soon looked for organizing opportunities outside New York. After the passage of the state's "Little Wagner" Act, the Pennsylvania Rapid Transit Company (PRT) was forced to dissolve its company union, the PRT Cooperative Assembly. With 9,800 employees, Philadelphia became the TWU's next target and soon reached out to the PNNC. The TWU, however, needed much more than an ally. Its AFL rival, the Amalgamated Association, relentlessly attacked the CIO as "Communist Insurgent Outlaws." This "unholy alliance" of communists and unions, the Amalgamated claimed, seek to abuse the PRT workers for their own political purposes. The TWU retaliated by

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<sup>49</sup> Schuyler, "Schuyler Finds Philadelphia Negro Workers are Rallying to 'New Deal' Call of Unions."

declaring the Amalgamated “splitters and co-operators with the bosses,” who place workers “at the tender mercies of... ‘benevolent’ employers.”<sup>50</sup>

The TWU and Amalgamated, however, shared one commonality—their hatred for the PRT and its new company union, the PRT Employees Union. After the passage of the Wagner Act, Mayor Wilson quickly ordered an election to determine the new collective bargaining agent for the employees. In protest of the Employees Union’s inclusion on the ballot, the TWU and Amalgamated declared a boycott. Defying the sanctity of the election, voting took place on company grounds. Employees, according to local TWU Secretary Treasurer George Rooney, were told “to keep quiet if they know what was good for them.” Foremen allegedly intimidated workers into voting for the company union as well. City police were also accused of supervising workers inside the voting booths. During this time, Wilson declared all PRT strikes illegal unless permitted by his Conciliation Board. The situation, Rooney argued, reeked of collusion between corporate and city officials. An enraged Rooney declared such tactics “a menace...which have become popular in certain European countries of late years.” After the election, the TWU immediately filed charges against the Employees Union to the state’s Labor Relations Board.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Jashua B. Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 249-263; Shirley Quill, *Mike Quill-Himself: A Memoir* (Greenwich: Devin-Adair, 1985), 86-102.; TWU, “To all Employees of P.R.T.: Craft Unions are out of Date! Company Unions are Out-Lawed!,” box 71, fol. 7, Transport Workers Union of America: Records of Locals (TWUL hereafter), New York University: Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives; Benjamin J. Davis, “African American Issues,” box 1, fol. 4, Transport Workers Union of America Records (TWU records hereafter), New York University: Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives; Amalgamated Association of Street, Electric Railway and Motor Coach Employees of America, newsletter, June 4, 1937, box 71, fol. 7, TWUL records; and John P. Davis to John Quill, April 8, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 474.

<sup>51</sup> George Rooney, “Here to Stay,” *Philadelphia Organizer*, Aug. 15, 1937, TWUL records, box 71, fol. 7; and George Rooney to Samuel Davis Wilson, July 14, TWUL records, box 71, fol. 7.

The fight against the company union coincided with the PRT's reorganization under the Federal Bankruptcy Act. Corporate restricting caused immense anxiety by the TWU. The PRT employee-stockholders, for example, were left out of the company's restructuring plans, effectively robbing workers' "control over their own investment." In the meantime, the TWU embarked on a public relations effort to educate Philadelphians over both the bankruptcy issues as well as the company union. The campaign, however, mostly involved Rooney dodging company union propaganda. In a public lecture, a PRT employee asked Rooney whether or not accusations of communism within the TWU were true. Rooney insisted that the TWU included various walks of political life with only a "sprinkling of such radicals as Socialists and Communists." Assuaging fears, Rooney unequivocally renounced strikes as well. Only when companies refuse to grant unions recognition or ignore workers' representative will the TWU "go to the extreme of taking strike actions."<sup>52</sup>

While the TWU drive stalled, the Philadelphia NNC was preparing for the second national convention. The mammoth preparation began when the United Front in the steel and transport industries were just getting started. It was, however, the perfect opportunity for the city and state's NNC and SWOC councils to advertise their accomplishments on a national level. After all, the black-labor partnership was the PNNC's signature achievement. Craving to maximize the congress's publicity, Davis wanted to project the steel workers as "the very heart" of the convention. Amis and the other five heads of the CNCNO made that possible. Ben Careathers coordinated the Philadelphia and state SWOC charters to help elect delegates to attend the convention. Organizational duties led by black communists and their SWOC comrades

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<sup>52</sup> Rooney, "Here to Stay;" "Report on Status of Local 161," May 23, 1939, TWUL records, box 71, fol. 7; Harry O. Reiser and William H. Johnson to Donald M. Livingston, Sept. 29, 1937, TWUL records box 71, fol. 7; George Rooney, interview by unknown, 1938, TWUL records, box 71, fol. 8.

provided the convention a militant aura. A case in point, the NNC chose October 15<sup>th</sup> for the convention's starting date, marking the seventy-eighth anniversary of the radical abolitionist John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Pinnacle of the Philadelphia Congress**

Approximately 4,500 spectators cheered outside the convention held at the city's Metropolitan Opera House. The NNC's credentials committee reported more than twelve hundred delegates from twenty-eight states attended, far surpassing the first convention in Chicago. Keynote speakers included renowned figures in the labor movement such as Pennsylvania's Lieutenant Governor Thomas Kennedy and the SWOC's Philip Murray. The convention also included prominent figures who, just a year prior, shunned the NNC. For instance, the support from Walter White of the NAACP, Tuskegee Institute President F.D. Patterson, and Norman Thomas of the American Socialist Party (SPUSA) indicated an acknowledgement by more moderate anti-racist leaders of the NNC's rise to national prominence.<sup>54</sup>

The NNC, however, was still not without its detractors. Though a convention participant, Frank Crosswaith of the New York Negro Labor Committee refused to endorse the congress. Composed of 300,000 black and white unionists of both CIO and AFL lodges, the labor committee criticized the NNC on the basis that it was not a legitimate labor organization. The African-American socialist Crosswaith maintained that the NNC's inclusion of religious and fraternal groups delegitimized the its credentials as a union movement. The labor committee's

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<sup>53</sup> John P. Davis to Charles W. Burton, Sept. 13, 1937, part 1, reel 8, frame 790; Ben Careathers to John P. Davis, Oct. 2, 1937, part 1, reel 9, frame ?; John W. Edelman to Arthur Huff Fauset, part 1, reel 9, frame 796; John P. Davis to Bella Gross, Sept. 13, 1937, part 1, reel 10, frame 00026, all found in NNC papers.

<sup>54</sup> "4,500 Cheer at Congress," *Afro-American*, Oct. 23, 1937, 1 and 2 and "Delegates Attending National Negro Congress, *Afro-American*, Oct. 23, 1937, 17.

Manning Johnson forcefully disagreed. For him, the NNC's inclusion of churches and fraternal organizations was a necessary tactics to make the United Front possible. "How can we expect to get anywhere without the support of these groups?" Johnson asked. Embracing the popular front sentimentality, Johnson argued, "They represent the very groups we have to depend on in our campaigns, in our strikes." Crosswaith and Johnson's dispute almost reached to the point of psychical violence.<sup>55</sup>

The PNNC also received criticism from the press when it made the controversial decision to invite Mayor Wilson. A *Tribune* editorial characterized the congress' move as a cynical maneuver designed to enhance its own political power without taking the Mayor's poor labor record into account. Mayor Wilson did receive praise a month before the convention for appointing a "special committee" designed to formalize greater cooperation between the PNNC and the mayor's office. His aid to visiting NNC delegates impressed many as well. After the convention, delegates organized a picket line surrounding a restaurant for its refusal to serve them. In response, the Mayor sent four police officers to the scene to protect the delegates during their picket. Though hardly a reliable ally of the black community, the Mayor's support for civil disobedience evidenced his acknowledgement of the intensification in black political expression.<sup>56</sup>

The mayor's recent concessions added to the PNNC's prestige. As the keynote speaker, Fauset declared such political recognition "is merely additional evidence of the spirit of 1937 Philadelphia, which with outstretched arms welcomed the National Negro Congress." Fauset linked the congress to the city's "earlier claims of fame and glory," such as the signing of the

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<sup>55</sup> "Unionists Balk Negro Congress," *Afro-American*, Oct. 16, 1937, 3.

<sup>56</sup> "Under the Microscope: Mayor Exploited the National Negro Congress," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 21, 1937, 4 and "Mayor Wilson Names Negro Congress Comm.," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Sep. 16, 1937, .



Declaration of Independence, the framing of the Constitution, the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the establishment of the Underground Railroad. The convention was nothing less than the next stage in this continuing struggle to fulfill the promises of full citizenship rights. “This,” Fauset declared, “is the meaning of the National Negro Congress, as in fact it is the meaning of our Constitution.” The speech, however, was not simply a recital of black loyalty to the democratic system. It was also a portent of things to come if the system failed to reciprocate such loyalty. “How great then is our responsibility as leaders of this Congress that this faith and trust of our masses be sustained and justified—and, not, as so often in the past, exploited and betrayed!”<sup>57</sup>

Possibly alarmed by the congress’ combative temperament, Wilson pressed upon the themes of patriotism. Speaking before the delegates, Wilson declared “For your race you are affirming again your unswerving support of the Constitution and your loyalty to it.” Nationalism, he argued, was the tie that bound all Americans together. “How much more fortunate are we than those overseas, torn with strife and ancient hatreds, forced into dreadful conflicts...we rest confidently in the blessings we have.” His attempts to instill national allegiance at times drifted into white liberal condescension. “The colored people of America have thrived and prospered despite all handicaps in a way which is as gratifying as it is surprising,” he spoke. Material progress for blacks proves, he assured, that the full realization of equal citizenship was upon them.<sup>58</sup>

President Randolph seconded Mayor Wilson’s call for black American support of liberal democratic institutions. Black Americans, in the words of Randolph, hail the constitution as a

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<sup>57</sup> Arthur Huff Fauset, “Publication of the National Negro Congress,” (Washington, D.C.: n.d. [1937]), n.p., NNC papers, part I, reel 11, frame 950-998.

<sup>58</sup> Samuel Davis Wilson, “Publication of the National Negro Congress,” n.p.

“Magna Charta of human rights.” “The Negro people,” he proclaimed, “especially look to the Constitution as an impregnable citadel of their liberties.” Without the Bill of Rights, “the liberation of all oppressed minority groups, could hardly [*sic*] exist and enjoy a healthy growth and development.” The constitution’s survival in a time of war and fascism evidences its “deeper moorings of stability” and inspires “hope in democracy” throughout the globe. Despite the unfinished revolution of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Randolph maintained, American democracy “provides the grounds of principle and [the] promises to secure it.”<sup>59</sup>

Like Fauset, however, Randolph’s speech was hardly an expression of blind faith in democracy and liberal capitalism. The constitution, Randolph noted, only provided the possibility for “the attainment of an enlightened and humane government, and an economic order that will invest the people with the right and the power to live the good life.” Capitalism, he warned, radically reduces the possibility for actualizing this dream of equality. Though the United States survived the global onslaught of fascism, democratic nations “are under constant, menacing stress and strain of [the] tendencies toward the rule of fascist force.” The “rapid transformation” of political economies and its consequences such as mass unemployment and world war cripple citizens’ hope and optimism by instilling pessimism and fear.<sup>60</sup>

In order to overcome the tide of American fascism, Randolph stressed the need to incorporate the black working class into the CIO and AFL. African Americans, he implored, constitute a vital component to the Popular Front’s defense of democracy. “True liberation,” proclaimed Randolph, “can be acquired and maintained only when the Negro people possess power; and power is the product and flower of organization.” That power of organization, he argued, can only come through the United Front of the working class. And yet, black workers

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<sup>59</sup> A. Philip Randolph, “Publication of the National Negro Congress,” n.p.

<sup>60</sup> Randolph, n.p.

continue to face the “pliant municipal representatives, and the extra-governmental organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Black Legion and other vigilante movements.” Only through unity on behalf of the working class will black workers overcome both white supremacist and anti-labor forces. Mass action on behalf of all workers in industrial production was, thus, the key to overcome fascism and actualize true democracy.<sup>61</sup>

The CIO provided this opportunity. For Lieutenant Governor Thomas Kennedy, the convention marked the beginning of the “Second Emancipation” whose purpose was nothing short of “reconstructing the social order.” Harnessing the moment to launch his endeavor of capturing the Democratic nomination for Governor, Kennedy outlined his vision for the Democratic Party. “We must give attention to injustice in the distribution of national wealth and income,” he declared. The organization of mass production workers gives promise for achieving this goal. Unions’ neglect of the black worker, however, continued to threaten the actualization of this new social order. Though not mentioning specific AFL lodges engaged in discrimination directly, Kennedy declared “it is equally a severe indictment against any union in America that will stand for such an un-American policy.” Discrimination, he concluded, was the barrier that stood in the working class’ way.<sup>62</sup>

Philip Murray used his speech to bask in the glow of the CIO’s achievements. In just eighteen months, the SWOC organized more than half a million steel workers into 1,052 lodges and formed almost eight hundred grievance committees. There is, therefore, no mystery as to why “the CIO is extremely popular with the workers of this nation...because it is the kind of union that the wage earners want.” Unlike Kennedy, Murray took great pleasure in pointing out the AFL’s intransigence towards organizing steel workers in Pennsylvania. Only until the SWOC

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<sup>61</sup> Randolph, n.p.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Kennedy, “Publication of the National Negro Congress,” n.p.

provided workers “of all the steel communities throughout the state their economic freedom,” did they begin to “set in motion an organism, the mechanism, the instrument that might make possible their political freedom.” This awakening, Murray emphasized, was being done, and could only be done, at the grassroots level. “I have a deep-rooted felling,” Murray concluded, “that you can do much in your communities and towns and in your organizations, societies, churches...to assist the CIO in the furtherance of its campaign to help you.”<sup>63</sup>

The Philadelphia convention catapulted the PNNC onto the stage of the political mainstream. Participation from figures such as Mayor Wilson, Lieutenant Governor Kennedy, the Tuskegee Institute’s F.D. Patterson, and the NAACP’s Walter White bestowed a newfound prestige upon the congress. Even Eleanor Roosevelt attended the Philadelphia NNC and CIO’s centenary celebration of Fredrick Douglass’ emancipation the following month. In front of the “largest turn-out of Negroes since the personal appearance of Champion Joe Louis,” Roosevelt declared unequivocal support to the United Front. Soon after the convention, Crystal Bird Fauset became the first black woman elected to the state legislature. The congress’s popularity, thus, rose not in spite of its radicalism but because of it. “The sum total of the [NNC’s] doctrine,” the editorial board of the *Chicago Defender* wrote, “is that the black man’s fight for freedom and justice...is now up to him.” This doctrine “will spell doom to the compromisers, who for many years have dissipated our energies, accomplished little, and more often led us astray.”<sup>64</sup>

Philadelphia’s black community increasingly expressed profound support for the PNNC and John P. Davis. After the Douglass celebration, a local activist hailed Davis for his United Front platform. “I wish you could know,” the activist wrote Davis, “what a thoroughly first-class

<sup>63</sup> Philip Murray, “Publication of the National Negro Congress,” n.p.

<sup>64</sup> “Race Congress Opens in Historic Room,” *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 23, 1937, 3; John A. Saunders, “11,000 Hear ‘First Lady’ in Philly,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 19, 1938; and “It’s Our Battle,” *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 23, 1937.

job you did... It seemed to me that the insight, the knowledge and the maturity of thought which your address revealed was quite unique in this whole field of the Negro in the American labor scene.” Davis’ elocution on the workers’ movement was “masterly” delivered and successfully “clarified in an amazing way certain questions which he or she had regarding the problem you discussed. “Most certainly,” she continued, “you have unusual capacity, and its splendid to know that you have the channel of the National Negro Congress through which to work, and it is also splendid to know that the National Negro Congress has your ability and your wisdom to lead it on into ever more effective accomplishments.”<sup>65</sup>

Approximately seventy local councils had formed by year’s end. A year of significant efforts by the local councils was “indicative of a much larger volume of work” than the National Executive Committee originally expected. This was made possible primarily in cooperation with the CIO. The NNC, for example, estimated that more than one-third of the convention delegates were unionists. The day after the convention, the NNC held a private meeting at the Metropolitan Opera House. As a reward for his efforts, Fauset along with his wife Crystal were added to the national executive committee. The committee also assigned fifty percent of fund raising duties to the local councils with forty percent from the national office and ten percent from the regional offices. Fund raising responsibilities were significant obligatory burdens for the local councils, but it demonstrated both the vital role and power of Amis and countless other field organizers as well as to the decentralized structure of the NNC.<sup>66</sup>

Davis’ expectation for the Pennsylvania councils were ambitious. Given the size of the state as well as the CIO’s considerable presence, Davis envisioned a complete shift in the

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<sup>65</sup> Helen R. Bryan to John P. Davis, February 14, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 12, frame 309.

<sup>66</sup> “Tentative Draft of Outline of Organization for National Negro Congress,” n.d. [1937], NNC papers, part I, reel 9, frame 881; and Report of the Meeting of the Executive Board of the National Negro Congress, Oct. 18, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 7, frame 532-533.

balance of power in Pennsylvania politics. In order to achieve this goal, he encouraged the councils to “broaden the leadership” by incorporating as many as unionists as possible. The SWOC made this black-labor alliance possible at its first annual convention held in April 1938 in Harrisburg. Despite the unspoken segregationist decree in the state’s capital, the SWOC delegates insisted on lodging in the same hotel and dinning in the same restaurant. “Wherever one went all went,” wrote Amis. The 1,280 delegates, in fact, celebrated AFL president William Green’s expulsion of the radicals. For Amis and other black CIO officials, the decision demonstrated which trade union movement stood by black workers’ side. “The C.I.O. teaches us,” a black delegate declared, “that only in unity is there strength and we will be able to better our conditions. We workers can’t fight among ourselves.” The delegates unanimously voted in favor for a variety of resolutions including the passing of a state anti-lynching law. The anti-lynching resolution’s co-author H.G. Peebles proudly proclaimed that not a single dissenting vote was cast against the proposal. Thomas Kennedy also received a “rousing ovation” in his bid for Governor. With Kennedy seeking to overthrow the old Democratic guard, the *New York Times* declared this challenge “the most ambitious political drive this militant wing of organized labor has yet undertaken.” Amis welcomed the move, “He leads Labor’s mighty army to answer the challenge.”<sup>67</sup>

The CIO, through the SWOC and TWU, injected a newfound sense of optimism in the PNNC. By the summer of 1938, the council secured affiliations from approximately one hundred

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<sup>67</sup> “Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Board: Metropolitan Opera House,” Oct. 18, 1937, 1-2, American Communist Party in the Comintern Archives “(CPUSA Comintern” hereafter), reel 306, delo 4074; Benjamin D. Amis, “Harrisburg State Capitol of Jim Crow,” *Labor’s Press*, April 27, 1938, box 1, fol. 11; Benjamin D. Amis, “Pa. Labor Council Backs Kennedy,” *Non Partisan News*, April 7, 1938, box 1, fol. 11; Benjamin D. Amis, “To Labor a Challenge,” *Non Partisan News*, May 7, 1938, box 1, fol. 11, all found in Amis papers; Lawrence E. Davis, “Kennedy Leads C.I.O.’s Flight,” *New York Times*, Mar. 13, 1938; and H.G. Peebles to John P. Davis, April 1, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 434.

organizations and distributed more than fifty thousand leaflets to black steel workers. Despite the perilous obstacles the Pennsylvania councils' labor organizers faced, the CIO provided the chance to foment a United Front. With keynote speeches delivered by Thomas Kennedy and Philip Murray at the Philadelphia convention, the NNC emerged as the most loyal and eager ally of the workers' movement. For John P. Davis, the Philadelphia gathering of unionists "has equipped us [the NNC] with clearer vision for the accomplishment of our tasks. It has outlined the procedure which we must follow if we are to be successful—the procedure of united mass action."<sup>68</sup>

Of the PNNC's 379 delegates, only five represented the CPUSA plus seventeen from organizations with significant communist members. Critics of militant civil rights, however, vocalized their concerns of the NNC's communist faction more frequently after the Philadelphia convention. After receiving criticism for providing a subdued and uninspiring speech, F.D. Patterson justified his conservative posture as an attempt to tame the "radical hue which had been given...by communists and other pink speakers." Prominent journalists and editors expressed their disapproval of the NNC as well. When asked to help publicize the NNC and the Philadelphia convention, Claude A. Barnett of the *Associated Negro Press* ominously described the congress as "distinctly 'left wing.'" Congress officers' association with the CIO made the movement "not far from communism." Barnett also dismissed the NNC for its lack of funds and bottom-up approach to organization. "They have no money. The delegates are whoever comes."

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<sup>68</sup> John P. Davis to Bertram M. Gross, April 29, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 13, frame 454-455 and Arthur H. Fauset to John P. Davis, May 7, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 16, frame 443-448.

Consequently, the NNC lacked the credibility to justify extensive news coverage. “In other words,” he concluded, “there is no business there.”<sup>69</sup>

These criticisms would continue to haunt the PNNC for the rest of its existence. As the PNNC rose to prominence, the louder its detractors became. Despite the council’s adoption of a non-partisan policy, for instance, Fauset was forced to publicly proclaim “Any report to the effect that the congress was leaning toward communism is untrue...The delegates to the congress were from all walks of life, and such an assembly in itself eradicates the basis for such as report.” After the NNC factionalized between communists and non-communists at its convention in 1940 in Washington, D.C., the congress and its remaining supporters suffered from severe political setbacks. The problem of finance, as Claude A. Barnett accurately noted, was also a point of grim contention. Consequently, the relationship between the Philadelphia council and national headquarters began to fracture over financial obligations. Throughout 1938, John P. Davis heavily pressured Fauset and other council members to enlarge its treasury. The PNNC responded by demanding more financial support from the national office. Neither organization, thus, possessed the resources to continue its labor campaign.<sup>70</sup>

### **A Sharp Decline**

The challenge of promoting the SWOC’s culture of racial harmony was always grim. In the spring of 1938, the SWOC and NNC councils of Coatesville and Philadelphia organized the workers of the Lukens Steel Company and subsequently formed a grievance committee. The

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<sup>69</sup> “Affiliates and Delegates of the Philadelphia Council of the National Negro Congress,” n.d. [1937], NNC papers, part I, reel 11, frame 299-308; James E. Boyack to Claude A. Barnett, Sept. 17, 1937; Claude A. Barnett to James E. Boyack, Sept. 18, 1937; and F.D. Patterson to Claude A. Barnett, Nov. 24, 1937, Claude A. Barnett Papers (“Barnett Papers” hereafter), box 342, fol. 7, Chicago History Museum: Research Division.

<sup>70</sup> Arthur H. Fauset, quoted by “Negro Congress Isn’t Radical, Leaders Hold,” *Afro-American*, Oct. 30, 1937, 20.



company's representatives addressed every grievance reported by the union. Two months later, however, police arrested James Ward for allegedly robbing a young white couple. In response, thousands of white residents, including police officers, marched towards the Coatesville jail with a "lynching spirit." On the eastside of town, 300 black residents gathered bricks, clubs, and guns. Armed and determined, the demonstrators guarded Ward declaring, "They shall not pass." In an effort to avoid violence, the police captain transferred Ward to the nearby police station in Reading. Though bloodshed was averted, the "sadistic frenzy" exposed the deep obstacles NNC and CIO organizers in Coatesville faced. In May, Pastor and head of the local NNC council S. Quash wrote Davis, "things are at the worse; more than I have known them to be in twenty five years" due to the "lack of interest on the part of a large majority of our people here."<sup>71</sup>

This insufficient United Front transferred upwards to the state level. The CIO and leftwing of the Democratic Party suffered a devastating defeat once the party thwarted Kenney's campaign by coalescing around the moderate candidate. Amis blamed labor's electoral defeat by pointing to William Green's instructions to the AFL lodges to vote against Kennedy due to his position in the CIO. Overcoming such opposition from both the party and conservative unions required a vast educational campaign that the radicals could not afford to implement. He took solace, however, noting that "this was the first time that Labor as an independent political force,

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<sup>71</sup> "S.W.O.C. Group Meets Officials of Lukens Steel," *Coatesville Record*, April 1938, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 11; "5,000 Would-Be Lynchers Storm Jail, But Girl In Case Says Suspect Is Innocent," *Pittsburg Courier*, June 11, 1938; Quoted by "Race Checks PA. Lynching," *Chicago Defender*, June 11, 1938; "A Tragedy Averted," *Chicago Defender*, June 18, 1938; and S. Quash to John P. Davis, May 10, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 473.

threw its cap into the arena and battled against the veterans of a well organized political machine.”<sup>72</sup>

Coinciding with the CIO’s political defeats, divisions between the Pennsylvania councils and the national office escalated. In a scathing letter directed to Benjamin Careathers, Davis declared, “We expect Pittsburgh to show results both in terms of improvement organizationally and in terms of its financial support to the national office.” Tensions between Davis and the Philadelphia council were no different. In February, Fauset accused Davis for failing to pay for the costly bills incurred from the Philadelphia convention of which Davis allegedly agreed to pay. Davis, however, continued to pressure the PNNC to contribute funds for the next two years of the council’s existence. In frustration, Fauset tendered his resignation as both PNNC President and NNC Vice-President. “May I say that one of the pleasantest memories of the years during my activity in the Congress,” Fauset wrote Davis, “will be my association in this work with you.” In one final plea, Davis wrote “I feel sure that you are no less concerned about the problems facing the Negro people than you were when the Congress began...I am sure you will believe that I too have the same burning desire to make the Congress go.” Fauset was unmoved.<sup>73</sup>

The PNNC’s financial burdens continued. A frustrated Davis even questioned the current work of the PNNC and complained over its failure to raise its quota. “I am sure it will be clear that if we had the financial support of our Philadelphia Local Council,” Davis wrote council secretary Goldie Ervin, “we would be better able to meet the obligation which we have, and

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<sup>72</sup> Lawrence E. Davies, “Jones Lead is Cut in Later Returns,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1938 and Benjamin D. Amis, “Labor Demonstrated Power in Primary Elections, Says Amis,” *Labor’s Press*, May 26, 1938.

<sup>73</sup> John P. Davis to Benjamin Careathers, April 15, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 12, frame 673-674 and Arthur H. Fauset to John P. Davis, Jan. 17, 1939, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 370 and John P. Davis to Arthur H. Fauset, Jan. 24, 1939, NNC papers, part I, reel 16, frame 471.

which are long overdue.” Ervin responded, “There is a financial crisis in the local NNC.” An impatient Davis reminded Ervin of his own extensive fundraising for the congress. “But my efforts alone are not enough to get the Congress out of the strangle-hold which long overdue debts have on us,” he wrote.<sup>74</sup>

The decline of the PNNC was partially determined by the CIO’s various defeats. Hearings over the TWU’s charges against the PRT company union, for instance, lasted from March 1938 until December with more than 8,000 pages of testimony. During this time, interest in transport unionism sharply declined. Rooney was mentally taxed over the endless need to assuage the “good deal of fear with which these fellows still regard any affiliation outside of the company-union.” Subordinates sensed Rooney was caving. Without Rooney’s knowledge, officer William H. Johnson informed the national offices that PRT workers within the TWU were “becoming disillusioned by the inactivity.” Rooney, Johnson wrote, “just naturally lacks the creative ability,” required to “keep any local alive at our stage of the game.” Johnson suggested forming a picket line around PRT headquarters just prior to the 1938 elections in order to “raise an outcry.” Rooney overruled the proposal. Such inactivity convinced Johnson that Rooney was too “conservative and slow to grasp the need for action and has no remedy for our deterioration.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> John P. Davis to Goldie Ervin, Oct. 2, 1939, part I, reel 13, frame 63-64; Thomas Nabried to John P. Davis, Feb. 25, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 274; John P. Davis to Thomas Nabried, part 1, reel 14, frame 273; Thomas Nabried to John P. Davis, May 11, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 280-281 John P. Davis to Thomas Nabried, April 22, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 278; John P. Davis to Thomas Nabried, April 19, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 279, Goldie Ervin to John P. Davis, April 23, 1939, part I, reel 16, frame 399; John P. Davis to Goldie Ervin, March 28, 1939, part I, reel 16, frame 406, all found in NNC papers.

<sup>75</sup> George Rooney to A. Spiegel, Nov. 5, 1938, box 71, fol. 8A and William H. Johnson to John Santo, Oct. 29, 1938, box 71, fol. 8A, both found in TWUL records.

Rooney's timidity was driven in part by the political implications a picket or strike might bring. Before the Dies Committee, for example, John P. Frey of the AFL's Metal Trades Department claimed all TWU officers were members of the CPUSA. An enraged Michael Quill believed AFL redbaiting was an attempt to split the black and white working class, effectively eliminating the CIO's base of support. "You are a traitor to the workers of America," Quill wrote Frey, "You are the Benedict Arnold of the American Labor movement." If Quill's accusations were true, it worked. The state Labor Relations Board remained unconvinced by the TWU and ruled in the PRT's Employees' Union's favor in June 1939. One TWU officer accused the judges' decision was a deliberate attempt to destroy the TWU for good. "The only logical conclusion is that the Board set out to review the record with a decision in mind, and then set up the evidence to support." Defeated and demoralized, the executive board closed the Philadelphia offices completely.<sup>76</sup>

As the Pennsylvania suffered political defeats, the NNC's Pennsylvania council's lost their strongest ally. In the Spring of 1939, a despondent John P. Davis distressingly informed Benjamin Careathers, "our work in Pittsburgh has remained practically at a stand-still." The CIO headquarters ceased its financial support to the state's NNC councils and, at times, failed to even respond to Davis' letters. With the 1940 elections approaching, the weaknesses of the CIO-NNC partnership in Pennsylvania "become[s] all the more serious and impermissible." In order to re-energize the council and arouse the black population, Davis suggested to CIO headquarters of forming a local labor conference but to no avail.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Michael Quill to John P. Frey, Aug. 19, 1938, TWU records, box, fol. 11; Unknown [name ineligible] to George Rooney, June 28, 1939, box 71 fol. 9.; and John Santo to George H. Rooney, Jan. 15, 1940, box 71, fol. 9, both in TWUL records.

<sup>77</sup> John P. Davis to Ben Careathers, March, 10, 1939, NNC papers, part I, reel 16, frame 41-42.

In spite of the political setbacks, Amis persisted in his efforts and organized workers at Philadelphia's J.E. Lovergan Company. The labor news pointed out that for 100 years, organizing Lovergan's employees "had been a non-union concern." By 1938's end, he and other SWOC activists organized Philadelphia workers in the Columbia Steel and Equipment Company, the Peerless Steel Company, and the Pencoyd-Carnegie-Illinois Steel Company. In addition to Philadelphia, Amis helped organized workers at the Allenwood Steel Company in Norristown, the Pacific Steel Boiler Company in Bristol, and the Concrete Steel Company in Camden, N.J. In light of such dedication to the United Front, CIO Regional Director John W. Edelman declared that only someone with this "unusual capacity" could succeed under these "difficult and critical situation[s]." <sup>78</sup>

Two months later, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The communist faction within the NNC and CIO subsequently became hostile towards progressives as well as the Roosevelt Administration. At an anti-war rally in Brooklyn, John P. Davis and Michael Quill declared, "We cannot, and will not support adventures in Europe and South America for which we have nothing to gain but death." Both men declared the Burke-Wadsworth Conscription Bill a threat to civil liberties and an expression of a "fascistic war machine." This shift from anti-fascism to anti-militarism sent shockwaves throughout the NNC-CIO and even found its way to the local level. In North Philadelphia, for example, thirty-two churches and organizations declared that conscription was "being pushed by the war-makers under the guise of national defense." <sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Charles L. Hunt, "Benjamin D. Amis...Field Organizer," *Philadelphia Independent*, Oct. 16, 1938 and John W. Edelman to unknown, Dec. 3, 1938, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 6.

<sup>79</sup> Michael J. Quill, John P. Davis, et al. "The Negro People Face A Double War," 1940, TWU records, box 2, fol. 3 and Paul Kleinbold, quoted by "Group Stages Peace Parade In No. Philly," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Aug. 8, 1940, 18.

For the first three years of its existence, the NNC and CIO survived the Dies Committee, but could never completely rid themselves of accusations of Soviet ties. The more national attention and popularity they enjoyed, the more they fell under the anti-communist microscope. After the immensely successful convention in 1937, Fauset and Sheppard publicly denied reports decrying the NNC as pro-Soviet. The public and fierce nature of the communist-progressive split in 1940, however, reached the breaking point. The split and the possibility that everything the NNC fought for would come to an abrupt end radicalized many. Goldie Ervin's bombastic statement succinctly summarized the emotionally charged environment, "The 'Uncle Tom' Negroes who have misled our people for years, and who realize that their grip on the Negro people is slipping. They think that by yelling 'The Congress has split...The Congress is dead,' it will turn over and die. But the Negro people want and need the Congress. It will live on."<sup>80</sup>

A man who previously had been at the vanguard in the Philadelphia Popular Front, Amis now turned an about-face. He was incensed over his name's inclusion on a list of sponsors for Philadelphia's Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. Blurring the lines between the Axis and Allied Powers, Amis declared "There may be different shades in the character of these nations, but when it comes to oppressing my people and giving them nationhood and democratic rights, they are all cut from the same cloth." The irony of such statements must have been obvious to Amis. The Popular Front's linkage of Jim Crow with colonialism and fascism provided people like him the power to burst threw the communist orbit and into the black community at large. Now, Amis demurred even the suggestion that African Americans had any role to play in the liberal capitalists' approaching battle against fascism and Nazism. "My people

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<sup>80</sup> Goldie Ervin, "Now I Think," *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 9, 1940, 4 and "Negro Congress Isn't Radical Leaders Hold," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 30, 1937, 20.

as a whole,” Amis asserted, “do not want to have anything to do with those nations who refuse to give freedom to the Black man.”<sup>81</sup>

During the period of the non-aggression pact, black organizers such as Amis continued their efforts in the workers’ movement. Building a stronger bond between the local councils and AFL lodges, for instance, was key importance for the PNNC. Writing Goldie Ervin, Davis insisted “there should be every effort made to indicate to our brothers in the A.F. of L. that the charges of favoritism toward the C.I.O.” were unfounded. For the first time in Philadelphia’s history, the AFL agreed to organize the city’s service employees in December 1939. Joining the effort, Amis agreed to work as Secretary Treasurer for the Local 758 of the Hotel, Restaurant and Service Employees International Alliance and the Bartenders International League. By establishing an all-black local, in the words of one local president, the AFL would “prove to the colored workers that by joining organized labor they can get job protection, and equal pay for equal work.”<sup>82</sup>

The Local 758’s membership reached as high as 300, but war demands squeezed it to 161 by 1942. Though devoid of the ferocity characteristic of the steel drive, the union did win modest wage increases for cooks, caterers, hotel waiters, and bartenders. Amis’ job, however, was spent mostly competing with its all-white sister Local 568. “Our main purpose,” Amis complained to the AFL, “is to protect the jobs that we have, without any interference or domination from ‘our white brothers.’” Tensions reached a boiling point in May 1942 when a group of “strong-arm” men raided 758 headquarters and stole all of its records. Amis charged executive board members

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<sup>81</sup> Quoted by “Scorns Defense Committee Post; Cites Oppression of Negroes,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Mar. 29, 1941, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 11..

<sup>82</sup> Harry Ames, quoted by “Start City Wide Drive to Organize Restaurants, Hotel Service Workers,” *Philadelphia Independent*, April 2, 1939, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 11 and John P. Davis to Goldie Ervin, April 24, 1939, NNC papers, part I, reel 16, frame 402-403.

Charles A. Paulsen and Harry Ames (both white) for ordering the raid and subsequently refused to pay dues until all material was returned. Paulsen retaliated by stripping 758 of autonomy rights. Effectively dissolving the local, President Edward Flore fired Amis under the charge of embezzlement. Amis admitted to accounting errors but insisted that “they were the honest mistakes of an untrained person.” “This ridiculous charge is a result of this [758’s] opposition” to Paulsen, Amis argued. In a petition addressed to Flore, signed by 92 of the 161 members, 758 accused their white counterparts of “knifing” black workers in the back for their actions. They demanded all stolen materials returned, their headquarters re-opened, and Amis restored to his position. The petition marked the end of 758 as well as Amis’ union work.<sup>83</sup>

Amis’ contribution to the labor movement spanned twenty years. PNNC members such as him instilled social democratic principles into the CIO. The Pennsylvania labor movement, led by the NNC and CIO’s councils, revitalized the radical tradition of the International Workers of the World. By unionizing countless black and white steel and transport workers, the NNC and CIO made an indelible mark on the history of the state’s labor movement. After the Pennsylvania CIO’s humiliating defeats beginning in 1938, however, the NNC lost its great ally. Amis and other congress members were subsequently forced to work for the segregationist AFL. Despite the gains made for black service workers, the AFL’s rejection of social equality among all workers led to Amis’ downfall as a labor organizer.

The fear of domestic communism sharply curtailed the NNC’s abilities as well. As a result from the non-aggression pact, the NNC’s communist faction was the only one remaining

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<sup>83</sup> “Union Blow at Caterers Protested,” *Afro-American*, Jun. 27, 1942, 20; Benjamin D. Amis to Editorial Board of the Philadelphia branch of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 13, 1942, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 3; Benjamin D. Amis to Edward Flore, June 24, 1942, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 3; Quoted by “Caterers Local Carriers Fight to Union President,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 20, 1942, Amis papers, box 1, fol. 11; and Local 758 to Edward Flore, n.d., Amis papers, box 1, fol. 3.



by 1940, causing significant embarrassment and ridicule. This watershed moment in the NNC's history encouraged scholars to paint the congress and a front for the CPUSA. Philadelphia historian James Wolfinger, for instance, asserts "The NNC's downfall came swiftly" once it "dropped racial goals in favor of supporting the Soviet Union." The history of the PNNC, however, tells a different story. Communists' disavowal of anti-fascism did not destroy the United Front. Local conditions, poisoned by Jim Crow unions, redbaiting, half-measures by skeptical allies, an almost constantly empty treasury, and a hostile municipality brought plights that militant unionists could no longer endure. Nevertheless, the PNNC introduced a new type of labor movement that linked Jim Crow with fascism and consequently penetrated the black masses. Reflecting fifty years later, Amis expressed no regrets, "In spite of all the difficulties that I had, fighting against capitalism..."<sup>84</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Hands off Ethiopia movement marked a profound global black consciousness in the city of Philadelphia. The international dimension of the city's political protest inspired numerous activists to harness this radicalism into a permanent black Popular Front. The founding of this diverse and citywide network of protest was born out of a shared conviction that fascism was not just a European phenomenon. Without the unity and shared purpose expressed by city activists, the PNNC would not have been possible. The key figures in the Ethiopia movement were, in fact, the principle architects of the PNNC. For congress officers such as Benjamin D. Amis, Arthur H. Fauset, and many others, the call for black solidarity was crucial in the fight against white supremacy. From 1935 to 1936, the PNNC successfully engaged in direct action against racial discrimination in both state and private employment, but was the militant defense of Samuel

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<sup>84</sup> Wolfinger, *Philadelphia Divided*, 76 and Benjamin D. Amis, interviewed by unknown, July 25, 1988, box 2, CD 2 of 2, CPOH collection.

Watson that legitimized the PNNC in the public eye. By rallying the black community against racism in the judicial system, community organizers throughout the state took their cue from the PNNC.

Of course, not every Philadelphian activist shared the PNNC's vision, and those who did were not always in agreement over the philosophy of tactics, strategies, and organization. By charging council officers such as Fauset with tremendous obligations to raise funds and set-up labor committees outside of Philadelphia, John P. Davis exhausted the PNNC. In order to energize the council, Davis encouraged Fauset to increase its membership by working with other organizations as well as secure affiliation from prominent individuals. The support from renowned officials such as Crystal B. Fauset and Marshal L. Shepard alleviated many of these struggles. Many, however, remained suspicious. Additionally, the community leaders that did support the councils lacked the resources necessary to wage a United Front.

The SWOC's call in February 1937 for all steel workers to coalesce provided the state's NNC councils the means to combat inequality and exploitation in heavy industry. From Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Coatesville, Lancaster, and Harrisburg, the Pennsylvania SWOC councils outlined a United Front strategy by hiring NNC officials to organize both black and white workers. The bonds forged between both organizations testified to the genuine desire by the CIO to organize all members of the working class on an equal basis. The arrival of the TWU was another indication of CIO leaders' determination to build a United Front. Though the TWU closed its Philadelphia in 1939, American's entry into the Second World War revitalized the CIO. In 1943, a revamped TWU Local 161, with the help of the NNC and NAACP, fought and won union recognition by the NLRB.

The polarizing effect of the non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union was felt throughout the black freedom struggle and workers' movement. Once the NNC and CIO hierarchy denounced the Roosevelt Administration for its military preparedness policies, non-communists resigned in protest. The most significant ruptures within the PNNC, however, resulted from the CIO's political and legal defeats. The NNC councils were built on the premise of foraging an alliance with the unions. Thomas Kennedy's defeat in the Democratic primary and the TWU initial loss in the NLRB hearings devastated the state's NNC councils. Thus, as the unions crumbled so did its strongest ally.

Fostering solidarity between the black and white working class was a tremendous hurdle as well. After years of segregation in the workers' movement, both blacks and whites viewed the CIO with suspicion. This obstacle extended far beyond the Popular Front. On November 1943, for instance, CIO President Philip Murray outlined the next phase of the United Front at the sixth Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. In what was described as the most consequential meeting of labor, the CIO embarked on a new civil rights initiative by unanimously voting for the establishment of the Fair Employment Practice Committee. "Any practice of racial discrimination, whether in industry or in the armed services...is but ammunition for our Axis enemies." Philadelphia's TWU was at the forefront of this effort. In July 1944, the city's *Evening Bulletin* published a picture of African-American transport worker training for his new job. The following day, however, the AFL encouraged white workers to walk off the job and remain on strike until the TWU forgo its support of black workers. In response, a number of African Americans rioted. Fearing a repeat of the Detroit riot of June 1943, the revamped PNNC and NAACP called on all progressive organization to quell the tensions. "How Philadelphians ever lived through those five sweltering, oppressive, dark days," Arthur H. Fauset wrote, "without

hurling themselves at each others' throat would remain a mystery." For Fauset, the AFL's actions was a reminder of the "desperate lengths to which the reactionary enemies of labor, the Negro people and indeed, the country will go in their attempt to sow the seeds of fascism in America." The attempt to overcome these conditions personified the very existence of the PNNC.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> William G. Nunn, "Murray Promises Continued Fight on Bias at CIO Meet," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov. 6, 1943 and Arthur H. Fauset, "Liberals Caught Napping," *Congress View*, Sept. 1944, 3 and 8, Edwards Strong Papers ("Strong papers" hereafter), box 7, fol. 1, Howard University: Moorland- Spingarn Research Center.

**Chapter Five**  
**“Defeat Hitlerism in Maryland”**  
**Building a United Front in Baltimore’s Heavy Industry, 1936-1941**

On October 9, 1938 in Baltimore, Maryland, Max Yergan outlined the global significance of the United Front at the closing session of the Eastern Regional Convention of the National Negro Congress (NNC). Predominantly composed of representatives from labor unions and civic organizations, the more than 500 delegates listened to Yergan promulgate interracial working class mobilization as the sole instrument for building democracy at home and defeating imperialism abroad. Imperialism, the seedbed of fascism, Yergan proclaimed, “deprives people of their land...it extracts from workers their labor without adequate compensation...and it seriously undermines or destroys the culture of its victims.” Highlighting the implications of this global crisis on the local scene, Yergan warned that the “spread of fascism and the persistence of imperialism is an encouragement to local and national fascists and imperialists.” The consequences of Jim Crow and exploitation are, thus, no less significant for African Americans and the working class as a whole than for those toiling under fascism and colonialism. Only by utilizing the principles of the United Front can workers ensure the “priceless boon of genuine lasting peace.”<sup>1</sup>

Historians have recently unearthed the grass-roots origins of Baltimore’s black freedom struggle in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>2</sup> The impact of anti-fascism and anti-imperialism on

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<sup>1</sup> “Delegates From 21 Cities at NNC Meet,” *Afro-American*, Oct. 15, 1938, 12 and Max Yergan, “The Negro People and World Peace,” address delivered at the closing meeting of the National Negro Congress at Baltimore, Maryland, Oct. 9, 1938, Marx Yergan papers (“Yergan papers” hereafter), box 206-6, fol. 35, Howard University: Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Andor Skotnes, *A New Deal for All?: Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Lee Sartain, *Border of Equality: The NAACP and the Baltimore Civil Rights Struggle, 1914-1970* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013); Bruce A. Thompson, “The Civil Rights Vanguard: The NAACP and the Black Community in Baltimore, 1931-1942” (dissertation, University of Maryland, 1996);

Baltimore's civil rights and labor activists, however, remain obscure. The concepts of fascism, imperialism, and war were deeply ingrained in the minds of the local Popular Front. The Baltimore National Negro Congress (BNNC) and its allies, for instance, considered their campaign for political and economic equality part and parcel to the fight to defend democracy against oppression, global and domestic. As fascism expanded to Ethiopia and Spain, the BNNC's call for a Popular Front found an intensely receptive audience in the Baltimore Urban League (BUL). Led by Edward S. Lewis, the BUL played the vital role in making the BNNC's industrial workers' movement possible. Lewis insisted that a black Popular Front epitomized the necessity of harnessing a "collective mind" among all anti-racist organizations for the purposes of empowering the black working class.<sup>3</sup> The BNNC, BUL, and labor organizers in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) formed a triumvirate as a safeguard against what they viewed as the anti-democratic forces in the city's defense industries.

Executive Secretary of the NNC John P. Davis, viewed the United Front in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states with the utmost importance due to the preponderance of African-American workers in the steel industry. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Baltimore. As a result of the Great Migration followed by the Great Depression, the city's black community grew more than thirty-one percent by 1933. Standing at 154,000, the black community constituted almost eighteen percent of the city's overall population. As the black community swelled, so did its presence in heavy industry. In 1920, for instance, African-American unskilled and semiskilled workers comprised of approximately eight percent of the overall workforce. By 1925, it

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and Dennis Anthony Doster, "‘To Strike for Right, To Strike With Might’: African Americans and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Baltimore, 1910-1930" (dissertation, University of Maryland, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Edward S. Lewis to unknown [name ineligible], Sept. 10, 1937, papers of the National Negro Congress ("NNC papers" hereafter), part I, reel 10, frame 853.

increased to sixteen and-a-half percent. As industrial workers were hit the hardest from the Great Depression, however, the black workforce decreased by more than nine percent by 1930 and another five percent by 1933. During the recession of 1937 and 1938, Davis estimated black workers of Baltimore constituted thirty-six percent of the overall unemployed. Thus, while black unskilled and semiskilled workers found opportunities in heavy industry throughout the 1920s, they also suffered the greatest losses by the 1930s.<sup>4</sup>

Nowhere was the presence of segregation, depression, and exploitation more acute than at the Bethlehem Steel Works Corporation in the working class suburb of Sparrows Point. Efforts by the workers' movement to organize Sparrows Point in the 1920s and early 1930s bore little results. After a series of strikes in the early 1920s, a number of African-American workers joined the Amalgamated Steel Workers' Union. Jim Crow in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), however, placed the needs of white workers above the needs of black workers. As a result, the black workforce continued to suffer from decreased wages and displacement during the depression. No union drive operating on the basis of racial equality existed in the Sparrows Point workforce, rendering the deadly conditions unchallenged. Efforts to forge a United Front at Sparrows Point prior to the Popular Front was mainly confined to local communist organizers but were forbidden to hold open meetings on company grounds. "There is a common

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<sup>4</sup> John P. Davis to W.A.C. Hughes, April 16, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 13, frame 615-616; John P. Davis to Lester B. Granger, Sept. 12, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 5, frame 217-218; Ira De A. Reid, "Social Inadequacy and the Negro Population of Maryland: A Preliminary Report on the Findings of the Survey of the Baltimore Negro," 3-4 and 6, May 1, 1934, National Urban League Records ("NUL records" hereafter), part I, box F84, Community Surveys of Baltimore, MD, 1934 folder, Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress.

understanding,” a black Sparrows Point worker informed the BUL, “that no union will be tolerated.”<sup>5</sup>

Because of the inhumane conditions at Bethlehem as well as the reservoir of non-unionized black workers in Baltimore, John P. Davis and Edward S. Lewis avowed that a successful union drive at Sparrows Point necessitated a black Popular Front operating on the basis of a working class-consciousness. For Davis, direct action on the shop floor required the support from “a broad cross section of Baltimore organizations” acting in unison. Embracing this call, Lewis considered the NNC an “epoch making event” in the struggle for workers’ rights. Throughout 1936 and 1937, the BNNC and BUL played the seminal role in galvanizing black workers to joining the CIO’s Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). Steel union organizers such as Israel Zimmerman eagerly capitalized on black activists’ desire to foment this United Front. By hiring black steel union organizer Arthur Murphy at Davis’ insistence, the CIO demonstrated its commitment to racial equality in the workers’ movement. The CIO’s outreaches to black workers would not have been possible without the city’s black community’s earnest desire to assist the SWOC.<sup>6</sup>

By 1938, the Popular Front endured various hardships. As the steel drive at Sparrows Point gained steam, the SWOC faced dangerous counter-forces from the Bethlehem company. After the disastrous 1937 Little Steel strike in the Midwest, steel companies like Bethlehem engaged in extralegal tactics such as increasing its private police force as well as employing

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<sup>5</sup> Unknown, quoted by Ira De A. Reid, “The Negro Community of Baltimore: A Summary Report of a Social Study Conducted for the Baltimore Urban League” (New York: Department of Research, National Urban League, 1935), 12-13, NUL records, part I, box N5, Baltimore 1940-1959 folder.

<sup>6</sup> John P. Davis to D.E. Rice, May 1, 1936, part I, reel 7, frame 366 and Edward S. Lewis to unknown [addressed as “Dear Friend”], Sept. 10, 1937, part I, reel 10, both found in NNC papers.



armed repression in order to disperse union rallies. Workers throughout others parts of Maryland, backed by the BNNC and CIO, endured even worse conditions. As African-American workers in the Eastern Shore, an area known for lynching, took matters into their own hands through wildcat strikes, white lynch mobs used violence and intimidation in order to maintain the post-Reconstruction status quo. Incidences such as these forced the Popular Front to shift tactics by forgoing direct action and engaging in congressional lobbying.

Under these conditions, the BNNC enjoyed nation-wide recognition for its efforts. By 1938's end, the NNC held its Eastern Regional Conference in Baltimore with keynote speeches delivered by iconic civil rights figures such as Charles Houston of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Belford V. Lawson of the New Negro Alliance (NNA), E. Franklin Frasier of Howard University, and Robert C. Weaver of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Back Cabinet." Participation from prominent officials of the Roosevelt Administration such as Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes and Works Progress Administration (WPA) official William Trent also marked the climax of the BNNC's acclaim in mainstream liberal circles. For both congress officials and union organizers in Baltimore, the Eastern Regional Conference validated their call for racial egalitarianism and industrial democracy. Armed with a newfound sense of optimism, the Baltimore Popular Front re-engaged in shop-floor activism.

As the BNNC and its labor allies enjoyed national recognition, however, anti-communist pressure mounted. By 1939, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (known as the Dies Committee) conducted a nation-wide harassment campaign against leftist organizations. The effects were profoundly felt in Baltimore once agents of the Dies Committee raided local headquarters of the American Communist Party (CPUSA). The BNNC's outrage towards

political repression coincided with rampant discrimination in the WPA programs. As domestic mobilization for war began, cuts to the New Deal made gains made by black workers even more tenuous. Consequently, the local councils of the NNC and CIO adopted a decisively critical position towards the Roosevelt Administration's foreign policy.

The Popular Front embraced an anti-militaristic position since its inception in 1935. By 1939, however, protests against American intervention increased exponentially. At the global and national level, the prioritization of the peace movement was predominately inspired by the non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed in August 1939. The local conditions of Baltimore, however, were the primary motivation for the BNNC and local CIO lodges to join the communist-inspired anti-war movement of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Anti-left repression and discrimination in the WPA radicalized the Baltimore Popular Front as well. As cuts to jobs programs were enacted, industries notorious for discrimination against African Americans received government contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Without allies in Washington, D.C., the BNNC took matters into its own hands by forcing the Glenn L. Martin Aircraft Company to hire black unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Because of its association with the peace movement, prominent African Americans and high-ranking officials of the CIO refused to endorse the BNNC's tactics. As anti-communism gained steam, some civil rights and union leaders who once favored the NNC had now reassessed their approach. The divorce between radical and moderate activists only intensified once the Dies Committee labeled the BNNC's Martin drive a communist plot designed to disrupt the nation's war efforts.

Throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s, the BNNC harnessed the ideas emanating from the Popular Front by building broad alliances with the CIO, BUL, and African-American

church community. Together, these activists made the United Front campaign possible at Sparrows Point as well as other areas of Maryland. In defiance of the anti-union repression, the black Popular Front persevered in its efforts by incorporating thousands of workers into the SWOC. The NNC convention of 1938 represented the highpoint of the Baltimore Popular Front. Less than a year later, however, the BNNC underwent a dramatic shift in its view of the Roosevelt Administration. Discrimination in jobs programs, political repression by the state, and Jim Crow norms in defense industries encouraged congress organizers to join the communists' denunciation of war and imperialism despite the political risks. The peace movement only hardened the BNNC's efforts to desegregate heavy industries thereby inviting further harassment from the Dies Committee. The work of local congress and union organizers, therefore, evidence a strong continuity of Popular Front activism from 1936 to 1941 despite the non-aggression pact between fascism and communism.

### **Building a Popular Front in Baltimore**

In the Fall of 1935, in the midst of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, the *Afro-American's* William N. Jones reported on the impending world crisis from Moscow. Appalled by the fascist revolt in Europe but encapsulated by the revolutionary developments within the Soviet Republic, Jones declared, "the old order is passing," as each nation, "is being pushed towards either the socialistic or fascist form of government." For African Americans, the question now was which path they wanted the United States to follow. In Jones' mind, the answer was as clear as day—to "not only strenuously oppose those who are turning towards fascism, but turn directly into the

path socialized Russia is going.” Only through a “world movement towards human brotherhood of all races” will fascism crumble beneath the trembling of a working class uprising.<sup>7</sup>

These words were written not from the pen of the CPUSA but the BUL. Though certainly not everyone within the National Urban League (NUL) shared Jones’ ideological fervency, the Urban League experienced a period of radicalization resulting from the socio-economic and political transformations of black working class life in the 1930s. Throughout the Great Depression, the iron and steel industries stood out as one of the few avenues of employment for African-American unskilled workers. Approximately one out of every ten workers in iron and steel industry, for instance, were black. The iron and steel companies’ discriminatory practices as well as the AFL’s refusal to recognize the unionization of industrial workers threatened to the advancement made by the black working class. The NUL feared that the more powerful the AFL became, the more it would destroy black workers’ gains made for the last twenty years. As a result, the NUL waged a systematic campaign against Jim Crow in both capital and the labor movement during the Great Depression.<sup>8</sup>

Like the NNC, the Urban League was alarmed by the conditions of black workers in industrial city centers South of the Mason-Dixon line, a region where anti-unionism and white supremacy were almost palpable. Though traditionally characterized as a border city, Baltimore, like many southern cities, exuded what John P. Davis frequently described as “fascist tendencies.” Attesting to Baltimore’s anti-union reaction, an organizer from the CIO’s International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) concluded that the city “is not in the

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<sup>7</sup> William Jones, “Reds Use World Opinion to Crack Down on Il Duce,” *Afro-American* Sept. 14, 1935, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Howard D. Gould to Frances Perkins, June 23, 1934, NUL records, part I, box D2, Correspondence Concerning Black Workers & New Unions, 1939-1940 folder and William N. Jones, “Day by Day,” *Afro-American*, Nov. 2, 1935, 7.

20<sup>th</sup> Century cycle” of unionization. Mob violence against black workers was routine as well. In December 1931, for instance, Matthew Williams shot and killed his white employer after an argument over salary. After turning the pistol on himself in an unsuccessful attempted suicide, Williams was placed in the Peninsula General Hospital. That evening, Williams was abducted from his hospital bed by six men and dragged three blocks to the courthouse. For twenty minutes, Williams hung in the air above the courthouse lawn before a jubilant audience of 2,000 without any resistance from the police. After his neck snapped, his body, now soaked in gasoline, was dragged to the black neighborhood of Salisbury and set ablaze. Two years later, George Armwood was arrested for allegedly sexually assaulting an elderly white woman. Six men subsequently kidnapped Armwood from his cell and stabbed him repeatedly. In front of a “bloody carnival,” 2,000 looked on as Armwood was hanged then burned. According to the *Afro-American*, Armwood’s murder marked the thirty-third lynching over the last fifty-one years in the state of Maryland.<sup>9</sup>

The Communist International’s (Comintern) adoption of the anti-fascist Popular Front in the summer of 1935 presented a profound opportunity for Baltimore-based organizations outside communist party circles. Radicals in the BUL such as Jones, Edward S. Lewis and his wife Edith Lewis determined that a black Popular Front provided the necessary means for protecting the black working class from lynching and others forms of oppression. Consequently, the BUL developed close relations with those within the anti-fascist movement, including members of the CPUSA. Jones and Edward Lewis played prominent roles at the third congress of the CPSUA-

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<sup>9</sup> John P. Davis to Elizabeth Gilman, Jan. 4, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 5, frame 190-191; “Shore Mob Lynches Negro,” *Baltimore Sun*, Dec. 5, 1931, 1; “Get at the Roots,” *Afro-American*, Oct. 28, 1933, 4; “Lynch Inquiry to Have List of Eyewitnesses,” *Baltimore Sun*, Oct. 23, 1933, 1; “Roman Holiday as Armwood is Hanged, Burned,” *Afro-American*, Oct. 28, 1933, 2; “Maryland Lynchings Since 1882 Now Increased to 1933,” *Afro-American*, Oct. 28, 1933, 2.

affiliate American League Against War and Fascism (ALAWF) on January 1936 in Cleveland. Both served as African-American delegates for the ALAWF's "national minorities commission," which outlined the significance of fascism to racial, ethnic, and religious minorities in the U.S. Along with delegates representing Jews, Italians, Germans, Indians, Chinese, Poles, Armenians, and Scandinavians, the delegates determined that only by "wiping out" every form of discrimination could fascism in the U.S. be averted. For her part, Edith Lewis emerged as head of the "women's commission" and was even named a member of the ALAWF's national executive board.<sup>10</sup>

The Baltimore Popular Front hoped to emulate the militant aura expressed among various national organizations. Edward and Edith Lewis helped form the local branch of the Popular Front-inspired North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. The branch set-up three headquarters at the ALAWF's office, the International Bookshop, and the headquarters of the Jewish-left newsletter *Daily Forward*. Here, the committee pleaded citizens to donate clothes, food, and medical supplies to the Spanish Republic in support of its defense against the fascist insurgency led by General Francisco Franco. They even called for the direct action of mass protests at the German and Italian embassies.<sup>11</sup>

Baltimore was also a popular headquarters for the Mid-Atlantic branches of the CPUSA-affiliate American Youth Congress (AYC). The AYC focused primarily on the industrial struggles of young workers and worked closely with the CIO and the NNC's sister organization the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC). Together, the SNYC and AYC formed an anti-fascist trade-union youth movement. The SNYC and Mid-Atlantic AYC branches jointly felt an

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<sup>10</sup> "Local Committee for Spanish Democracy to Become Active," *Labor Herald*, Nov. 27, 1936, 2, Enoch Pratt Free Library: Periodicals Department.

<sup>11</sup> "Hail Herndon Greatest Hero of U.S. Youth," *Afro-American*, Jan. 11, 1936, 8; D.E. Rice to John P. Davis, Jan. 31, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 7, frame 328.

“increasing need for the development and coordination of Negro and white groups.” Galvanized by the “ruthless invasion” of Japan in China as well as Italy and Germany in Spain and Eastern Europe, both pledged, “our untiring support to their struggles for freedom and independence.” In the same breath, the AYC and SNYC resolved to “break the bonds of economy slavery here in America” by challenging the Jim Crow bureaucracy of the AFL’s craft unions.<sup>12</sup>

Looking to strengthen the bonds between the black community and anti-fascist groups, the Maryland branch of the ALAWF invited militant pastor and member of the Philadelphia NNC (PNNC) Marshall L. Shepard to rally Baltimore’s black community behind the United Front. Before a mixed audience, Shepard declared that though African Americans have fallen victim to fascism since Reconstruction, “there is a graver danger now that this country as a whole would take on a Fascist dictatorship.” Under this regime, the black workers would “be singled out for special treatment as the Jews are now in Germany.” The evisceration of black Americans, Shepard warned, would eventually enable American fascism to “grind under its heel the entire working class.” Only by forming a “solid front” of the working class and “fight the danger as a common cause,” declared Shepard, will Baltimore’s citizens prevent such a catastrophe. Heading to Shepard’s warning, the local ALAWF pledged to do whatever necessary to prevent “fascist and militarist influences from taking roots in the Maryland Free State.” In

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<sup>12</sup> “Youth Congress at Hopkins,” *Labor Herald*, Nov. 6, 1936, 2; Kenneth Zierier to John P. Davis, Sep. 9, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 8, frame 625; Henri M. Deas et al., “Manifesto Containing the Facts and Findings of the Youth Sessions of the Eastern Regional Conference of the National Negro Congress,” Oct. 7, 8, and 9, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 12, frame 789-791.

their promise to resist both “strikebreakers” and “KuKluxers,” the league sponsored a racially mixed May Day rally at the City Hall Plaza with demonstrators waiving pro-union placards.<sup>13</sup>

The embrace of an interracial anti-fascism committed to a Popular Front by Baltimore’s civil rights community, led by the BUL, made the formation of a United Front possible. As a keynote speaker at the creation of the NNC at Howard University in May 1935, Edward S. Lewis considered the CIO “the most promising outlet for practical affiliation of our group with the labor movement.” In preparation for the NNC’s first national convention on February 1936 in Chicago, Lewis and the BUL held a mass meeting to discuss the NNC’s call for a militant workers’ movement. Writing John P. Davis, Lewis enthusiastically declared, “We want [to]...make our pledged contribution even if we have to pay our own way.” After working for years in both academia and the Urban League—first earning his Master’s Degree in social work at the University of Pennsylvania before serving four years for the Kansas City Urban League (KCUL) then eight for the BUL—Lewis grew weary of liberal reform. For years, he worked within social justice circles known for their “abundance of hot air and persons who are more concerned with impressing you with their erudition than with rolling up their sleeves and going to work.” “Personally I am fed up,” Lewis decried, “on conferences which refer to the Negro’s social and economic problems.” Now was the time to “develop some basic leadership among the masses.” If the black community failed to do so, “we are all...going to be on relief.” Lewis, thus, embraced a triumvirate with NNC and CIO with the utmost urgency.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> James Murphy, “In Liberty Bell Town,” *Afro-American*, April 11, 1936, 12; “Maryland Branch of the League Against War and Fascism to Hold Conference this Sunday,” *Labor Herald*, Oct. 9, 1936, 3; and “Baltimoreans Make May Day Demands,” *Afro-American*, May 8, 1937, 8.

<sup>14</sup> “A.F.L. Rift Opens Doors to Our Workers, Says Lewis,” *Afro-American*, Dec. 14, 1935, 10; C. White Pfeiffer, “Survey of the Baltimore Urban League,” April 1940, n.p., 2, NUL records, part I, box E8, historical information, 1913-1940 file, Edward S. Lewis to John P. Davis, May 2, 1935, NNC papers part I, reel 6, frame 287; John P. Davis to Edward S. Lewis, Nov. 21, 1935,



Lewis became Davis' liaison in Baltimore. In the buildup of a BNNC, Lewis introduced Davis to Reverend David E. Rice, President of the Baltimore Interdenominational Ministers Alliance. Both Lewis and Rice served on the NNC's National Executive Council, bestowing critical prestige to both the national and local NNC. Davis placed great emphasis on community leaders such as Rice due to the "particular interest and locality" Baltimore's religious activism represented. Rice was subsequently charged with promotional and fundraising duties for the BNNC. For both Lewis and Rice, however, the depression had radically curtailed their respective organizations. Rice's church was undergoing "terrific financial pressure," while Lewis was enmeshed with the financial obligations for the BUL. Searching for help, Lewis turned to CPUSA organizer Frank Scott. Lewis sent Scott a list of Baltimore organizers willing to aid the BNNC's efforts to assist the CIO's steel drive. Scott's abilities won admiration from all and were consequently charged with running the BNNC's day-to-day operations.<sup>15</sup>

The BNNC's ability to win over religious organizations testified to the black community leaders' willingness to join the workers' movement. Attesting to Scott's organizational skills, the BNNC orchestrated a twenty-four person provisional committee consisting mostly of church officials. The BUL also played a seminal role in making the Baltimore council possible. For William N. Jones, the NNC marked the "rising new tide of militant thinking" and the decline of

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NNC papers, part I, reel 6, frame 288; Edward S. Lewis to John P. Davis, Feb. 3, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 10, frame 866; and Edward S. Lewis, "The National Conference on the Economic Crisis and the Negro," *Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 1 (Jan., 1936), 73-78.

<sup>15</sup> "The Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress," (Washington, D.C.: National Negro Congress, 1935), 40-41, NNC papers, part I, reel 2, frame 248-270; Edward S. Lewis to John P. Davis, Nov. 13, 1935, part I, reel 6, frame 285; John P. Davis to William Jones, Jan. 29, 1936, part I, reel 6, frame 6; John P. Davis to D.E. Rice, May 1, 1936, part I, reel 7, frame 366; John P. Davis to D.E. A, June 9, 1936, part I, reel 7, frame 701; John P. Davis to Edward S. Lewis, July 22, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 222-223; Unknown [name ineligible] to Timothy Boddie, Dec. 13, 1937, part I, reel 9, frame 80, all found in NNC papers; and "What Local Sponsoring Committees Are Doing," n.d. [1936], part 10, reel 15, frame 423-429, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ("NAACP papers" hereafter).

“our self-appointed guardians of race interests who have become so steeped in traditional prejudices against any forms of progress.” For Jones, this progress necessitated the “militant control” of the black freedom movement by those dedicated to “organizing white and colored workers along the line of absolute equality, fighting for the very political, economic and social equality which we have been fighting for since emancipation.” Such rhetoric illustrated the determination of the BNNC and its allies to organize African Americans on the basis of class.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the first two years of the Baltimore Popular Front, the BNNC’s provisional committee, led by Frank Scott, absorbed various churches and unions. Building a mass movement, Scott held a rally of approximately 700 attendees representing a wide “cross-section of the Negro population” in February 1938. In order to give the BNNC a “good beginning,” John P. Davis sent Reverend Arthur D. Gray, chairman of the NNC’s Washington, D.C. council (DCNNC), to give the keynote address. Scott secured endorsements from churches and religious clubs ranging from the Methodist-Episcopalian Baltimore Ministers’ Meeting, the Perkins Square Baptist Sunday School, the Providence Baptist Church, the Baptists Ministers Alliance of Baltimore, and the Zion Baptist Church. In addition to winning over the churches, Scott secured affiliation with all-black AFL lodges such as the International Brotherhood of Red Caps, the Association of Colored Municipal Employees, and the Colored Motion Picture Operators Union. His most prized endorsement, however, came from the CIO lodge at Sparrows Point.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> William N. Jones, “Day By Day: National Negro Congress,” *Afro-American*, Feb. 29, 1936, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Scott to John P. Davis, Nov. 7, 1937, part I, reel 14, frame 846; Frank Scott to John P. Davis, n.d. [1938], part I, reel 14, frame 778; Frank Scott to John P. Davis, Jan. 9, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 852; Esther McNeill to Frank Scott, Feb. 4, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 854; Frank Scott to John P. Davis, Feb. 14, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 788; Frank Scott to Esther McNeill, Feb. 17, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 786; Frank Scott to John P. Davis, Feb. 28, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 781-782; Frank Scott to John P. Davis, April 5, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 780; John P. Davis to Frank Scott, April 6, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 779; Frank Scott to John P. Davis, April 28, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 768; John P. Davis to Andrew A. Rice, April 29, 1938, part

## Building a United Front in Sparrows Point

In the Summer of 1929, journalist Ralph Matthews investigated the working conditions of the notorious Bethlehem Steel Works in Sparrows Point. “There is a smacking of hell around Sparrows Point,” he wrote. The workers, he found, could only describe the deadly environment as “blood heat,” a combination of the summer sun and the mill itself. As he toured the plant, Matthews was engulfed by “leaping flames, terrible blasts, crackling furnaces, molten steel, red-flowing metal,” all competing with the “scorching sun.” As they toiled in the mill, workers conversed in their own “language of the factory, audible but unintelligible to you.” Matthews felt the scorn and contempt from the esoteric dialect for his white-collar appearance and noticeable discomfort. It was not difficult for him to pinpoint the reasons for such resentment. “There is something radically wrong with an economic system which forces human beings” to earn their “bread in Hades.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1933, Joe Black was forced to work during the August heat on Bethlehem’s open-hearth floor. Here, white workers were known to finish early when conditions of extreme heat occurred. African-American workers such as Black were routinely called in to replace them. Under the more than usually dangerous instances such as these, black workers were known to request a wage increase for compensation. In this instance, the foreman refused. While toiling in the sweltering blaze, workers could hear Black complaining of heat exhaustion, but he would not dare say this to the foreman. When a black worker at Sparrows Point would go home on account of heat, according to the *Afro-American*, “the rule is that he does not have to report for work

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I, reel 14, frame 615; Frank Scott to John P. Davis, July 15, 1938; Frank Scott to John P. Davis, Nov. 27, 1937, part I, reel 14, frame 846, Frank Scott to John P. Davis, Jan. 29, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 852, all found in NNC papers.

<sup>18</sup> Ralph Matthews, “In Darker Baltimore,” *Afro-American*, June 29, 1929, 12.

again.” Black finally finished at 3:00PM and checked himself in at the mill’s dispensary. Six hours later, his body succumbed to the trauma. He died working for 28 cents an hour.<sup>19</sup>

That same year, steel worker turned investigative journalist Horace B. Davis reported that the conditions that took Black’s life were commonplace in Bethlehem’s plants. Though company-employed scientists contended that workers could till in the mill safely in eighty degrees Fahrenheit, some were exposed to temperatures as high as 220. In rare cases, doctors were known to inject cocaine into the bloodstream in order to relieve the pain from extreme cramping. One worker at Sparrows Point informed Davis that almost 250 men suffering from cramps walked or were carried to the dispensary within one week. Once the beds were full, the remaining workers were “laid out like cattle on the grass.” An eighteen-year-old Sparrows Point worker informed Davis that at Bethlehem, “they age one considerably” due to the constant “worry of keeping a home on the poor wages paid and the rotten speed-up conditions.”<sup>20</sup>

By the summer of 1936, a growing bloc of leftwing unions challenged the segregated and overwhelmingly craft-oriented Maryland and District of Columbia Federation of Labor (MDCFL). At the June convention, the left demanded a resolution declaring full support for the CIO. Though the resolution narrowly failed, Baltimore’s anti-fascist trade union weekly *Labor Herald* remarked that the militant bloc presented the first “serious challenge to the old leadership for the first time in a number of years.” Inspired by the radical shift in tactics and philosophy of union organizing, the Amalgamation of Iron and Steel Workers (AA) agreed to a partnership with the CIO in forming the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) a week after the convention. The effects were immediately felt in Baltimore. The entire workforce of 900 steel workers at the Eastern Rolling Mills halted all production in response to wage cuts and refusal by

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<sup>19</sup> “Say Speed-Up Helped to Kill Steel Worker,” *Afro-American*, Aug. 26, 1933, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Horace B. Davis, *Labor and Steel* (New York: International Publishers, 1933), 26 and 53.

the company to recognize the AA. After thirteen days, State Senator and CIO representative Robert B. Kimble secured the restoration of wages as well as union recognition. A year later, the workers voted in favor of the SWOC as the sole collective bargaining agent by a four to one ratio in the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections. This successful work stoppage by 900 indicated to the *Herald* that steel workers had “whetted their taste for real unionism.” The city’s working class had found a union that would meet the challenges of a United Front head on.<sup>21</sup>

The display of militancy at the Eastern Rolling Mills provided early momentum for the Baltimore steel drive at Sparrows Point. After the first SWOC convention on February 1937 in Pittsburgh, the SWOC constructed a multifold approach to the United Front. Because black workers constituted one-third of Bethlehem’s work force, Senator Kimble recognized the magnitude of securing endorsement from community leaders. “We do not wish to isolate ourselves,” he declared. To make its presence known, the CIO conducted a strong publicity campaign to win over the *Afro-American*’s editorial board. Concurring with the publicity campaign, the SWOC formed education classes for workers that focused on teaching the basics of trade unionism, parliamentary procedure, and public speaking. The education drive, Kimble determined, would not succeed without the recruitment of black workers on the basis of social equality. Only by fomenting a multiracial approach, the SWOC determined, will the workers’ movement survive the company propaganda of race prejudice and redbaiting.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “Maryland Federation Shows Big Gains for Industrial Unions,” *Labor Herald*, June 1, 1936, 1; “Amalgamated Ass’n Joins C.I.O. in Big Steel Drive,” *Labor Herald*, June 12, 1936, 1; “Easter Rolling Mills Closed Down by Strike,” *Labor Herald*, June 19, 1936, 1; “Steel Workers Win: Secure Agreement and Wage Raise,” *Labor Herald*, June 26, 1936, 1 and 8; “The Frankenstein of Steel,” *Labor Herald*, June 26, 1936, 4; and “Eastern Rolling Mill Votes 4 to 1 for C.I.O.,” *Labor Herald*, June 11, 1937, 1.

<sup>22</sup> “Trustworthy Men are Richly Blessed Proverbs 28:20: Organizing Bethlehem Steel Co.,” *Afro-American*, Aug. 29, 1936, 4; “Steel Union Drive Open,” *Labor Herald*, July 17, 1936, 1 and 8; and “Local Campaign by S.W.O.C. Begins,” *Labor Herald*, July 24, 1936, 1 and 8.

Of key importance to the SWOC was to mobilize every element of workers in the steel industry. Searching for broad support, the SWOC firmly endorsed gender egalitarianism at the Finnish Hall, a hotbed of leftwing activism in the 1930s. During the successful Eastern Rolling Mill strike, the strikers' wives banded together and created strike relief efforts. After the successful solidarity campaign, they formed a political coalition known as the Women's Auxiliary of the Steel Organizing Drive composed of both women steel workers and wives of male workers at the Eastern Rolling Mills. Soon after the strike, the Auxiliary incorporated the wives from Sparrows Point in order to distribute thousands of campaign leaflets to their husbands. Additionally, the SWOC targeted the almost 5,000 tin workers in the city's can shops of which more than half were women.<sup>23</sup>

The call for racial equality at Sparrows Point proved far more challenging due to the persistence of prejudice within the workers' movement. While preparations for the drive at Sparrows Point were formulating, two black Baltimore CIO organizers declared that the "Southern problems" of racial and religious animosity were the gravest threat to Baltimore's working class. "There is too much written on the 'Negro Problem,'" they declared, "and not enough action." This action, they argued, involved fighting white supremacy not just within the corporations but "among the workers, and occasionally, among the organizers" as well. Only through community organizing under the leadership of those dedicated to anti-racism would

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<sup>23</sup> "C.I.O. Urges Women Steel Worker to Join Union," *Labor Herald*, Aug. 14, 1936, 1; "Baltimore Tin Workers Favor Industrial Organization—Long Hours and Small Pay Spurs Union Drive," *Labor Herald*, Aug. 21, 1936, 1 and 8; "Steel Workers Wives Back C.I.O. Drive," *Labor Herald*, Aug. 21, 1936, 8; "Sparrows Point Workers Hold Meet," *Labor Herald*, Sept. 4, 1936, 8.

Baltimore's CIO lodges achieve this goal. "We hope for the day," they wrote, "when all organizers will rid themselves of the many so-called race and religions problems."<sup>24</sup>

Given the presence of almost 3,000 black workers at Sparrows Point, the BNNC and BUL took a keen interest in supporting the SWOC. "A key labor force," Davis described black workers to the CIO. The company's color line, however, felt almost definite. Soon after the CIO-AA pact, Davis met with the local SWOC organizer Israel Zimmerman. Discrimination, Zimmerman informed Davis, was a cancer in Baltimore's workers' movement. Numerous organized black workers held grievances against the local unions and earned considerably less than their white counterparts. Union discrimination and an unequal distribution of income among the workforce, combined with Bethlehem's constant onslaught of anti-union propaganda, made for a mammoth undertaking for a United Front campaign. Searching for ways to overcome these obstacles, Davis convinced the *Afro-American* and Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library to distribute NNC pamphlets promoting the steel drive. With these endorsements, Davis boasted that five out of six black steel workers would become aware of the upcoming drive. Davis personally provided 500 copies of the NNC manifesto to a local organizer as well.<sup>25</sup>

The publicity campaign could go only so far. After all, the importance for hiring a black organizer, Davis reasoned, was crucial for industries where extra-exploitation and discrimination were routine. One SWOC organizer, for instance, warned that Bethlehem routinely pitted black

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<sup>24</sup> George Streater and Edward Witt, "Colored Workers Eager to Organize," *Labor Herald*, Sept. 3, 1937, 1.

<sup>25</sup> "Organizing Bethlehem Steel Co.," "Negro Workers and the American Labor Movement," n.d. [1937], part I, box A167, Miscellaneous articles, 1936, 1937, 1940 folder; Edward S. Lewis to Ira De A. Reid, Sept. 4, 1934, NUL records, part I, box F84, Community Surveys, Baltimore, Md., Correspondence 1934 August-1935 folder; John P. Davis to Earl Dimon, part I, reel 4, frame Dec. 17, 1935; John P. Davis to Clinton Golden Aug. 11, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 310-311; and John P. Davis to William Hobbs, Sept. 25, 1936, part I, reel 10, frame 233, all found in NNC papers.

and white workers against each other in order to stifle union organizing. This tactic had an indelible impact on both white labor organizers and the black community. SWOC filed director Clinton Golden acknowledged to Davis that the “peculiar” socio-economic conditions of southern industry made for a racially toxic environment. He confessed to Davis that “improper treatment” by some white organizers towards black workers in the South was a severe impediment. In response to this unequal treatment, a number of African Americans expressed cynicism towards industrial unions. “I cannot possibly over-estimate the importance of winning the support of the Negro people to the C.I.O.,” an alarmed Davis wrote a community organizer in nearby Chevy Chase, “particularly at this time when every effort is being made to poison the minds of leaders of Negro organizations against the labor movement.” Gauging black interest in the SWOC, Davis and Zimmerman held a town hall meeting with approximately 600 in attendance of which half were steel workers. Afterwards, almost 100 attendees approached Davis and Zimmerman directly and provided their names and addresses and requested a visitation by the SWOC. Despite the hostile conditions resulting from discrimination in both the company and the union movement, Davis was encouraged by the remarkable receptiveness to anti-racist confrontations on the shop floor. Nevertheless, Davis and Zimmerman concluded that a black SWOC organizer was vital for the SWOC in its pursuit of earning the black working class’s trust.<sup>26</sup>

Arthur Murphy spent more than twelve years in both the Pennsylvania and Ohio labor movement. As a member of the first all-black AA local for the Monongahela Valley, Murphy was present at the infamous Steel Strike of 1919, a strike where steel workers violently

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<sup>26</sup> John P. Davis to Clinton Golden, Aug. 14, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 5, frame 433; Clinton Golden to John P. Davis, Nov. 10, 1937, NNC papers, part 1, reel 13, frame 156; John P. Davis to Gardiner Jackson, NNC papers, part 1, reel 10, frame 700; and “Bethlehem Plays Race against Race,” *CIO News*, Jan. 8, 1940, 1, Baltimore, MD: Enoch Pratt Free Library.



fragmented along lines of race. Once the strike and the violence subsided, Murphy joined the Steel and Metal Workers' Industrial Union (SMWIU) as a full time organizer in Ohio. Aware of the SWOC's reluctance to hire organizers at the NNC's will, Davis asked Senator and CIO official Kimble to lobby the SWOC personally to hire Murphy. With Murphy in charge of the United Front campaign at Sparrows Point, Davis assured that 1,000 black workers would be unionized by year's end. Concurring with Davis, the SWOC hired Murphy full time in order to gain credibility with the black workforce. Murphy's appointment, in the words of the *Chicago Defender*, testified to the "iron unity between black and white workers," that the BNNC and SWOC personified.<sup>27</sup>

For Davis, fusing the workers' movement with the black freedom struggle was the necessary prerequisite for the United Front. Writing a CIO officer in Baltimore, Davis insisted "the large number of Negro industrial workers in that area makes it very important for the organized labor movement to give support to Negro organizations." Thanks to the BNNC and its supporters, the presence of African Americans in the workers' movement quickly emerged. Organizers such as Zimmerman routinely used the BNNC's name in order to promote the SWOC within the black community. With only one day's notice, 1,000 black steel workers of the Eastside attended a neighborhood rally held by Zimmerman, Davis, and a young lawyer for the NAACP named Thurgood Marshall. With a sound amplifier, the speakers' voices could be heard from blocks away as many cheered from their stoops. The audience reached a "pitch of enthusiasm" when the speakers reiterated the SWOC's anti-discrimination policy. After the rally,

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<sup>27</sup> John P. Davis to Van A. Bittner, Aug. 7, 1936, part I, reel 3, frame 778-779; John P. Davis to Clinton Golden, Aug. 14, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 5, frame 433; Lawrence Brown, "Race in Drive to Unite Steel Workers," *Chicago Defender*, Sep. 12, 1936, 11; Joseph G. Rayback, *A History of American Labor*, (New York: MacMillan, 1966), 287; and David Brody, *Labor in Crisis: The Steel Strike of 1919*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 254-255.

fifty-two signed union cards indicating their desire to join ranks while others openly invited organizers to call on them at home. With the backing from black radicals such as Davis and Marshall, Zimmerman successfully conducted a “house to house canvass” in black neighborhoods. The BNNC, in the words of Zimmerman, enabled him and the SWOC to “demolish some barriers” within the working class.<sup>28</sup>

The size of the SWOC activity grew immensely within a matter of months. In January 1937, the CIO appointed veteran of the United Mine Workers (UMW) John J. Mates State Director of SWOC’s Maryland District. Mates’ task was to form a state-level organization designed to harmonize the disparate CIO drives. This required greater consolidation of black workers in the steel industry. Consequently, Mates reached out to the politically influential Baptist congregations. The church, according to the BUL, was “chief and foremost among” the black communities’ political leadership. Baltimore’s more than 5,000 black steel workers, after all, constituted a significant portion of the church community. Attesting to the importance of the church to the workers’ movement, one NNC organizer wrote a fellow minister in Baltimore, “The minister...must be interested in the laboring peoples’ problems and must manifest that interest when they are in the struggle for better conditions.” Accepting this task, the Negro Baptist Conference, a representative of dozens of congregations, pledged to open all churches for SWOC meetings.<sup>29</sup>

Organizing African Americans paralleled steel drives in the European immigrant communities. An endorsement from Congressman Vincent L. Palmisano and the hiring of Luigi

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<sup>28</sup> Israel Zimmerman to John P. Davis, Aug. 12, 1936, NNC papers, part I, reel 8, frame 655; John P. Davis to Frank J. Bender, Sept. 21, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 8, frame 891; and “Thousands Attend Steel Workers Open Air Meeting,” *Labor Herald*, Aug. 14, 1936, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Reid, *The Negro Community of Baltimore*, 37; “Mates New State Director—Mill Committees, Drive Under Way,” *Labor Herald*, Jan. 3, 1937, 1 and 8; and W.H. Jernagin to A.J. Payne, NNC papers, part 1, reel 10, frame 644.

Quintillano to the local SWOC quickly won over the Italian working class. The SWOC also hired eastern European labor organizer Smiley Chatak to help lead the mostly Polish workers. This won the endorsement from both the Polish National Alliance and the Polish Roman Catholic Union among others. Together, they formed the Polish Committee for Steel Workers Organizations (PCSWO), a federation of twenty Polish groups consisting of 5,000 members. Support from the Polish community was crucial as Mates, Zimmerman, and Murphy routinely used the Polish Hall for union meetings. Despite the six inches of snow and rain in a freezing evening in March, more than 600 workers at Polish Hall greeted all three speakers with “rounds of applause.”<sup>30</sup>

Under trying circumstances, the *Pittsburgh Courier's* George Schuyler was astonished by the SWOC's accomplishments in the “notorious jim-crow [*sic*] non-union town” of Sparrows Point. Schuyler surprisingly found a majority of the white workers were unreceptive to the company's anti-union and segregationist propaganda. Throughout this period, the “militant and earnest” Murphy informed Schuyler that the SWOC had won over more than sixty percent of the black workforce with almost seventy percent of whites. Since the SWOC entered Sparrows Point, some black workers were even promoted to skilled positions and, thus, higher salaries without retaliation by their white co-coworkers. In light of the United Front's strength, Schuyler pontificated whether or not “we are on the threshold of a new day in race relations” in Baltimore.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “Steel Drive Endorsed by Polish Fraternal Orders in Baltimore,” *Labor Herald*, Jan. 22, 1937, 6; “Steel Workers Organizing Committee Passes Half-Way Mark—Rally Held Sunday—Many Sign Up,” *Labor Herald*, March 26, 1937, 3; and “Steel Workers Meeting Sunday Afternoon,” *Labor Herald*, April 9, 1937, 1; and “Steel Workers Union Forges Ahead at Sparrows Point,” *Labor Herald*, June 16, 1939, 1.

<sup>31</sup> George S. Schuyler, “Virginia and Maryland Negroes Flock to Unions,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Aug. 7, 1937, 1.

The BNNC's United Front campaign at Sparrows Point became one of the most significant union drives of any NNC council. The brutality and discrimination workers endured at the Bethlehem company presented one of the most challenging obstacles for any congress or SWOC local. Yet the oppressive environment only hardened both congress and steel union leaders' convictions on the United Front. "The S.W.O.C., knows no sex, color, or creed," the *Labor Herald* wrote, "It only knows working people."<sup>32</sup> Throughout the first year of its existence, the BNNC and its allies made substantial progress in overcoming these conditions. Through both its publicity campaign as well as the rallying of workers and church leaders, the BNNC successfully implored the black community to join the militantly burgeoning workers' movement. The seminal contributions from radical unionists like Zimmerman and communists such as Frank Scott testified to the black community's willingness to join the Popular Front. Arthur Murphy's leadership in the SWOC also testified to the CIO's commitment to the BNNC. As the steel drive at Sparrows Point progressed, however, the BNNC and SWOC faced mounting challenges for the next two years. The violence response from anti-union forces to the steel drive, combined with internal dysfunction, would soon expose the limitations to the organizations' tactics.

### **The Uneven Development of the United Front**

The BNNC's contribution to the CIO was confined to Sparrows Point and was led almost solely by Murphy and Davis. The inability to expand activities into other union campaigns was driven by the Jim Crow culture of the workers' movement. Davis, for example, requested Lewis and Murphy identify twenty to thirty locals willing to affiliate with the BNNC. Davis' motivation for lobbying outside organizations to affiliate with NNC locals was partially

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<sup>32</sup> "Sparrows Point Workers Hold Meet," *Labor Herald*, Sept. 4, 1936, 8.

financial. All affiliates of the NNC were charged a fee, which provided a small revenue stream to the national and local councils. “We are badly in need of funds here,” an NNC official wrote the Baltimore council. Edward S. Lewis, however, informed Davis that only five “progressive unions” existed in the city, rendering the black-labor alliance confined to the SWOC and all-black AFL lodges. Consequently, Davis requested local organizers such as Murphy to donate part of their own salary to the NNC. Adding strain to Murphy, the CIO refused to commit to his employment long-term, making his position within the SWOC tenuous. “Much will depend on the effectiveness of his work,” Clinton Golden wrote Davis.<sup>33</sup>

Frustrating bureaucratic hurdles curtailed the BNNC’s work as well. Edward S. Lewis spent most of 1937 building the Vocational Opportunity Campaign (VOC), a key initiative for the Urban League. The BUL’s inability to assist the BNNC as much as Davis originally envisioned was due, in part, from his own pledge that the congress’s work would not supersede that of the Urban League. Davis, in fact, encouraged local councils to “be of service” to the local VOC campaigns as opposed to operate separate union drives. The BNNC, under Frank Scott, was committed to this project. The organization of Sparrows Point’s black workforce, however, was left to the BNNC due to the BUL’s preoccupation with matters unrelated to the SWOC. Davis’ hope for “mutual assistance” between the NNC and Urban League at Sparrows Point was significantly curtailed.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Clinton S. Golden to John P. Davis, Aug. 19, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 395; U. Simpson Tate to Earl Dixon, Jan. 24, 1936, part I, reel 4, frame 545; John P. Davis to Arthur Murphy, April 8, 1937, part I, reel 10, frame 903; John P. Davis to Edward S. Lewis, April 8, 1937, part I, reel 10, frame 903; Edward S. Lewis to Esther McNeill, Nov. 11, 1937, part 1, reel 10, frame 919; Edward S. Lewis to John P. Davis, May 24, 1937, part I, reel 10, frame 940-941, all found in NNC papers.

<sup>34</sup> John P. Davis to A. Gilmore, Nov. 21, 1936, part I, reel 5, frame 222; John P. Davis to Eugene Kinckle Jones, July 20, 1937, part 1, reel 10, frame 554; John P. Davis to Eugene Kinckle Jones, July 31, 1937, part I, reel 10, frame 559; Frank Scott to John P. Davis, n.d. [1938], part I, reel 14,

Making matters more arduous for the BNNC, the responsibilities of running the local council without adequate assistance curtailed Frank Scott's abilities to spend the necessary time needed to assist the steel drive. According to Lewis, Scott was "snowed under with miscellaneous activities" of the BNNC. Davis, however, continued to pressure Scott to raise money and securing affiliations. "OUR campaign is YOUR campaign," Davis compelled Scott, "OUR success is YOUR success. Let it not be said that the Baltimore Council failed to do its bit." Unfortunate events such as Reverend Rice, BNNC chairman of finance, falling deathly ill for three months also limited the congress's impact. In light of the situation, Lewis called for an "injection of new blood into the Baltimore picture" but to no avail. Because of the lack of resources as well as Baltimore's close proximity to NNC headquarters in Washington, D.C., Davis became the council's de facto president.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the vigor with which the SWOC carried itself, Bethlehem's steadfast segregationist policy curtailed shop-floor activism. Fearing retaliation by company "spies" and "agents" searching for ways to divide the working class by race, SWOC applications assured almost complete unanimity. No one other than the state director and "high officials" in Pittsburgh knew the applicants' names. Black SWOC members, Lewis pointed out, even hid their CIO buttons on the inside of their jackets, keeping them out of the foremen's sight. "Segregating blacks from whites in the factory," Lewis latter reflected, "was the policy of divide and rule." At Bethlehem, blacks were what Lewis referred to as "white workers' domestics," laboring as scrap men, furnace workers, janitors, and carriers of steel for white cutters and

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frame 778; and John P. Davis to Arthur H. Fauset, Feb. 24, 1938, part 1, reel 13, frame 79-80, all found in NNC papers.

<sup>35</sup> Edward S. Lewis to John P. Davis, May 24, 1937; John P. Davis to Edward S. Lewis, April 8, 1937, part 1, reel 10, frame 903; and John P. Davis to Frank Scott, June 4, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 811, all found in NNC papers.

molders. The 1937 Recession also increased a great sense of employment competition between black and white. Segregation and employment insecurity was a reminder that a racial outbreak on the shop floor could happen at any moment. Bethlehem Jim Crow, Lewis noted, was a reminder to “blacks that there were whites but a few feet away who could take their jobs” as well as to “whites that they had privileges which the CIO could take away.”<sup>36</sup>

The CIO was also fearful of unintentionally fomenting violence between labor and management. In the summer of 1936, for example, 1,700 employees of the Kelly-Springfield Tire Company in nearby Cumberland walked out in protest of management’s firing of workers engaging in union activity. Enraged by the “Fascistic plan” to undermine the CIO, the employees formed peaceful picket lines. In response, the police fired three rounds of tear gas into the crowd. Though labor and management eventually ended hostilities, more than 400 on the drum tire floor engaged in a wildcat sit-down in response to the company’s failure to address wages and working conditions the following year. Determined to break the union’s back, the company ceased all production, rendering more than 1,700 temporarily jobless.<sup>37</sup>

The SWOC was desperately eager to avoid such a scenario at Sparrows Point. Mindful of a possible uncontrollable labor-management feud that a fight for collective bargaining rights could provoke, the union conducted a “pleasant and agreeable” meeting with the corporation’s assistant manager Frank G. Wrightson. In order to come to a “mutual understanding,” the SWOC suggested using the recent agreement made between labor and management at the Carnegie-

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<sup>36</sup> “Sparrows Point Workers Hold Meet,” *Labor Herald*, Sep. 6, 1936, 8; and Edward S. Lewis, Draft of “Baltimore Blacks and the CIO, 1936-1941,” n.d., 9-12, Edward S. Lewis papers (Lewis papers hereafter), box 2, folder 27, New York: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

<sup>37</sup> Cumberland Rubber Workers Plan Organization Drive to Unionize Kelly-Springfield Tire Plant,” *Labor Herald*, Aug. 21, 1936, 1; “Use Tear Gas on Strikers,” *Labor Herald*, Aug. 28, 1936, 1 and 8; “Use Tear Gas on Kelly-Springfield Strike,” *Labor Herald*, Oct. 2, 1936, 1 and 8; “Steel Workers Rally Sunday,” *Labor Herald*, Sept. 11, 1936, 1 and 8; and “Cumberland Tire Plant Closes,” *Labor Herald*, Jan. 22, 1937, 1.

Illinois Steel Company in Chicago as the basis for negotiations with Bethlehem. For company representatives, recognizing the SWOC as the sole representative of Sparrows Point's workers was a bridge too far. Company President Eugene G. Grace dismissed the idea as "something we hear so much about these days [but] is nothing new in the Bethlehem organizations."<sup>38</sup>

While the enraged SWOC Regional Director Clinton Golden demanded secret ballot elections for all Bethlehem plants, violence erupted in the Midwest during the Little Steel Strike. Determined to deter an outbreak at Sparrows Point, Bethlehem used the opportunity to justify increasing its private police force. Charges were made that the company, with the help of Baltimore County Sheriff T.J. Randolph Nicholas, deputized at least an additional 300 men. The situation, according to Mates, was becoming "extremely dangerous" on the shop floor as the deputies reportedly armed themselves with "a carload of ammunition and tear-gas bombs." Though thousands of workers at Finnish Hall voted in favor of filing a complaint to the Department of Labor, the SWOC maintained an unofficial no-strike pledge for fear of repeating Little Steel in Baltimore. "Although there have been rumors [propagated by the company] of strikes here," declared Mates, "we are of the opinion that negotiations with the local management can be continued on a sane, reasonable basis without the need for any loss of time on the part of the workers."<sup>39</sup>

Despite the no-strike pledge, the SWOC was determined to grasp some post-Little Steel momentum. In a "very unusual scene," more than one hundred cars paraded throughout the Eastside in solidarity with the workers of Sparrows Point. The demonstrators paraded from the

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<sup>38</sup> "Sparrows Point Meets Local S.W.O.C.," *Labor Herald*, March 26, 1937, 1 and 3; and "C.I.O., Bethlehem Will Meet Today," *Baltimore Sun*, Mar. 18, 1937, 26.

<sup>39</sup> "C.I.O. Asks Vote At Sparrows Point," *Labor Herald*, June 18, 1937, 1 and 8; "Added Police Cause Protest by Steel Union," *Baltimore Sun*, June 21, 1937, 2; and "Local Steel Union Accuses," *Labor Herald*, June 25, 1937, 1.



National Maritime Union (NMU) headquarters to the Finish Hall carrying banners proclaiming “Join the C.I.O.” and “Make Baltimore a Union Town.” The effort was a full frontal assault on Bethlehem by Clinton Golden and John Mates. In a show of racial harmony, Mates introduced both Murphy and white organizer John Monarch to the audience. Patrick B. Whalen, president of the NMU, “brought the house down” after pledging its full support for the Sparrows Point workers. Although the CIO maintained large swaths of support from Baltimore’s steel workers throughout 1937, however, labor violence in the Midwest forced the SWOC and BNNC to forego direct action on the shop floor. After presenting a graphic portrayal of the carnage resulting from Little Steel in Chicago and Johnston, for instance, Golden insisted that an alternate “peaceful revolution” was taking place in Baltimore.<sup>40</sup>

By winter of 1937, Sparrows Point activism transferred from the neighborhood and shop floor to the courtroom. In a series of NLRB hearings, workers declared Bethlehem’s Plan of Employee Representation (PER) a company union serving the interests of management. The company, the SWOC argued, “have dominated and contributed financially” to the PER. Charges against the PER itself ranged from employing agents to spy on the SWOC, interfering in peaceful picketing, and firing PER members who were also engaged in SWOC activity. Thanks to a series of delays and appeals by the company’s lawyers, the case became the most litigated in NLRB history and would not be settled for almost two years.<sup>41</sup>

As the community organizing imitative stalled at Sparrows Point, the BNNC was forced to search for other opportunities. Edward S. Lewis, for example, proposed that the NNC focus on

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<sup>40</sup> “Sparrows Point Meeting Proceeded by Auto Parade,” *Labor Herald*, Aug. 12, 1937, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Edward S. Lewis to John P. Davis, March 31, 1937, NNC papers, part I, reel 10, frame 898; John P. Davis to Herman P. Kopplemann, Nov. 12, 1937, part I, reel 10, frame 765; “Bethlehem Steel Target for NLRB Fire,” *Baltimore Sun*, Aug. 29, 1937, 2; “NLB Begins Steel Hearing,” *Labor Herald*, Dec 3, 1937, 1 and 8; “Sparrows Point Hearings Go On,” *Labor Herald*, Dec. 17, 1937, 1; and Reutter, *Making Steel*, 280-299.

“social legislation” protecting workers and minorities. Heading to this call, Arthur Murphy and the SWOC pledged to assist the NNC National Executive Committee in its pursuit of an anti-lynching bill. The NNC’s legislative program to enforce civil liberties, curtail police brutality, and pass both the anti-lynching and civil rights bills was driven in part by the need to protect workers’ right to strike. In April 1938, for instance, six hundred African-American women in the cannery industry from the eastern shore of Crisfield went on strike for three weeks in protest against the reduction of their salary. Mike Howard, secretary of the Baltimore CIO council, helped organize the strikers and set-up a committee to provide food after a number of stores were warned not to provide credit to the strikers. The workers of Crisfield—a town less than thirty miles from the lynching of Matthew Williams and George Armwood—were faced by a mob of three hundred attempting to burn down an entire residential block. Members of the mob broke into the home of two strike leaders looking for Howard. In their failure to kidnap and lynch Howard, the mob flipped then burned his car.<sup>42</sup>

Davis implored Carl Murphy of the *Afro-American* to send an investigator in an attempt to raise awareness concerning the violent “method to prevent [the] improvement of the economic conditions of these cannery workers...to a high political level.” After Davis demanded the state enforce the constitutional rights of the strikers, Governor Harry Nice ominously assured “the Constitutional rights of both labor and capital” and promised to uphold the “protection of both sides in this unfortunate controversy.” Nice went as far to say “everything is quiet and peaceful, with a probability of amicable adjustment.” An outraged Davis implored Frank Scott to assemble

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<sup>42</sup> John P. Davis to Arthur Murphy, March 22, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 199; John P. Davis to Gariner Jackson, July 25, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 742; “Lynching Shore Mob Terrorizes 600 Women to Keep Wages at \$2 per Week,” *Afro American*, Apr. 30, 1938; and “Troopers Halt Crisfield Mob: 600 Girls on Strike Hold Out 3 Weeks Despite Threats to Burn Homes,” *Afro-American*, Apr. 30, 1938, 1.

a group of congress delegates to speak directly to the Crisfield workers. By refusing to go quietly, the BNNC determined to help the workers by “breaking down the type of lynch terror for which the Eastern Shore of Maryland is notorious.” Davis subsequently directed Scott to use the delegation to lobby local legislatures to pass the wages and hours bill. The following month, three delegates representing the cannery workers testified before the Senate Civil Liberties Committee demanding an investigation. Maryland Senator Millard E. Tydings “preferred to remain neutral” and insisted that the local authorities would handle the matter. As a result, no charges were filed against the mobsters. However, the women did officially join the CIO canning and packing union and received a return to their previous wages. As a result of the BNNC’s work in Crisfield, Scott secured additional affiliations with all-black AFL lodges and leaders of the Baptist community.<sup>43</sup>

The BNNC and its allies’ willingness to organize workers in hostile environments drew applause from the congress’s executive body. By the Summer of 1938, for instance, the NNC could no longer afford conducting nation-wide conferences as it did in Chicago in 1936 and Philadelphia in 1937. Consequently, the NNC cancelled its third conference set to take place in 1938 in Detroit. It chose to conduct smaller but numerous Regional Conferences covering four geographic areas including a number of state conferences. It was decided that Baltimore, under Edward S. Lewis and Frank Scott’s direction, would host the Eastern Regional Congress. Hoping to “spur the work” of the BNNC, the conference took place on the centenary anniversary of

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<sup>43</sup> John P. Davis to Governor Harry Nice, n.d. [1938], part I, reel 14, frame 256; Governor Harry Nice to John P Davis, April 22, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 258; Frank Scott to John P. Davis, April 28, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 768; John P. Davis to Frank Scott, April 22, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 769; John P. Davis to Frank Scott, April 23, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 770; John P. Davis to Frank Scott, April 19, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 771, Frank Scott to John P. Davis, April 5, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 780, all found in NNC papers ;“Senate Pledges Crab Pickers Strike Inquiry,” *Afro-American*, May 14, 1938, 15; and “Crab Industry Strike Won by 500 Women,” *Afro-American*, May 21, 1938, 9.

Frederick Douglass' escape from Maryland's slave economy. Drawing inspiration from the radical abolitionist, the conference program committee declared, "They who would be free must themselves strike the blow." The committee consisted of more than thirty activists representing the church, the CIO, black AFL lodges, and professionals. Though the citizens of Baltimore, Washington, D.C., New York, and Philadelphia constituted more than half the conference, delegates representing the entire NNC East coast councils were in attendance.<sup>44</sup>

The Eastern Region was by far the most successful and wide ranging congress with more than five hundred delegates in attendance. Keynote speakers of renowned status in black political circles such as Baltimore-born professor of sociology E. Franklin Frazier, the NAACP's Charles Houston, civil rights attorney Belford V. Lawson, and economist Robert C. Weaver provided the congress with mainstream acclaim. The most impactful contribution came from Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes. For Davis, the participation of Ickes at the conference marked a significant recognition of the Baltimore Popular Front. "We have noted with sincere admiration," Davis wrote Ickes, "your utterances on fascism and your forthright denunciation of 'economic royalists.'" An address at the convention from a prominent New Dealer, in Davis' mind, raised the awareness that black Americans "have most to lose from war and fascism and from the success of reactionary interest opposing the President."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> "Call to Eastern National Conference of the National Negro Congress," n.d. [1938], part I, reel 13, frame 54-57; John P. Davis to all members of the National Executive Council and all local councils of the National Negro Congress, Aug. 29, 1938, part I, reel 13, frame 60-61; John p. Davis to Thurgood Marshall, Sept. 30, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 112; John P. Davis to Frank Scott, April 8, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 803-804; "Statement of Aims and Purposes of Eastern Regional Conference of National Negro Congress," Oct. 7-9, 1938, part I, reel 16, frame 428-430, all above found in NNC papers; and "Delegates from 21 Cities at NNC Meet," *Afro-American*, Oct. 15, 1938, 12.

<sup>45</sup> "More Jobs is Goal of Negro Congress," *Baltimore Sun*, Oct. 9, 1938, 3; John P. Davis to Harold L. Ickes, Sept. 15, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 721-722; and John P. Davis to C.F. Kyle, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 889-890.

Secretary Ickes' speech was in part a self-serving promotion of the Roosevelt Administration and the Democratic Party in an attempt to maximize the black vote for next month's elections. On the other hand, it was a clear awareness of the growing power of the Baltimore's black electorate. Secretary Ickes implored the audience and the community at large to harness their "political power" to propel the New Deal "to its full fruition." Appealing to the NNC's United Front sensibility, Ickes spoke of the sharecropping oligarchy and capitalist class as the source of "the exploitation of the underprivileged third of the nation." "The problem of the Negro," Ickes spoke, "merges into and becomes inseparable from the wider problem of American citizens who are at or below the line" of poverty. Speaking to the NNC's anti-fascist internationalism, Ickes also linked the "democracies crumbling into ruin all over the world" with the "concentrated wealth...once more attacking from without and sapping from within to destroy the liberties of the people" in the U.S. By pinpointing fascism as the byproduct of capitalist authoritarianism, Ickes' speech was nothing short of recognition by liberals of the NNC's seminal status as a leader in the black Popular Front.<sup>46</sup>

Davis looked at the convention as an opportunity to transform Baltimore's racial and class relations by fusing the BNNC with the CIO's political arm known as Labor's Non-Partisan League. His concern of black voting rights in Baltimore dated as far back as the summer of 1936. He estimated that 35,000 African Americans were eligible to vote but not registered. For him, the Eastern congress marked the day black voters would become a dominant political force by shattering Jim Crow in the voting booth. Davis considered Secretary Ickes' speech a "sensation among Negro voters in Baltimore" and possessed the chance to transform city politics by rallying "the Negro voters to progressive and labor candidates." By promoting the "new deal [*sic*]

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<sup>46</sup> "Ickes Labels G.O.P. Negroes' False Friend," *Baltimore Sun*, Oct. 8, 1938, 22.

benefits to Negro voters,” the BNNC envisioned a new era where the entire Baltimore working class would become the predominant powerbroker in progressive politics.<sup>47</sup>

After a year of litigation, the NLRB declared Bethlehem’s company union unlawful and forced it to re-open its gates to the CIO. With the PER losing its monopoly, the SWOC re-established shop-floor activities. Stewards were newly elected and immediately formed grievance committees. Victory in the courtroom coincided with seismic gains for both capital and labor due to the massive increase in the demand for steel. By September 1939, Bethlehem officials estimated that 1,500 workers a day sought employment. The benefits for black workers were significant as migrants from North and South Carolina, Virginia, and Alabama, comprised a large percentage of the new employees. As a result, Bethlehem’s employment ratio averaged one black worker for every two whites, which brought fear in the minds of the company. Consequently, Bethlehem promoted cross class interracial harmony on the shop floor in order to weaken the SWOC’s momentum. Company manager Leroy C. Schlimme invited writers of the *Afro-American* to promote the betterment of black workers’ conditions. Based on the reporting, the publicity campaign made an impression. One journalist claimed that thanks to the employment boom, “Sparrows Point had softened the lines of worry in the faces of many colored Baltimoreans.” Nevertheless, the publicity campaign was clearly driven by the growing strength of the BNNC and SWOC’s requirement drive. “Every effort is made,” claimed Schlimme, “to make working conditions at the plant pleasant for all the men, regardless of their color.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> John P. Davis, “National Negro Congress: Report of National Secretary,” 14, NNC papers, part I, reel 7, frame 90; John P. Davis to Eli Oliver, Oct. 11, 1938, NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 320; John P. Davis to A. Philip Randolph, Oct. 25, 1938, part I, reel 14, frame 560.

<sup>48</sup> “Report of Labor Board Examiner Favors Workers After Year Study,” *Labor Herald*, Dec. 30, 1938, 1 and 4; Max Johnson, “Most Important War Product is Steel: Bethlehem Plant at Sparrows Point Employs 23,000 Workers,” *Afro-American*, Sep. 30, 1939, 18; “Workers Don’t

The Eastern Regional Conference was a triumph of Baltimore's United Front. As prominent black activists and New Dealers gave their wholehearted backing, the BNNC felt emboldened and subsequently expressed unequivocal support to the Roosevelt Administration. The SWOC's victory over the company union provided optimism at Sparrows Point as well. Writing President Roosevelt, the conference delegates declared, "We pledge to you our support for every progressive measure undertaken by you." By the end of 1938, however, war mobilization led to the drastic decreases in state-funded jobs programs. Enraged by the perceived betrayal of the working class by the state, congress organizers began analogizing the impending imperial conflict in Europa and Asia with the growing wealth in defense industries known from rampant discrimination.<sup>49</sup>

### **A Local People's Peace Movement**

What should have been the pinnacle of the Popular Front turned into a significant rupture once war mobilization in the U.S. commenced. The fear of unchallenged discrimination that war mobilization would bring was expressed with a profound sense of militancy. As early as the summer of 1938, the CIO held a National Anti-War Congress in Washington, D.C. The "Keep America Out of War" movement was organized primarily by peace advocates and unions with 200 hundred delegates representing Baltimore's CIO lodges. The main objective of the labor caucus was the "promotion of anti-war work in labor circles throughout America." The delegates called for the immediate removal of American ships and marines from all belligerent nations and a halt to the increase of the army and navy budget. They even called for the nationalization of all defense industries. Continuing its anti-fascist work, the worker delegates called for the

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Mind Dangers," *Afro-American*, Sept. 30, 1939, 18; and John Monarch, "Maryland Director of the SWOC Reports marked Improvements," *Labor Herald*, Jan. 13, 1939, 1 and 2.

<sup>49</sup> Eastern Regional Conference of the National Negro Congress to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, n.d. [1938], NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 905.

“increasing solidarity with the people of all nations in the struggle to abolish economic injustice and colonial oppression and to remove the cause of dictatorial militarism.” They demanded the lifting of the embargo on Spain in order to continue “the international solidarity of workers against war,” and championing the “use of laborer’s power to prevent the arming and equipping of fascist and imperialist nations.” At the closing session, the CIO chastised the Roosevelt Administration for “allowing native Fascists to destroy our freedom and lead our people to destruction as Hitler is leading the German people under his regime.”<sup>50</sup>

Nowhere was this sentiment expressed with more urgency than in Baltimore. The BNNC’s anti-militarism was significantly shaped by the government’s shift from funding jobs programs to domestic mobilization for war. The loss of the gains made by workers, John P. Davis postulated with gloom, would spell doom for the NNC. With war looming, he implored the local councils to re-organize around issues of protecting jobs programs. The CIO lodges also pressured the Roosevelt Administration to maintain neutrality and revise the New Deal. E.J. Lever, newly appointed national coordinator for the SWOC’s Bethlehem drives, hoped to use the mobilization of labor to foment a working-class peace movement. “When workers organize to know that they should not fight other people’s battles,” Lever spoke in Baltimore, “there won’t be any war.” Regional CIO director Frank J. Bender similarly declared “America will stay a democratic country as long as the people learn to organize effectively to maintain democracy.” The Maryland Youth Congress (MYC), a key ally for the BNNC, also argued that only by

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<sup>50</sup> “Baltimore Sends Two Hundred Delegates to Peace Delegates,” *Labor Herald*, June 3, 1938, 4; “Keep out of War,” *CIO News*, Oct. 30, 1939, 1 and 8; and “War Danger Key Labor Day Topic,” *CIO News*, Sept. 11, 1939, 3.



avoiding war and revitalizing pro-union policies can the Popular Front prevent a fascist takeover.<sup>51</sup>

The BNNC and CIO's concern in the decline of jobs programs and aversion to war predated the signing of the non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union by more than a year. The anti-war mood, however, did pose an existential challenge to the NNC by the summer of 1940. William N. Jones was particularly concerned with the impact the non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union would have on the Popular Front in the U.S and abroad. The Soviet Union's rebuffing of the "militant insistence that people of African descent...be given absolute political, economic and social equality throughout the world" was seen in the eyes of Jones as a grave portent for the anti-fascist struggle. In London, Ivan Maisky, Soviet Ambassador to Great Britain, refused to answer Jones' question concerning the impact his country's shift in foreign policy would have on various communist parties but assured there would be no "change in policy in respect to race and national groups." Jones' thoughts on the non-aggression pact and its impact on the communist movement were never fully articulated. Six months later, Jones died of organ failure after battling a four-month illness. Had Jones survived, he would have witnessed a continuation of the Popular Front despite the Soviet Union's about face towards fascism. It was a Popular Front that need not require the support of the Communist International but the Baltimore working class.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "Negro Group Worried by Joblessness," *CIO News*, Feb. 5, 1940, 1 and 8; "SWOC Head Hits War," *CIO News*, Sept. 25, 1939, 8; John P. Davis to Local Councils of the National Negro Congress, n.d. [1939], NNC papers, part I, reel 14, frame 130; and Unknown [name ineligible] to John P. Davis, June 23, 1939, NNC papers, part I, reel 17, frame 158.

<sup>52</sup> "William N. Jones, "Reds Reassure Jones on the Race Question," *Afro-American*, Nov. 18, 1939, 7 and Peyton Gray, "William N. Jones, AFRO City Editor, Dies," *Afro-American*, May 18, 1940, 1.

Many of the NNC and CIO's foes did find the peace movement a useful tool due to its ties to the CPUSA and Labor's Non-Partisan League. Though himself anti-war, AFL President William Green used the non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union to embarrass the CIO and NNC. Though not mentioning either organization outright, Green declared the non-aggression pact proof that local communists and the Third Reich were "comrades in arms." "We were told by leaders of the Communist movement," Green declared, that no "conflict existed between the philosophy of Nazism and that of Communism, and that no basis of accommodation could be established between them." Now, American communists "praise and approve the pact which Stalin and Hitler made after declaring a short time ago that it never could be made."<sup>53</sup>

The local elite also expressed considerable hostility towards the Popular Front by decade's end. A number of Baltimore's black politicians admonished the BNNC's partnership with the Labor's Non-Partisan League for its "pro-communist attitude." In early 1939, the *Baltimore Sun* went as far as endorsing government raids on CPUSA headquarters. Despite the Dies Committee's official objective to surveillance both leftwing and righting organizations, the editors insisted that the Dies Committee's "investigation of the Communists' activities is the feature that commands attention." In March of 1940, two agents for the Dies Committee raided Baltimore's CPUSA headquarters and seized all party records. The *Baltimore Sun* bragged that the raid was "the most productive subpoena haul they had yet made." Dr. Albert E. Blumberg, member of the local CPUSA, was later arrested on charges of contempt for his refusal to cooperate with the Dies Committee. The Baltimore branch of the League Against War and Fascism, now re-organized into the American League for Peace and Democracy (ALPD), was

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<sup>53</sup> "The Nazi-Communist Conspiracy for Poland's Destruction," *Labor Herald*, Oct. 6, 1939, 7.

also forced to close its headquarters due to the outbreak of war in Europe as well as harassment by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).<sup>54</sup>

Amidst the anti-communist atmosphere, the BNNC and the CIO formed a local people's peace movement by linking neutrality abroad to economic justice and civil rights at home. During a three-day conference entitled "Yanks Are Not Coming," the CIO, MYC, and BNNC demanded both neutrality with Europe and a revitalization of New Deal programs. Though the unions constituted the base of this struggle, the conference formed alliances with various local student, Christian, and pro-democratic organizations. For the BUL's part, Edward S. Lewis served as a speaker and discussion leader. Lewis vociferously scorned the Dies Committee's harassment of communists and its unwillingness to investigate fascist groups such as the local Ku Klux Klan (KKK). For Lewis, state repression was the Popular Front's most sinister threat. "If certain minority groups can have their civil liberties violated," Lewis proclaimed at the conference, "the reactionaries will be able to wipe out the rest of the minority groups." Thus, the Popular Front's hostility towards the Roosevelt Administration was not a cynical attempt to please the Soviet Union during the non-aggression pact but was rather a genuine fear of the violation of minorities' civil rights and the end of New Deal programs. "That is the way fascism and reactionary politics worked in Germany and Italy," warned Lewis, "and it seems we have the beginning of such activity in Baltimore today."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> "The Dies Committee," *Baltimore Sun*, Jan. 8, 1939, 8; Walter Rautenstrauch to John P. Davis, Jan. 11, 1940, NNC papers, part I, reel 18, frame 235; "Negroes Here Condemn National Congress Action," *Baltimore Sun*, April 30, 1940, 5; "Peace League Dies Assailed is Disbanded," *Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 2, 1940, 1; "Baltimore League for Peace is Dead," *Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 3, 1940, 5; and "Dies Agents Raid Communist Office Here," *Baltimore Sun* Mar. 29, 1940, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Irving Kandel to John P. Davis, Feb. 29, 1940, NNC papers, part I, reel 18, frame 156; "Youth and Labor to Cooperate in Demands for Peace," *CIO News*, April 1, 1940, 8; and "Civil Liberty

Lewis' support for the BNNC after the congress split between communists and non-communists at the 1940 conference in Washington, D.C. stood in sharp contrast with the NUL hierarchy. Secretary of the Urban League's Workers' Bureau Lester Granger was not opposed to the tightening bonds between the NNC and communism per se. His demurral of the NNC's goals was primarily driven by the disobedient nature of its grassroots initiatives. A number of organizations, Granger complained, were reportedly "ignored, blocked or embarrassed" by the "over-zealous activities" of local congress officers. Though not mentioning specific cases of unruly grassroots activism, Baltimore's peace movement clearly demonstrates how local Urban League officials carved out an alternative path for the organization. While Granger insisted on maintaining an alliance with the Roosevelt Administration, Edward S. Lewis remained committed to the CIO and NNC.<sup>56</sup>

The Baltimore Industrial Union Council (BIUC), the central organ of thirty-five CIO lodges, became the organizing base for the anti-war movement. The BIUC's dual focus on peace and job programs was predicated on the belief that "the involvement of the United States in war would mean the destruction of the American trade union movement." By forging an "Army of Peace," the BIUC threatened a "people's march on Washington" in protest of the Roosevelt Administration's gradual support for the Allied Powers. At the Polish Hall, the BIUC declared that "It will be impossible to draw this country into the foreign war...if labor is united against entering it." The CIO adopted similar positions at the state level. Determined to "Mobilize the CIO to help defeat Hitlerism in Maryland," the Maryland and District of Columbia Federation of Labor, now dominated by the CIO, expressed unanimous opposition to war at its convention in

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Not For Few, Baltimore Attorney Tells Youth," *CIO News*, April 15, 1940, 2; and "CIO Calls Special Peace Meet," *CIO News*, May 27, 1940, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Lester B. Granger, "The Negro Congress—Its Future," *Opportunity* (June, 1940): 165-166, NUL records, part I, box N35, Vols. 18-20, 1940-1942.

the winter of 1940. It also withheld its political backing of any electoral campaign for state senate and legislature that supported military intervention. Appealing to the NNC, the CIO's Baltimore and D.C. lodges also adopted an "uncompromising opposition to any form of discrimination."<sup>57</sup>

The Baltimore community's growing interest in issues concerning war and peace was reflected in the BIUC's formation of the People's Peace Committee (PPC). Diversifying its membership, the officers of the PPC included John Rogers of the National Maritime Union, Thelma Line of the Maryland Youth Congress, professor Louis Teeter of Johns Hopkins University, and Howard B. Patterson of the BNNC. In July, the PPC held its first public session decrying the proposed conscription legislation for its potential dangers to the youth and working class. Methodist minister Harold Bosley declared that any attempt to "regiment the American people" through peace-time conscription would force society to "undergo as rigorous a totalitarian regime as Germany's or Italy's." Floyd R. Banks, professor at Baltimore's historically black Morgan State College, decried the European conflict as an imperial venture "between the British Empire and Germany for the opportunity to exploit millions of Negroes." Together, William Smith of the IUMSW, Howard McKenzie of the NMU, and Lewis E. Burnham of the NNC's youth division encouraged the PPC to send representatives to meet with Maryland's senators and representatives to discuss the merits of voluntary enlistment that

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<sup>57</sup> Sidney R. Katz to John P. Davis, April 26, 1940, NNC papers, part I, reel 19, frame 902-903; "T. D'Alesandro, Jr. Wins With Labor," *Labor Herald*, May 10, 1940, 5; "Mobilize CIO to hit Grate Sabotage Bill," *Labor Herald*, March 10, 1941; "Unions, Liberties Face Death If We Enter Conflict," *CIO News*, Feb. 5, 1940, 1; "Thousands More Support D'Alesandro," *CIO News*, April 22, 1940, 2; "Organize Ten Million Workers, Avoid War, Lewis Urges CIO," *CIO News*, Oct. 16, 1939, 3 and 6; "CIO Urges Peace March to Capital," *CIO News*, Dec. 23, 1940, 1 and 15; "Says Labor Can Keep America Out of War," *Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 29, 1940, 9; "Baltimore CIO Favors March on Washington," *Baltimore Sun*, Dec. 17, 1940, 8; and "CIO Group Hands Off In Maryland Campaign," *Baltimore Sun*, Mar. 13, 1940, 6.

included higher pay and only a one-year term of service. The reportedly non-committal congress people seemed to only further inflame the peace activists.<sup>58</sup>

Lewis Burnham took a keen interest in organizing the black youth of Baltimore with the predominately white American Youth Congress into a nation-wide peace conference in New York. The goal was to foment the young masses into “shaping policy for a national organization” by “linking up the fight for the right to vote...with the struggle to keep America out of war.” While traveling to Baltimore once a week throughout the month of August, Burnham reached out to Edward S. Lewis, Hilda Orr of the BUL’s youth division, and H. Calvin Parker of the Baltimore Youth Federation (BYF) to help coordinate a youth protest against the proposed Burke-Wadsworth Act, the first peace-time conscription bill in U.S. history. Having already secured the commitment from youth activists in the NAACP and Yong Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), Burnham insisted that Baltimore’s black youth would “go a long way in giving us the kind of delegation we need for an effective lobby.” Burnham’s tireless work even caught the attention of Eleanor Roosevelt.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> “Takes Crack at Commies ‘Peace’ Front,” *Labor Herald*, Aug. 2, 1940, 4; “Peace Committee, Youth Congress Hit Conscription,” *CIO News*, July 1, 1940, 1; “BIUC Backs Peace Meet, Hits Conscription,” *CIO News*, July 22, 1940, 1; “Stay Out of War, Halt Fascism Here, Avnet, Banks Urge,” *CIO News*, July 22, 1940, n.p. [page number ineligible]; and “Peace Committee Rally,” *CIO News*, Aug. 19, 1940, 8.

<sup>59</sup> “Proclamation Calling for Draft Registration On Oct. 16: The First Peacetime Draft in American History Becomes Law,” *New York Times*, Sep. 17, 1940; Clarence Toliver, “The point is This: Mr. Mitchell on Representation,” *Afro-American*, Aug. 24, 1940, 11; Lewis E. Burnham to Hilda M. Orr, May 11, 1940, part I, reel 18, frame 754; Hilda M. Orr to Louis E. Burnham; H. Calvin Parker to Lewis E. Burnham, May 17, 1940, part I, reel 18, frame 782; Louis E. Burnham to Vernen Johnson, May 22, 1940, part I, reel 18, frame 783; Louis E. Burnham to Eleanor Roosevelt, May 27, 1940, part I, reel 18, frame 780; Louis E. Burnham to Thelma Dale, June 18, 1940, part I, reel 18, frame 781; John P. Davis to Louis E. Burnham, June 24, 1940, part I, reel 18, frame 776-777; Lewis E. Burnham to Hilda M. Orr, Aug. 5, 1940, part I, reel 18, frame 771; Louis E. Burnham to Edward S. Lewis, August, 1940, part I, reel 18, frame 772; all found in NNC papers.

Though Orr and Park were unable to send delegates to New York, the PPC allied itself with the Chicago Emergency Peace Mobilization (CEPM). In Chicago, delegates of the PPC joined approximately 18,000 of the CEPM's three-day protest against conscription as well the potential loss of gains made by organized labor. The NNC placed civil rights front and center at the rally. Participation from newly elected NNC President Max Yergan and Paul Robeson, in the words of the *Chicago Defender*, testified to the "leadership Negro America can give to the counter-drive for peace and democracy." "Black America," the *Chicago Defender* reported, "knows best the need of peace and democracy. We have defended both; we have received neither." Upon return from the Chicago demonstration, the PPC distributed 15,000 leaflets and encouraged residents to wire, telephone, or write their congressional representative urging them to oppose conscription. The BNNC, with the help of CIO officials, also held its own anti-war conference entitled the "Maryland State Legislative Conference in Defense of Democracy and the Rights of the People" under the leadership of Dr. Banks.<sup>60</sup>

Edwin S. Smith, one of the three original members of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), received a standing ovation before the MDCFL in his warning against the nation's belligerent nationalism that the path towards war was fomenting. "Owners of the industrial resources," he declared, are agitating "in the name of patriotism, efficiency and national unity, to suppress popular liberties and to deprive their less fortunate and powerful fellow Americans of gains...which they have won by long and painful efforts." As the U.S. prepared for war, Smith noted, the number of strikes had been radically curtailed by the growing economic power of the

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<sup>60</sup> "Unions Asked to Send Peace Delegates," *CIO News*, June 17, 1940, 1; "The Cry for Peace," *Chicago Defender*, Sept. 14, 1940, 14; "Negro Meet Invites CIO Delegates," *CIO News*, Sept. 30, 1940., 2; and "Civil Rights, Democracy and Peace Demanded by Mobilization," *CIO News*, Sept. 9, 1940, 1 and 8.

defense industry. Only by retaining the full authority of the NLRA and its guarantee to workers' right to organize in the national defense program will this xenophobic militarism be defeated.<sup>61</sup>

War mobilization radicalized the union drives as many scorned the corporate profits that resulted from a military conflict they deemed immoral. William G. Sinclair, a delegate for the local Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers (IUMSW), declared the "Imperialistic war, which brings nothing but horrible, and useless death to workers involved...brought a boom to Baltimore shipbuilding industry." One member of the MDCFL similarly declared Baltimore "the most notorious open-shop city in the world, with the exception of dictator-controlled nations." Capitalizing on the anti-war militancy, the IUMSW demanded a closed shop with the Baltimore shipbuilding company Maryland Drydock in order to ensure unionized workers would benefit from the massive increase in revenue. "We want to get the closed shop peacefully," Sinclair declared, "but if necessary we'll 'hit the bricks' to do it!"<sup>62</sup>

Once the NLRB forced the Bethlehem Company to open its gates to the CIO, the SWOC was armed with a newfound militancy. Given the close interaction between the steel and ship workers at Sparrows Point, the SWOC and IUMSW agreed to form a joint recruitment drive. In order to maximize the union membership, the IUMSW organized the shipbuilding workers while the SWOC focused on the steel mill. The inclusion of the IUMSW brought "dynamite in every phrase." The BNNC also brought additional black SWOC officials to help in the organizing drive. Lamar Cook, national staff organizer for the CIO, spent fourteen years organizing mills in New York and Pennsylvania. One SWOC official in Baltimore described Cook as the key "instrument for bringing about better unity among the colored and white races, as well as among

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<sup>61</sup> "'Build Democracy to Defeat Fascism'" *CIO News*, Dec. 23, 1940, 8.

<sup>62</sup> "Imperialistic, Useless War 'Booms' Shipyards," *CIO News*, Sept. 25, 1939, 1 and "CIO Won't Move State Office Here," *Baltimore Sun*, Dec. 14, 1940, 17.



members of our own race.” Under the direction of another black SWOC organizer John Thornton, the workers’ movement unionized almost sixty percent of the plant, including seventy percent of black workers. By the summer of 1941, the SWOC and IUMSW unionized enough workers to call for a closed shop. “We will organize the Sparrows Point plant...or ‘bust,’” Thornton declared.<sup>63</sup>

Local conditions such as the decline in jobs programs and government harassment of peace activists encouraged many to scorn the same administration it once pledged to support. As the BNNC and CIO re-organized around protecting jobs programs and protesting war mobilization, the Popular Front faced stern opposition from government agencies such as the Dies Committee. Anti-militarism, combined with the SWOC’s victory at the NLRB, only further radicalized both the BNNC and the CIO. Determined to protect the gains made, the workers’ movement continued to fight for anti-discrimination in Baltimore’s defense industries. Once the BNNC and CIO became closely linked with the Comintern during the period of the non-aggression pact, however, anti-communism introduced immense obstacles. While the work of the BNNC and CIO reached new levels of enthusiasm, the stain of communism significantly curtailed their efforts.

### **Fighting Jim Crow Defense Industries**

While the SWOC re-organized at Sparrows Point, the BNNC focused on discrimination in white color employment. Throughout the city, black workers were systemically segregated into the lowest skilled and, thus, lowest paid employment. For three years, only seventeen of the

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<sup>63</sup> “Cooperative Program in Drive at Sparrows Point Plant,” *Labor Herald*, Feb. 16, 1940, 1 and 5; “Shipyard, SWOC to Hear ‘Dynamite,’” *Labor Herald*, Feb. 19, 1940; Bernard Spring, quoted by “What the Other Fellow Says: Baltimoreans Tell All About Fellow Citizens,” *Afro-American*, April 11, 1942, 10; “To Unionize Sparrows Plant or ‘Bust’—CIO,” *Afro-American*, Feb. 22, 1941, 8; and “To Ask Closed Shop at Sparrows Point Plant,” *Afro-American*, Aug. 16, 1941, 11.

WPA's white color projects were given to black workers. "We do not have difficulty getting the Negro to use the pick and shovel," Edward S. Lewis wrote John P. Davis, "but there is tremendous opposition to his using pen and pencil in this state." The BNNC, BUL, and others such as the People's Unemployment League and Workers' Alliance had made only "limited progress" in addressing the racial disparities in skilled work. To qualify for the WPA, Lewis discovered, the applicant must be "practically destitute." Even if a black worker was lucky enough to find WPA employment, no projects existed for them. "In my twelve years of Urban League work," an exacerbad Lewis decried, "the WPA set-up in this town has been the toughest nut to crack which I have ever encountered."<sup>64</sup>

Some within Baltimore's political class felt the resentment from black workers. The district of Democratic Congressperson Ambrose J. Kennedy, for instance, included almost fifty percent of Baltimore's registered black voters. Known as a progressive Parole Commissioner, a sympathizer of the NNC, and supporter of the anti-lynching bill that ultimately failed at the seventy-sixth congress, Kennedy assumed his political position in the black community was secure. "I have been criticized and...voted against," Kennedy wrote Davis, "because I have openly sponsored what I thought was right for the Negro race." By 1939, however, Kennedy observed a new political climate in the black community "which is disturbing me very much." Kennedy was troubled by his latest reelection in which "a very heavy Negro vote" was cast against him. Alarmed, Kennedy beseeched Davis for his "personal opinion" for how "I might correct this situation." A cordial but stern Davis replied "anti-lynching legislation is not enough" and pointed to the near impossibility for African-American workers in Baltimore to find white color employment. Kennedy's vote against the appropriation bill requested by the Roosevelt

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<sup>64</sup> Edward S. Lewis to John P. Davis, March 27, 1939, NNC papers, part I reel 15, frame 875-876.

Administration for the WPA only further imperiled his political future. “This action,” Davis warned Kennedy, “will not be received well by the Negro voters in your district.”<sup>65</sup>

Loosing faith in the WPA, the BNNC decided to force anti-discrimination in defense industries in the hope of winning skilled positions for African Americans. Together, the Baltimore and Washington, D.C. councils pooled their resources together in preparation for a fight with the notorious Glenn L. Martin Aircraft Company. The BNNC’s struggles with the company dated back to December 1940. Black workers paid taxes used for building aircraft, therefore, entitling them to job opportunities on par with whites. The company responded by refusing to “break precedent” of a white-only workforce and “questioned whether Whites and Negroes would work together.” The Maryland Youth Conference infuriatingly wrote that the Martin Company’s government contracts, worth almost \$400 million, did not entitle it to an all-white workforce.<sup>66</sup>

The BNNC’s Martin drive was part of a nation-wide assault on segregation in defense production. The NNC councils of Boston, Brooklyn, Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles took similar action. With support from the Baltimore Industrial Union Council, the Baptist Ministers’ Conference, the all-black fraternal Elks, the AFL’s Glass Blowers Union, Baltimore’s Mayor Howard W. Jackson, and various CIO lodges, the BNNC held a statewide job’s conference to

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<sup>65</sup> Ambrose J. Kennedy to John P. Davis, March 17, 1939, part I, reel 16, frame 877-878 and John P. Davis to Ambrose J. Kennedy, April 3, 1939, part I, reel 16, frame 887-890, both found in NNC papers.

<sup>66</sup> John P. Davis to Edward S. Lewis, March 23, 1939, part I, reel 16, frame 936; John P. Davis to Frank Scott, March 23, 1939, NNC papers, part I, reel 17, frame 794; “Martin Aircraft Ban on Negroes to Continue,” *CIO News*, Dec. 30, 1940, 8; “Glenn Martin’s Jim Crow Policy Still Under Fire,” *Afro-American*, Jan. 18, 1941, 10; “Glenn L. Martin ‘Contract’ Framed to Slow UAW Drive,” *Labor Herald*, Feb. 24, 1941; Sam Lacy, “Glenn Martin Symbol of Unemployment Unfairness, Forgets Youth and Betrays Spirit of Forebears,” *Afro-American*, May 10, 1941, 24; “President Orders and Even Break for Minorities in Defense Jobs,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1941; and John P. Davis to Philip Murray, June 26, 1941; NNC papers, part I, reel 18, frame 930.

discuss ways to combat the company. Edward Lewis and John Thornton contributed to the conference effort as well. Thanks to a performance by Paul Robeson, the conference enjoyed almost 1,000 delegates representing every section of Maryland's union activity as well as Washington, D.C. The conference branded "Martin 'Jim Crow'" a direct "challenge to the Negro people's right to live." The BNNC demanded the company add 7,000 blacks to its 17,000 white workforce. Drawing from its success in building a United Front in Sparrows Point, the BNNC declared "Progressive White workers also will join with Negro people in their fight for jobs because they know that exclusion of Negroes is a threat to their own struggles." Newly appointed SWOC director at Sparrows Point Nicholas Fontecchio similarly declared "Negro and white labor had better get together to make solid the base of this strength."<sup>67</sup>

The conference accused the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) for "doing nothing to enforce its [anti-discrimination] policy" except for the CIO's Sidney Hillman writing an "insipid letter" to all defense corporations. At a hearing before the OPM, John P. Davis presented Hillman an official complaint against the Martin Company. Tens of millions of African Americans had suffered from cuts to and discrimination within the WPA, the report declared, making anti-discrimination in defense industries vital for black employment. Though many were told to seek employment in the defense industry once the WPA denied them opportunities, for example, discrimination at companies such as Martin rendered them jobless. Consequently, Davis encouraged Hillman to lobby President Roosevelt to sign an executive order banning racial discrimination within defense industries. Hillman and Robert C. Weaver, also a member of

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<sup>67</sup> "U.S. Faces Crisis as Defense Jim Crow Tightens," *Chicago Defender*, Mar. 22, 1941, 3; "Carry on Fight for Jobs at Martin Aircraft Co.," *Chicago Defender*, March 22, 1941, 6; "Plans Completed for Defense Conference," *Afro-American*, March 22, 1941, 12; "Negro Congress Rally to Demand Martin Jobs," *CIO News*, April 21, 1941, 2; "Paul Robeson Famous Artist, Here This Sunday," *Labor Herald*, April 25, 1941, 2; and "Baltimore Mayor Backs Demand for Plane Jobs," *Chicago Defender*, June 28, 1941, 4.

the OPM, insisted that issuing an executive order “should present the last possible recourse.”

Davis responded by threatening to submit a request to the Defense Mediation Board for a hearing. An irate Hillman responded by questioning the NNC’s right to file such a complaint and insisted that either the NAACP or NUL were just as qualified to represent the black working class. Afterwards, twenty-five NNC members opened a picket line outside the headquarters bearing placards condemning the OPM.<sup>68</sup>

Later that month, two members of the Dies Committee working as undercover agents in the CPUSA-allied APM charged the BNNC with “deliberate exploitation of the question of racial discrimination” at the Martin plant. Agents Hazel Huffman and Mary Spargo testified before the Dies Committee that the Martin drive was a plot by the NNC for the “creation of a gigantic strike movement.” Spargo referenced APM literature promoting the Martin drive as proof that the BNNC was fomenting a communist uprising in the defense industry. The congress’s main goal, they insinuated, was not to promote the hiring of any black worker but only those “whom they [the NNC] felt would co-operate with them” in their efforts to “exploit the question of racial discrimination.” Spargo referenced the participation of Howard professor Alpheus Hunton, a member of both the APM and the NNC, as evidence of a conspiracy. Hunton irately responded that “Negroes have long been asking why the Dies Committee does not devote just one-tenth of its time to investigating...varied forms of discrimination and oppression practiced against Negroes.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> “Demand Jobs for Negroes At Martin,” *CIO News*, May 5, 1941, 1 and “Glenn Martin Case May Go to Mediation Board,” *Afro-American*, May 10, 1941, 24.

<sup>69</sup> “Dies Agents Charge APM Exploiting Race Issues,” *Afro-American*, May 31, 1941, 8 and “Prof. Hunton Seeks Hearing Before Dies Group on Communist Charges,” *Chicago Defender*, May 31, 1941, 6.

Alpheus Hunton's testimony before the Dies Committee was followed by the House of Representatives' investigation of defense industry's compliance with the Fair Employment Practices Committee. President Glenn L. Martin was asked why there were no black workers employed in his plant. Martin contended that hardly any black workers possessed the skills necessary for the work and refused to attend vocational courses required to learn such skills. Testifying the following week, Edward S. Lewis decried Martin's instance that black workers lacked the skill to work in aircraft industries while the company simultaneously denied them access to the vocational courses. The most revealing aspect of Martin's testimony was his open refusal to employ an integrated workforce. "I, personally, have nothing against the colored race," declared Martin, "but if I hired them I would be forced to segregate them." When asked why, he insisted that "It is the policy of the State of Maryland to segregate colored people." Martin even ominously suggested that he would support a strike by white workers if blacks were hired. "There would be an immediate stoppage of work," he warned, "We know that. It couldn't be avoided."<sup>70</sup>

Lacking the support from either the CIO hierarchy or the Roosevelt Administration, the Baltimore and Washington, D.C. councils took matters into their own hands. "Public relief, upon which so many Negroes are forced to depend for a living, is now being cut to the bone," the councils declared, while the Martin company "is waxing fat on more than 3000 million dollars worth of government defense contracts." Both councils encouraged the 300,000 African Americans throughout Maryland and D.C. to submit job applications for the Martin Company at the councils' respective headquarters. The councils then encouraged workers to physically apply for employment en masse at the company. The goal was to force the company to turn away at

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<sup>70</sup> "Lewis Says Martin is all Wet," *Afro-American*, Jul. 12, 1941, 11 and "NNC Reports Gains at Martin Aircraft Plant," *Afro-American*, July 26, 1941, 10.

least 5,000 black applications. Knowing the workers' would be denied employment, the councils then encouraged each to write letters directly to the White House, the office of Secretary of War Frank Knox, and Sidney Hillman. Calling for mass pressure, the councils declared, "If our Government really wants to defend and strengthen democracy...then let it FORCE defense employers to give our people jobs!"<sup>71</sup>

In the winter of 1941, the company agreed to hire ten black skilled workers with an additional fifty to sixty workers currently under training at an all-black vocational school. By January 1942, seventy-five were employed as assemblymen with a company promise of hiring a total of 100 skilled or semi-skilled by February. Despite this limited success, black workers continued to face discrimination in Maryland's defense industries. At the even more discriminatory Bethlehem Fairfield Shipyard, 225 workers, of which seventy-five percent were union members, were fired that summer. Numerous complaints by workers reached the *Afro-American* concerning shop floor Jim Crow. Workers faced segregation in bathrooms and cafeterias as well as "continual harassing by foremen and white workers, most of whom are said to be Southerners."<sup>72</sup>

Despite the strong numbers of Sparrow Point workers of the pipe shop, blacksmith, and welder departments "flocking" to the IUMSW, union president Norman Edward Dorland and the business agent Carl Bradley were purged on suspicion of using their influence to promote the CPUSA. The IUMSW's national officers described the effort as "the first of its kind in the

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<sup>71</sup> The Washington and Baltimore Councils of the National Negro Congress, "7000 Jobs for Negroes at Glenn L. Martin's. How? You must Help us Win!," n.d. [1941], NNC papers, part I, reel 19, frame 611-614.

<sup>72</sup> "Skilled Negroes Win Glen [sic] Martin Jobs," *CIO News*, Oct. 6, 1941, 1; "Glenn Martin Company is Pleased with Workers," *Afro-American*, Nov. 15, 1941, 24; "Martin Aircraft Plant to Have 100 Colored Skilled and Semi-Skilled by Feb. 1," *Afro-American*, Jan. 17, 1942, 5; and "Blame Southern Whites for Mass Firings at Fairfield Shipyard as 225 Lose Jobs," *Afro-American*, Jul. 11, 1942, 12.

history of the organizations,” and was “a direct result of a previously announced policy opposing isms.” Bradley, a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, was a well-known communist since the early 1930s. In 1931, Bradley openly ran on the CPUSA ticket for Mayor. It was not until the peace movement and the anti-communist crackdown from the Dies Committee, however, when Bradley and Dorland were purged from the union. Without citing specific evidence, the IUMSW’s executive board simply highlighted their affiliation with the peace movement and its attacks against both the OPM and national defense industries as justification for their dismissals.<sup>73</sup>

Despite many CIO leaders’ shift to the political right, redbaiting mattered little for Sparrows Point’s black workforce. In preparation for the NLRB election set for late September, the SWOC held numerous mass meetings. The largest occurred at the Polish Hall with John P. Davis serving as keynote speaker. Thanks to the BNNC, approximately, 6,000 out of 6,500 black workers voted in the election, giving the SWOC a resounding victory of a more than two to one margin. Because of Davis, John Thornton, and others, Fontecchio gave full credit to the “great number of colored workers at the plant,” for the victory. “Had their vote been against us,” he wrote, “we would have lost the election.” Two months later, the federal government approved the construction of a low-rent 304-unit housing project for black workers at Sparrows Point. Under supervision of the all black Samuel Plato Company, the first black construction company to receive a government contract, an integrated workforce of 100 built the Sparrows Point FWA Housing Project.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> “Shipyard Workers Union Expels Communist Clique,” *Labor Herald*, May 2, 1941, 1 and “Two Men Here are Expelled by CIO as Reds,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1941, 26.

<sup>74</sup> “Steel Workers Foresee CIO Election Victory,” *Chicago Defender*, Sep. 27, 1941, 2; “SWOC Wins Sparrows Point Election,” *Labor Herald*, Sept. 26, 1941, 1 and 8; “CIO Wins NLRB Election at Sparrows Point Plant,” *Afro-American*, Oct. 4, 1941, 24; “Began Work on Housing



## Conclusion

From the latter half of the Great Depression to America's entry into World War II (WWII), the BNNC maintained a fierce commitment to racial egalitarianism and industrial democracy. The BNNC's greatest victories, in fact, occurred during the militant peace movement, a period where anti-communist harassment by the state, liberals, corporations, and conservative CIO heads dramatically curtailed the BNNC's momentum. And yet, the overwhelming support by black workers of Sparrows Point for the SWOC and BNNC demonstrated the limitations to redbaiting. Despite the overlapping objectives between the BNNC, the CPUSA, and Labor's Non-Partisan League during the peace movement, black workers of Sparrows Point were clearly undeterred by anti-communism from both the Dies Committee and the CIO hierarchy.

Discrimination in the WPA, as well as drastic budget cuts to New Deal programs, forced the BNNC to engage in direct action against Jim Crow defense industries. During the period of the non-aggression pact, the BNNC faced immense scrutiny over its efforts to build a United Front at the Martin and Bethlehem companies. As congress organizers and their allies organized anti-war movements on both a national and local level, charges of exploiting the issue of discrimination as an attempt to disrupt war mobilization significantly limited the scope of the their anti-discrimination campaigns' effectiveness and, thus, the results that followed. Despite these obstacles, black workers at Sparrows Point appeared unfazed by the redbaiting. The black workforce, in fact, was the decisive factor in making the SWOC the sole collective bargaining agent.

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Site at Sparrows Point," *Afro-American*, Nov. 22, 1941; and "All-Colored Firm Forges Ahead on \$1,000,000 Sparrows Point Project," *Afro-American*, Dec. 13, 1941, 10.

The Dies committee's impact on the BNNC's Martin drive cannot be overestimated. The portrayal of the BNNC as a communist conspiracy to disrupt defense production under the banner of racial equality was a clear indication of the depths government agencies were willing to go in destroying the Popular Front. Either unable or unwilling to resist the attacks, national officers of the CIO appeased the anti-communist environment by refusing to endorse the BNNC's efforts to integrate Martin's workforce. The greatest obstacle, however, came from the corporations. Both the Martin and Bethlehem companies perfected the tactics of dividing the working class by race. By private companies' fusing anti-communism with white supremacy, the Popular Front's anti-discrimination work in Baltimore slowed to a crawl by the nation's entry in World War II.

Though limited the Martin drive's success may have been, it testified to the BNNC's relentless effort to integrate the workforce under immense pressure from anti-communists and white supremacists. Perhaps the greatest impact of the Martin drive—aside from the hiring of hundreds of skilled and semi-skilled black workers—was its exposure of the limitations to A. Philip Randolph's MOWM and the Roosevelt Administration's executive order on anti-discrimination. Historians have yet recognized the NNC's anti-discrimination drives. Historian Eric Arnesen, for example, contends that the campaign for integration in defense industries by Randolph's MOWM stood in “stark relief” to the NNC.<sup>75</sup> While Randolph and the MOWM demanded equality for workers, black radicals in the post-1940 NNC placed the “needs of the Soviet Union at the head of its agenda” and “significantly undermined an organization they had been instrumental in founding.”<sup>76</sup> Such arguments perfectly mimics assertions made by the Dies

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<sup>75</sup> Eric Arnesen, “No ‘Graver Danger’: Black Anticommunism, the Communist Party, and the Race Question,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 3, issue 4 (2006): 19.

<sup>76</sup> Arnesen, “No ‘Graver Danger,’” 19.

Committee. By equating the NNC's leftwing populism to Stalinism, explanations for how and why the BNNC conducted an identical drive at the Martin plant, supported by the BUL, remains unanswered.

War mobilization and state harassment heightened the precarious nature of the Baltimore Popular Front and exposed the weak underpinnings of the BNNC's political influence. Many within the United Front expressed contradictory statements towards war. While some supported war only as an act of self-defense, others refused to support armed conflict under any circumstances. Additionally, while some deemed war a detriment to black Americans and colonized people worldwide, others defined war as an enemy of the working class as a whole. However, the termination of state-sponsored jobs programs and the strengthening of Jim Crow and anti-union companies such as Bethlehem and Glenn L. Martin was a uniform fear within the entire black-labor alliance. For the BNNC, the peace movement was a genuine protest against the end of New Deal programs, the intensification of government harassment, and the growing power of defense industries with segregated workforces. Unfortunately for the BNNC, the more vociferous its scorning of racism and exploitation grew, the more politically isolated it became.

## Conclusion

I appeal to you, in order that you may effectively serve America, your race, the cause of the workers and the oppressed everywhere, to develop a worldview and extend your vision upon the boundaries of your country. Let all the world come within the sweep of your concern.

– A. Philip Randolph, “The Spirit of Human Rights,” circa 1940s<sup>1</sup>

On June 1946, 1,000 delegates at the NNC’s annual convention in Detroit voted in favor of sending a petition to United Nations Director General Trygve Lie demanding an investigation into violence against African Americans. In reference to the UN’s Economic and Social Council, the NNC insisted on the international communities’ jurisdiction to investigate mass violence wherever it occurs. In addition, NNC Executive Secretary Revels Cayton implored President Harry S. Truman to impose higher standards “in the field of human rights” by addressing low-cost housing and employment discrimination. “For the first time in the long history of the cancerous race issue in the U.S.,” a reporter observed, “the current action brings the condition out of the domestic area and into the international limelight.” Two months later, four African Americans, two women and two men, were lynched in Monroe, Georgia. Outraged, NNC President Max Yergan wrote United Nations Security Council demanding intervention by the international community.<sup>2</sup>

In the immediate post-war era, the NNC utilized the United Nations’ Charters in the struggle for universal human rights. The NNC also protested the Cold War policies of the United States by forming a partnership with Paul Robeson and his National Committee to Win the Peace (NCWP). Together, the NNC and NCWP promoted democracy building, complete eradication of

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<sup>1</sup> A. Philip Randolph, “The Spirit of Human Rights,” address to the graduation class of Douglass High School, 12, n.p., n.d. [circa 1940s], papers of A. Philip Randolph (“Randolph papers” hereafter), reel 30, frame 895.

<sup>2</sup> “Demand United Nations Probe U.S. Race Prejudice,” *Chicago Defender*, June 8, 1946, 1 and William Hepburn, “Mr. Hepburn Reports on National Negro Congress,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 29, 1946, 2.

fascism, civilian control of atomic energy, and an end to colonialism. Their activities caught the eye of the California Senate Factfinding Subcommittee on Un-American Activities (referred to as the Tenney Committee) in October 1946. When asked by the Tenney Committee if Robeson considered himself a communist, he responded, "I characterize myself as an anti-Fascist." He continued to lecture the committee by lambasting the western democracies for not only refusing to support Republican Spain but also recognizing General Francisco Franco's military dictatorship as the legitimate government. The democracies' failure to de-Nazify Europe, he warned, meant "the American people today must decide what they are going to support...I, as a Negro, know fascism would wipe me off the face of the earth."<sup>3</sup>

A week later, Robeson stood before more than eight hundred delegates of the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) at Charleston, South Carolina. The SNYC's Youth Legislature recently inaugurated campaigns for voter registration, an anti-lynch bill, and peace between the world's superpowers. A number of delegates recently joined the Congress of Industrial Organization's southern union drive known as "Operation Dixie" as well. For Robeson, the international crises was directly connected to the SNYC's fight against political disenfranchisement and extralegal violence. He declared, "The United States will have no moral position to speak for democracy before the United Nations while Negroes are the victims of brutal assault in America." He maintained that the South Carolina native and Secretary of State James F. Byrnes's militaristic stance towards the Soviet Union was rooted in his segregationist policies at home. The dual threat of Jim Crow and the Cold War was the greatest challenge activists faced since the Popular Front, Robeson proclaimed. The "Communist menace," he

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<sup>3</sup> "Equality Not U.S. Ideal, Robeson Says," *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 19, 1946, 4 and Paul Robeson, quoted by Jack Young, "Paul Robeson Defies un-American Committee," *Daily Worker*, Oct. 11, 1946, 11.

decried, had become the “chief weapon” to divide and discredit the post-war black freedom struggle.<sup>4</sup>

A. Philip Randolph and his March on Washington Movement (MOWM) also engaged in global protest. “The problem of color and oppression in our country reflects the pattern of the problem of color and oppression of the entire world,” wrote Randolph. Inspired by the post-war colonial struggle, Randolph hailed the African and Asian continents who have “elected to fight and perish rather than surrender” to the “bibles, booze, and bullets” of their “white imperialist benefactors.” The Jews of Europe have similarly rejected the “hand of white capitalist Christendom.” Supporting Jews’ right to return to Palestine, Randolph declared, “they want relief from the faggot and the lash” and “deliverance from” the extermination camps. Like the communist left, Randolph also decried imperialism and its repercussions for the black freedom struggle. He stated, “The fight for wealth and power by the modern state and empire systems, requires that they employ war as an instrument of national policy, foreign and domestic.” “Foreign military adventures unify a people behind their war-lards,” he explained, “under the smoke-screen of national defense, manifest destiny, freedom, master-race doctrine, democracy, victory, glorify, empire and world domination.”<sup>5</sup>

Like the Popular Front, the United Nations compelled black activists to frame social equality within a global context. This “spirit of human rights” entailed a global struggle against all forms of racial oppression. These connections routinely bridged divisions of race by

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Robeson, quoted by “Robeson Asks Negro Youth Groups to Join Anti-Lynch Crusade,” *Daily Worker*, Oct. 22, 1946, 9; “Youth Congress Takes Militant Stand on Race Oppression,” *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 26, 1946, 3.

<sup>5</sup> A. Philip Randolph, “The Negroes Struggle for Power,” 3-4, n.p., n.d. [1940s], reel 30, frame 637; A. Philip Randolph, “The Golgotha of European Jewry,” 1-2, n.p., n.d. [1940s], reel 31 frame ?; and A. Philip Randolph, “Socialism for Peace and Plenty,” 1, n.p., n.d. [1940s], reel 30, frame 854-864, all found in Randolph papers.

appealing to solidarity among all ethnic minorities and exploited workers. “Raise your banner for the freedom of all peoples,” declared A. Philip Randolph, “for no Negro is save [sic] if a Jew in Poland is insecure, or a poor white worker is in economic bondage in the deltas of the Mississippi...Refuse to compromise on the great human issue of freedom and justice.”<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the Popular Front, however, the Cold War exposed the ideological gaps between the left and communist left that were largely overcome during the anti-fascist movement. As Carol Anderson notes, “the tenuous unity that characterized African Americans’ postwar plans was rapidly fracturing along the U.S.–Soviet fault line.” While the NNC, MOWM, and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) agreed on enforcing the universal principles of human rights enshrined by the UN, the former refused to denounce communism and Soviet foreign policy. As Cold War tensions grew, the NNC instead condemned what it perceived as the West’s “attempted frameup” against the Soviet Union as an attempt to “obscure the fight...for emancipation of oppressed peoples everywhere.” The NNC’s insistence on the Soviet Union’s centrality to the anti-colonial movement enraged the NAACP’s Walter White and reinforced his conviction that the radicals were nothing but a tool in the CPUSA’s arsenal. Cold War pressures, combined with organizational instability, convinced Revels Cayton to forge the NNC completely with the CPUSA’s Negro Commission. As tensions between the superpowers grew, the communists subordinated much of the black radical agenda in favor of defending the Soviet Union at all costs. Without resources and allies, the NNC dissolved completely by 1947.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Randolph, “The Spirit of Human Rights,” 12.

<sup>7</sup> Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 52; Erik Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2012), 257 ; and Vera Vanderberg, quoted by “Detroit Unionists Score Churchill Call for War,” *Daily Worker*, March 9, 1946, 5.

Conversely, Randolph denounced Paul Robeson and other black communists for refusing to pledge loyalty to the United States in the event of World War III with the Soviet Union. Though Randolph supported communists' constitutional rights to speech and assembly, their refusal to criticize the Soviet Union was clear "evidence of slavish submission to the thundering god of the Communist heaven." The Soviet Union's selling of oil to fascist Italy, silence towards the Axis' atrocities during the non-aggression pact, occupation of Eastern Europe, and treatment of its Jewish population "bode no promise of heaven for Negro Americans." In light of communist atrocities, black Americans "are compelled by enlightened self-interest, to help the United States in the cold war, and a hot one if it should come against Soviet Russia." Such a conflict "is the only way to keep the jewel of democracy in the firmament of government." Randolph's firm stance against communism was both a political tactic and a genuine belief in the American political system's ability to absorb workers and minorities into its constitutional framework. Democracy's willingness to embrace a more inclusive political system, albeit sluggishly, was evidence of its superiority.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Randolph's anti-communism, the MOWM suffered a fate similar to the NNC. As World War II came to its conclusion, so did Randolph's organization. After all, the MOWM was designed to harness military Keynesianism for the benefit of black workers and soldiers. By the war's conclusion, the inauguration of peacetime jobs fell outside the authority of the Fair and Equal Practices Committee (FEPC). By 1946, the southern Democrats in the Senate filibustered legislation designed to make the FEPC official law, effectively crushing one of the most significant landmarks of the 1940s black freedom struggle. An irate Randolph warned, the "Fascist filibuster against the FEPC...was a blow at the American Constitutional political system

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<sup>8</sup> Randolph, "Should Negroes Help the U.S.A. win the Cold War against the U.S.S.R.," 16.



of Government by majority rule and an evidence of a sinister trend toward totalitarian statism.”

Nor did Randolph escape the anti-communist investigations of the 1950s. Because of his leadership in the NNC from 1935 to 1940, Randolph fell under the microscope of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy. It seems as that loyalty to the American constitution and condemnation of international communism was not enough to avoid the domestic Cold War.<sup>9</sup>

The Cold War led a generation of scholars to overlook the true significance of the National Negro Congress. Even those historians who mentioned the NNC tended to focus on the controversial 1940 Washington, D.C. convention. They highlighted this controversial confab as evidence of the congress’s fealty to the Soviet Union, overlooking the fact the NNC waged countless struggles for political and economic rights at home and human rights abroad before and after the non-aggression pact. Its partnership with the Congress of Industrial Organizations as well as black locals of the American Federation of labor also helped assimilate hundreds of thousands of black workers into the union movement.

Perhaps the NNC’s greatest contribution was placing race equality within the larger objectives of the global Popular Front. By building off of Erik S. Gellman’s seminal scholarship, this dissertation has examined the ways in which the Popular Front expanded the national borders of the black freedom struggle. Fascism, the NNC argued, was hardly a European phenomenon but rather a transnational threat to all minorities and workers. Future scholars of African American and labor history during the Great Depression should, indeed, observe how activists identified their struggles with various anti-fascist and anti-colonial movements spread throughout the globe. Such scholastic endeavors will demonstrate, as this dissertation has

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<sup>9</sup> A. Philip Randolph, “Democracies Doomed Unless Justice Prevails,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 2, 1946, 16 and Sidney Wilkinson to A. Philip Randolph, June 1, 1951, Papers of A. Philip Randolph (“Randolph papers” hereafter), reel 23, frame 412.

showed, that the struggle for race equality in the Great Depression United States cannot be understood in isolation.

Though the NNC met its demise by the late 1940s, activists of the 1950s and 1960s headed its warnings. While organizing the Poor People's Campaign, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of the "long, hot summer" of 1967. If activists failed to unite and resist ghettoization, King proclaimed, "They'll throw us into concentration camps...the sick people and the fascists will be strengthened...they'll cordon off the ghetto and issue passes for us to go in and out." "To prevent this," he proclaimed, "we're going to be militant." King's prophetic warnings of poverty and fascism testifies to the central argument made by the black Popular Front—fascism can emerge anywhere, and the only solution to this barbarism is to form a united front of working people at home and the oppressed abroad. Through solidarity of struggle, anti-fascism can become more than a mere slogan for so-called radicals and intellectuals but a real and potent mass-based struggle for building a just world. This is the legacy of the National Negro Congress.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted by David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1986), 596-597.

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