

Perspectives on Black Working-Class History and the Labor Movement Today

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Introduction

African American working class and labor history are inextricably interwoven with the larger history of the black community, the labor movement, and the nation itself. No less than in the past, the labor movement today is a complex phenomenon, which reveals divergent but related tendencies. On the one hand, we are struck by the decline in union membership from an estimated 35 percent of the nonagricultural labor force in the mid-1950s to less than 20 percent by the mid-1980s. On the other hand, there is also evidence that the labor movement is undergoing a revival, as service workers, white collar professionals, women, immigrants, and diverse people of color enter the work force in growing numbers. Moreover, workers are experimenting with creative combinations of old and new strategies and tactics: international solidarity, independent labor politics, various inside strategies, and civil disobedience. Taken together, according to labor historian Peter Rachleff, "we find the elements of a new labor movement."

Historians and other scholars need to pay much more attention to the lives of contemporary working people, including their diverse communities as well as their unions. Conversely, historians are in an excellent position to remind workers of their past -- struggles that were waged, won, partially won, or lost. Accordingly, this essay analyzes a period which holds perhaps the most important lessons for contemporary labor, class, and race relations -- i.e. the Great Depression and World War II. Because these were crisis times in American and African American life, they demanded serious debate, painful decisions, and an extraordinary resolve to survive hard times. Indeed, African Americans not only resolved that they would survive, but that they would do so with dignity and often

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with a sense of humor.

During the depression years, African Americans told a joke about two men walking along a country road. Although the men picked cotton from sun up to sun down, they had no money and owned no property. In fact, they could barely place food on the table. The conversation eventually turned to their wives and the creative solutions that they devised to make ends meet. It is no secret that black families survived because black women could almost literally turn nothing into something useful. At any rate, one of the men bragged: "My wife is smart. She don't waste a thing. Why, just the other day she took one of her old raggedy dresses and made me a tie." Determined not to be outdone the other man turned to his friend and replied: "Boy, that ain't nothing. Yesterday my wife took one of my old ties and made her a dress!" In other words, while some workers despaired, most expressed hope and a determination to survive with heart, soul, and mind intact.

Long before the stock market crash in 1929, African Americans had already experienced the growing impact of hard times. The "Last Hired and the First Fired," African Americans entered the depression earlier and deeper than other racial and ethnic groups. Sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton believed that the black community served as a "barometer sensitive to the approaching storm." Months before the stock market crash, the *Chicago Defender* warned that, "Something is happening . . . and it should no longer go unnoticed. During the past three weeks hardly a day has ended that there has not been a report of another firm discharging its employees, many of whom have been faithful workers at these places for years." As late as 1934, an unemployed black worker spoke for many when he appealed to the NAACP for help to feed and clothe his family. "I am writing you asking if you will assist me in procuring work . . . or Direct Relief . . . I need food and raiment for my wife and children."

The Great Depression brought mass suffering to the country as a whole. National income dropped by nearly 50 percent, from \$81 billion in 1929 to \$40 billion in 1932; unemployment rose to an estimated 25 percent of the labor force; and nearly 20 million Americans turned to public and private relief agencies to prevent starvation and destitution. Still, African Americans suffered more than their white counterparts, received less from their government, and got what they called a "raw deal" rather than a "new deal." The depression took its toll on virtually every facet of African American life.

As unemployment escalated, membership in churches, clubs, and fraternal orders dropped. Blacks frequently related the pain of this separation from friends and acquaintances. "I used to belong to a Baptist church, but don't go there now. I can't go anywhere looking like this . . ." "I don't attend church as often as I used to. You know I am not fixed like I want to be -- haven't got the clothes I need." As cotton prices dropped

from 18 cents per pound to less than 6 cents by early 1933, blacks in the rural South faced the most devastating impact of the Great Depression. All categories of rural black labor --landowners, cash tenants, sharecroppers, and wage laborers -- suffered from declining incomes. Mechanical devices had already reduced the number of workers needed for plowing, hoeing, and weeding, but planters now experimented with mechanical cotton pickers as well. The number of black sharecroppers dropped from nearly 392,000 in 1930 to under 300,000 as the depression spread. As one black woman put it, many jobs had "gone to machines, gone to white people or gone out of style." The novelist Richard Wright reinforced the same point, "As plantation after plantation fails, the Bosses of the Buildings [northern industrialists] acquire control and send tractors upon the land, and still more of us are compelled to search for 'another place.'" Public and private relief efforts were virtually non-existent in the rural South, forcing farm families to continue their trek to the city.

Despite declining opportunities to work in southern and northern cities, black migration continued during the depression years. The percentage of urban blacks rose from about 44 percent in 1930 to nearly 50 percent during the depression years. The black population in northern cities increased by nearly 25 percent; the number of cities with black populations of over 100,000 increased from one in 1930 to eleven in 1935. Public social services played an increasing role in decisions to move. As the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal noted in his classic study of black life during the period, "It was much harder for Negroes who needed it to get relief in the South than in the North."

The increasing migration of blacks to cities reinforced the poverty of established residents. By 1932, black urban unemployment had reached well over 50 percent, more than twice the rate of whites. In northern and southern cities, black workers faced special difficulties trying to hold on to their jobs. In Pittsburgh, for example, some black workers were fired when they refused to give kickbacks to the foreman for being permitted to keep their jobs. "I was just laid off -- why? Because I wouldn't pay off the foreman. He knows us colored folks has to put up with everything to keep a job so he asks for two-three dollars anytime an' if you don't pay, you get a poor payin' job or a lay-off." Other black workers expressed the same grievance. "My division foreman charged me \$20 one time for taking me back on, after he had laid me off; then asked me for \$15 more after I had worked a while. I just got tired of that way of doin' and wouldn't pay him; now I'm out of a job." At the same time, unemployed whites made increasing inroads on the so-called "Negro jobs." Not only in factories but in street cleaning, garbage collection, and domestic service work, whites competed for the traditionally black jobs.

As the depression intensified, many white women also entered the labor force for the first time. They competed with black women for jobs as maids, cooks, and

housekeepers. In northern cities, unemployment and destitution forced many black women to participate in the notorious "slave market." Congregating on the sidewalks of major cities, these women offered their services to white women, who drove up in their cars seeking domestic help. Some of the employers were working class women themselves and paid as little as five dollars weekly for full-time laborers who carried out a full regimen of housework. In their observations of the practice in the Bronx, New York, two black women, Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke, compared the practice to the treatment of slaves in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1832 novel:

She who is fortunate (?) enough to please Mrs. Simon Legree's scrutinizing eye is led away to perform hours of multifarious household drudgeries. Under a rigid watch, she is permitted to scrub floors on her bended knees, to hang precariously from window sills, cleaning window after window, or to strain and sweat over steaming tubs of heavy blankets, spreads and furniture covers.

The work was difficult indeed. One young black woman, Millie Jones, offered a detailed description of her work for one family for five dollars a week:

Did I have to work? and how! For five bucks and car fare a week. . . . Each and every week, believe it or not, I had to wash every one of those windows [15 in a six-room apartment]. If that old hag found as much as the teeniest speck on any one of 'em, sh'd make me do it over. I guess I would do anything rather than wash windows. On Mondays I washed and did as much of the ironing as I could. The rest waited over for Tuesday. There were two grown sons in the family and her husband. That meant that I would have at least twenty-one shirts to do every week. Yeah, and ten sheets and at least two blankets, besides. They all had to be done just so, too. Gosh, she was a particular woman.

Making matters worse, many employers cheated the women out of their wages. As Baker and Cooke put it, "Fortunate, indeed, is she who gets the full hourly rate promised. Often, her day's slavery is rewarded with a single dollar bill or whatever her unscrupulous employer pleases to pay. More often, the clock is set back for an hour or more. Too often she is sent away without any pay at all." In urban factories and commercial laundries, black women also faced difficult times. In a New York laundry, black women worked fifty hours each week. According to one employee, "it was speed up, speed up, eating lunch on the fly." Women working in the starching department stood on their feet for ten hours each day, "sticking their hands into almost boiling starch." When the employees complained, the boss threatened to fire and replace them with workers from the large pool of

unemployed women. While black women did not accept these conditions without a fight, racism and job competition helped to narrow the margin between subsistence and destitution. Evidence of racism abounded. In the South, white workers rallied around such slogans as, "No Jobs for Niggers Until Every White Man Has a Job" and "Niggers, Back to the Cotton Fields - City Jobs Are for White Folks."

The most violent efforts to displace black workers occurred on southern railroads, where the white brotherhoods, as their unions were called, intimidated, attacked, and murdered black workers in order to take their jobs. One contemporary observer, Hilton Butler, offered a list of black firemen who lost their lives or were seriously injured: "Gus Emera, [a] Negro fireman at Durant, saw a closed car rush toward him as he stepped from an engine to a side track. He jumped back in time to miss the second shotgun load, but the first was sufficient to send him to the railroad hospital with serious wounds . . . Cleve Sims, a fireman also stationed at Durant, walked into the yards at night to go to work. From behind a water tank a shotgun blazed, and Cleve fell badly wounded." By early 1933, nearly a dozen black firemen had lost their lives in various parts of the country. Butler concluded: "Dust had been blown from the shotgun, the whip, and the noose, and Ku Klux Klan practices were being resumed in the certainty that dead men not only tell no tales but create vacancies."

The discriminatory policies of employers and labor unions also affected African Americans in northern cities. Employers retained their views that African Americans were fit only for dirty, unpleasant, low paying, and heavy work. As blacks sought employment, employers again frequently claimed that, "We don't have a foundry in our plant and that's the kind of work Negroes are best suited for." In Milwaukee, one firm justified its exclusion of black workers in familial and paternalistic terms: "We just sort of work like a family here and to bring in Negro workers would cause confusion and cause white workers to feel that their jobs had lost in dignity if being done by Negroes." White workers reinforced and frequently demanded such policies. Twenty-four unions, ten of them affiliates of the AFL, barred blacks completely and others practiced other forms of discrimination and exclusion. Thus, disproportionately large numbers of African Americans entered the bread lines, sold their belongings, and faced eviction from their homes.

It was a difficult time, but the Republican administration of Herbert Hoover did little to relieve the suffering. Hoover resisted proposals for aiding the nation's poor and destitute. Instead, he pursued a policy of indirect relief through the establishment of agencies like the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which provided loans to relieve the credit problems of huge corporations like railroads, banks, and insurance companies. By "priming the pump" of big business, Hoover believed that federal aid to corporations would

stimulate production, create new jobs, and increase consumer spending, i.e., "trickle down" to the rest of the economy and end the depression. Unfortunately, these policies, as well as the first years of FDR's New Deal, provided little help to African Americans.

Despite their suffering under the Hoover administration, African Americans rallied to the slogan "who but Hoover" in the presidential election of 1932. Hoover had not only failed to advance effective policies for dealing with the depression, he had also offended African Americans in a variety of ways, including refusing to be photographed with black leaders. Still, he received about 66 percent of the black votes. Only in New York and Kansas City, Missouri did the majority of blacks vote for Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The Republican party was still the party of emancipation. Its role in the emancipation of slaves represented a "long memory" for African Americans. Moreover, despite their lowly position, industrial expansion during the 1920s had opened up new opportunities for thousands of blacks. Although skeptical, some blacks took heart in Hoover's words that, "We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land. The poorhouse is vanishing from us." From their vantage point Roosevelt looked little better than Hoover. As Assistant Secretary of Navy, he had supported the racial segregation of the armed forces. He had also adopted Warm Springs, Georgia as his home and accepted the system of racial segregation in that state. Moreover, during its national convention, the Democratic party rejected an NAACP proposal for a civil rights plank calling for an end to racial discrimination. Thus, for a variety of reasons, African Americans perceived little reason for supporting FDR over Hoover.

After his election, FDR did little to build confidence among African Americans. The new president depended on southern segregationists to pass and implement his "New Deal" programs. FDR defined the depression as an economic disaster, requiring massive federal aid and planning. Accordingly, the President formulated his New Deal programs, giving close attention to the needs of big business, agriculture, and labor. Some African Americans hoped for equal consideration, but most anticipated and received a "raw deal" during the first years of FDR's administration. Roosevelt opposed federal anti-lynching legislation, prevented black delegations from visiting the White House, and refused to make civil rights and racial equity a priority. FDR repeatedly justified his actions on the grounds that he needed Southern white support for his economic relief and recovery programs. In a conversation with an NAACP official, he confided that "If I come out for the anti-lynching bill now, they will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing. I just can't take that risk." African-American rights were placed on hold. Each piece of New Deal legislation failed to safeguard African Americans against racial discrimination. The National Recovery Administration (NRA), the Agricultural Adjustment

Administration (AAA), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), to name only a few, all left blacks vulnerable to *discriminatory employers, agency officials, and local whites.*

Despite the initiation of New Deal relief measures, African Americans repeatedly complained of their inability to secure relief. When a father of six lost his job and sought relief in the city of Pittsburgh, relief officials denied his request. Only when he deserted his family, his wife reported, did she and the children receive aid. According to the woman's testimony: "He told me once that if he wasn't living at home the welfare people would help me and the kids, and maybe he just went away on that account."

Southern state and local officials disregarded federal guidelines and paid African American relief recipients less than their white counterparts. In Atlanta, blacks on relief received an average of \$19.29 per month compared to \$32.66 for whites. In Jacksonville, Florida, about 5,000 whites received 45 percent of the relief funds, while the 15,000 blacks on relief received the remaining 55 percent. Southern politicians defended the practice, arguing that the low living standard of blacks enabled them to live on less than whites. In his own words, from Louisiana, a black man complained to the NAACP:

I have been deprived of work since Oct. 20th 1933 . . . Being denied of work so long I was forced to apply for direct relief and the woman Parrish director of the [F.]E.R.A. told me because I had quit a job in Sept. that only paid me \$2.00 per week 10-14 hours per day and because I had written several letters to Washington reporting this office she said you will not get any direct relief here. I will show you that you cannot run this office [she said] . . .

A letter from Alabama told the same tale:

N.A.A.C.P., Dear Sir: Please allow me to present a question to you which myself is very important because I am one of families that is in very bad need of aid an up to this date have been denied so it have retch the stage that something must be did. It is a well known fact that one cannot live without food and clothes so a friend and myself being among the unemployed and is not getting any aid so far from the public welfare of this county is asking for aid or information about aid from some source. Will you see after this matter at once . . . Its awful bad to wait for someone who does not care to give you food.

From Georgia, a widow explained the abuse and violence that her 17-year-old son faced

when he sought work relief:

Dear Sir: Sometime ago about 6 or 7 weeks ago my boy went up in town to sign to get on the releaf work to get some of the govnor money he was out of a job and I am a poor widder woman with a house full of little childrens and a cripple girl to take ceare of they woulden let him sign the white peoples knocked him down run him out of town woulden let him com back to town he went back to town in about 5 weaks they got after him agin about a hundred head of white mens with knives and they run him all ove town they cout him they throwed him in back of a truck hog fashion he got out som way they put a Bulldog on him then he ran in a stor then som of the collord mens beg the cheef police to put him in jale to keep the mob from killing him the cheaff say let them kill him just so they dont mobb him heare in town the night marshell put him in jale for safe keeping and I hade to pay him \$5.00 to get him out and he had to leave town dont be see heare no more if they see him enny more they will sure kill him he left in the night walking with no money I wont be able to gave him nothing and I want him to help me that is my sun he is just 17 years old--Just write to help me if you all please take up far me and help me I am his mother . . .

The local Federal Emergency Relief Administration was not alone in discriminating against blacks. The Agricultural Adjustment Act paid farmers to withdraw cotton land from production, create a shortage, and drive up the price of cotton on the market. Set up to administer the law at the local level, AAA county committees excluded African Americans from participation. By depriving African Americans of representation, white landowners were able to institute policies that drove black landowners into the ranks of sharecroppers and forced growing numbers of sharecroppers off the land altogether.

During its first year, for example, the AAA encouraged farmers to plow under cotton that was already planted. Landowners took government checks, plowed up cotton, and denied tenants a share of the government income. At the same time that planters removed increasing acreage of land from cultivation, the largest landowners turned increasingly to scientific and mechanized farming. The "thundering tractors and cotton picking machines" rendered black labor more and more dispensable. Although their numbers dwindled, the remaining black sharecroppers earned less than their white counterparts. White sharecroppers received a mean net income of \$417 per year compared to only \$295 for blacks. White wage hands received \$232 per year compared to only \$175 for blacks. Lower earnings aggravated other forms of racial inequality.

In his survey of 612 black farm families in Macon County, Alabama, the sociologist

Charles S. Johnson found that more than half lived in one- and two-room weatherworn shacks. When asked if her house leaked when it rained, a black woman said, "No, it don't leak in here, it just rains in here and leaks outdoors." Another cropper complained that the landlord refused to provide lumber for repairs: "All he's give us . . . is a few planks . . . It's nothin doin'. We just living outdoors." Food was also difficult to come by for farm families. A writer for the magazine the *New Republic* reported in 1931 that some black farmers in the cotton region were near starvation: "Some of the men who are plowing are hungry. They don't have enough to eat . . . And with hunger gnawing at their vitals they plow in earnest, because they are in a desperate situation and they exist in terrible anxiety. So they plow hard." Black tenants had good reasons to view these early years of the "new deal" as a "raw deal."

The National Recovery Act also discriminated against black workers. Partly by exempting domestic service and unskilled laborers from its provisions, the NRA removed most blacks from its minimum wage and participatory requirements. Since over 60 percent of African Americans worked in these sectors, the measure had little meaning for most blacks, especially African American women. Nonetheless, other blacks who held on to their precarious footing in the industrial labor force, despite hard times, faced new pressures from employers and white workers.

In 1934, the Milwaukee, Wisconsin Urban League reported a strike at the Wehr Steel Foundry. The chief aim of the strike, the League reported, was the "dismissal of Negroes from the plant." When black workers decided to cross the picket line, police joined strikers in attacks on them: "The first few days of the strike brought considerable violence between the Negroes who attempted to continue on the jobs and the white pickets . . . Police had been summoned [by management] to protect those who cared to enter but in turn joined with the strikers in overturning an automobile filled with Negro workers." Even on construction projects for black institutions, white workers rallied to bar African American workers. In St. Louis, for example, when the General Tile Company hired a black tile setter on the two million dollar Homer Phillips Hospital for blacks, all the white AFL union men quit and delayed construction for two months. In Long Island and Manhattan, the Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the Building Service Employees' Union pursued similar practices. When African Americans were brought under the provisions of the law in southern textile firms, employers reclassified African American jobs, in order to remove them from the protection of the NRA codes.

Some firms simply argued that blacks were less efficient than whites and thus deserved low wages. In Atlanta, for example, the Scripto Manufacturing company told black workers that "This company does not base wages on color but entirely on efficiency. Our records show that the efficiency of colored help is only 50 percent of that of white help

in similar plants . . . If the 'false friends' of the colored people do not stop their propaganda about paying the same wages to colored and white employees this company will be forced to move the factory to a section where the minimum wage will produce the greatest production. *Stop your 'false friends' from talking you out of a job.*" Where the codes did upgrade the pay of black workers, many firms replaced their African American workforces with white employees. It is no wonder that blacks frequently called the NRA, the "Negro Run Around," "Negroes Ruined Again", and "Negro Rarely Allowed."

In short, NRA legislation (particularly section 7a, which gave workers the right to collective bargaining with employers) enabled labor unions to strengthen their hand at the expense of blacks in the North and South. As late as 1935, organized white labor also blocked the inclusion of a nondiscrimination clause in the Wagner National Labor Relations Act. Sponsored by Senator Robert Wagner of New York, the new law gave workers and their unions extended protection in their effort to bargain collectively with management. According to Wagner's assistant Leon Kyserling, "The American Federation of Labor fought bitterly to eliminate this clause and much against his will Senator Wagner had to consent to elimination in order to prevent scuttling of the entire bill." African Americans not only faced discrimination in industrial, agricultural, and relief programs, they confronted racial bias in federal housing, social security, and regional planning and youth programs as well.

In the face of blatant forms of discrimination during the early New Deal, African Americans found little to praise in the government's relief efforts. They were acutely aware that they suffered disproportionately from unemployment, but faced the greatest discrimination and received the least benefits from government relief, work, housing, and social security programs. All Americans gained increasing assistance from the federal government, but such assistance would only slowly reach African Americans and help to reverse the impact of hard times on their families and communities.

By the mid-1930s, however, a variety of new forces would gradually transform the "raw deal" into a "new deal." The emergence of the new Congress of Industrial Organizations, the Communist party, and the Democratic party's growing appeal to black voters, all helped to improve the position of blacks during the period. In a nationwide radio broadcast, President Franklin D. Roosevelt symbolized the shift when he condemned lynching as murder: "Lynch law is murder, a deliberate and definite disobedience of the high command, 'Thou shalt not kill.' We do not excuse those in high places or low who condone lynch law." Following the President's pronouncement, the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine exclaimed that FDR was the only president to declare "frankly that lynching is murder. We all knew it, but it is unusual to have a president of the United States admit it. These things give us hope."

By 1939, African Americans had gradually increased their share of New Deal social programs and improved their socioeconomic conditions. African-American income from New Deal work and relief programs -- the Public Works Administration (PWA), Works Progress Administration (WPA), and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) -- now nearly equaled their income from employment in agriculture and domestic service. On CCC projects, African Americans increased their representation from less than 6 percent in 1935 to 11 percent in 1939. African Americans also occupied about one-third of all low income PWA housing units, obtained a rising share of Federal Farm Security Loans, and access to a variety of new WPA educational and cultural programs. Based partly upon increasing access to educational expenditures, including the building of new facilities, black illiteracy dropped 10 percent during the 1930s. By the mid-1930s, nearly 45 blacks had received appointments in various New Deal agencies and cabinet departments.

The "Black Cabinet," as these black advisers were called, included Robert L. Vann, editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, in the office of the Attorney General; William H. Hastie, a civil rights attorney, in the Department of the Interior; Robert C. Weaver, an economist, also in the Interior Department; Lawrence A. Oxley, a social worker, in the Department of Labor; Edgar Brown, president of the United Government Employees, in the Civilian Conservation Corps; and Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College, head of the Negro Division of the National Youth Administration. The number of African Americans on relief and the amount of money available to them rose steadily.

African Americans increasingly hailed such New Deal social programs as "a godsend." Some even suggested that God "will lead me" but relief "will feed me." African Americans now perceived that a "new deal" was in the making. Key to these changes was the increasing interaction of black workers, the larger African American community, the labor movement, and radical parties, although most black workers would join the mass production unions of the CIO -- steel, coal mining, meat packing, and automobile.

Perhaps more than any other single figure during the 1930s, however, A. Philip Randolph epitomized the persistent effort of black workers to organize in their own interest. Born in Crescent City, Florida in 1889, Randolph was the son of an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) minister and an equally hard-working and productive mother. He had migrated to New York in 1911. During World War I he had co-published an antiwar socialist magazine *The Messenger* and was soon denounced by the U. S. attorney general as "the most dangerous Negro in America." In 1925, he spearheaded the formation of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (and Maids) (BSCP), a black union, which the AFL refused to recognize. During the 1930's, however, when new federal legislation (the Railway Labor Act of 1934) legitimized the rights of workers to organize, Randolph and the BSCP increased their organizing drive among black porters. Randolph's rhetoric and

actions inspired the rank and file during the hard days of the depression. At one convention, he exclaimed that, "The lesson that Pullman porters in particular and Negroes in general must learn is that salvation must and can only come from within." Other officers invariably reinforced Randolph's inspiring words. "When the US finished the War of Revolution the people were ragged, the wives and children were barefoot, the homes had not even window panes to keep out the cold; but America had her independence just the same." Black pullman porters rallied to the BSCP. By 1933, the union claimed to represent some 35,000 black Pullman porters.

Two years later the BSCP defeated a Pullman company union and gained the right to represent porters in negotiations with management, which, in 1937, signed a contract with the union. In the meantime, the AFL had grudgingly approved a full international charter for the brotherhood, placing it upon an equal footing with other constituent unions. The BSCP victory had extraordinary significance: it not only helped to make blacks more union-conscious, but increased their influence on national labor policy, and the larger civil rights struggle.

As black workers increased their organizing activities, the major civil rights organizations also moved toward a sharper focus on the economic plight of African Americans. In 1933, the NAACP, the Urban League, and other interracial organizations formed the Joint Committee on National Recovery (JCNR). Although under-funded and ill-staffed, the JCNR lobbied on behalf of blacks in Washington, D. C. and helped to publicize the plight of African Americans in the relief and recovery programs.

The Urban League also formed Emergency Advisory Councils and Negro Workers Councils in major cities across the country and played a major role in promoting closer ties between blacks and organized labor. Although the League had earlier supported black strikebreaking activities and emphasized amicable relations with employers, it now urged black workers to organize and "get into somebody's union and stay there." For its part, the NAACP formed a Committee on Economic Problems Affecting the Negro, invited representatives of the CIO to serve on its board, and worked with organized labor to gain housing, wages, hours, and social security benefits for black workers.

The major civil rights organizations also supported the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign. Aimed at white merchants who served the African American community but refused to employ blacks, the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Can't Work" campaign galvanized the black urban community. In New York, Chicago, Washington D.C., and other cities, African Americans boycotted stores that refused to hire African Americans, except in low-paying domestic and common laborer capacities. New York launched its campaign under the leadership of Reverend John H. Johnson, of St. Martin's Protestant

Episcopal Church. When white Harlem store owners refused to negotiate, Rev. Johnson and his supporters formed the Citizens League for Fair play and escalated their efforts. The Citizens League set up picket lines around Blumstein's Department Store, took pictures of blacks who crossed the line, and published photos in the black newspaper, the New York Age. After six weeks, the store gave in and hired black clerical and professional staff. As a result of such actions, New York blacks obtained the nation's first black affirmative action plan.

In 1938, the New York Uptown Chamber of Commerce negotiated with the Greater New York Coordinating Committee for Employment and agreed to grant African Americans one-third of all retail executive, clerical, and sales jobs. The businesses would not fire whites to make room for blacks, but agreed to give blacks preference in all new openings.

Although African Americans expressed their resentment in formally organized and peaceful group actions, they sometimes despaired and adopted violent responses. On 25 March 1935, a race riot broke out in Harlem, when a rumor spread that a black youth had been brutally beaten and nearly killed by police. Flyers soon appeared: "Child Brutally Beaten -- Near Death," "One Hour Ago Negro Boy Was Brutally Beaten," "The Boy Is Near Death." Although the youth in question had been released unharmed, outrage had already spread and African Americans smashed buildings and looted stores, in a night of violence that resulted in at least one death, over fifty injuries, and thousands of dollars worth of property damage.

In his novel *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison later described the event: "I could see a crowd rushing a store . . . moving in, and a fusillade of canned goods, salami, liverwurst, hogs heads and chitterlings belching out to those outside . . . as now out of the dark of the intersecting street two mounted policemen came at a gallop . . . charging straight into the swarming mass. They came toward me as I ran, a crowd of men and women carrying cases of beer, cheese, chains of linked sausage, watermelons, sacks of sugar, hams, cornmeal, fuel lamps."

In the volatile climate of the 1930s, some blacks gravitated toward the Communist and Socialist parties. They perceived radicalism as the most appropriate response to the deepening plight of African Americans. In 1931, aided by the Communist Party, blacks in rural Alabama founded the Alabama Sharecroppers Union. The organization developed an underground network of communications that enabled them to maintain secrecy. Meetings took place in black churches, where their plans were disguised as religious undertakings. The union's membership increased to an estimated 3,000 in 1934. Its efforts soon attracted the attention of local authorities and violence broke out when law officers tried to confiscate

the livestock of union members, who allegedly owed money to landowners.

In 1932, Ned Cobb, referred to as "Nate Shaw" in the oral history of his life, joined the sharecroppers union and fought the system that oppressed him. As he recalled, he had to act because he had labored "under many rulers, just like the other Negro, that I knowed was injurious to man and displeasin to God and still I had to fall back."

One cold morning in December 1932, Shaw refused to "fall back." When deputy sheriffs came to take his neighbor's livestock, he took part in a shootout with local law officers. He reported that before he could reach for his gun, the law officers "filled my hind end up from the bend of my legs to my hips with shot." I walked on in the door, stopped right in the hallway and looked back. He [a law officer] was standin right close to a big old oak tree right in line with the door. Run my hand in my pocket, snatched out my .32 Smith and Wesson and I commenced a shooting at Platt. Good God he jumped behind that tree soon as that pistol fired; he jumped like lightin. My mind told me: just keep shooting the tree, just keep shootin and maybe he'll get scared and run; you'll have a chance at him then. But as the devil would have it, the more I shot the tighter he drawed up behind that tree until I quit shootin. I seed his head poke around the tree -- that tree saved him -- and he seed what I was doin: good God almighty, I was reloadin and before I could reload my gun . . . [e]very one of them officers [4 in all] outrun the devil away from there. I don't know how many people they might have thought was in that house, but that .32 Smith and Wesson was barkin too much for em to stand. They didn't see where the shots was comin from -- nobody but Mr. Platt knowed that.

Nate Shaw's action underscored the increasing militance of rural black workers. Despite violence and intimidation, black workers also took an active part in the formation of the socialist Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU). A black farmer helped to inspire the organization when he spoke up at the initial meeting of the group: "For a long time now the white folks and the colored folks have been fighting each other and both of us has been getting whipped all the time. We don't have nothing against one another but we got plenty against the landlord. The same chain that holds my people holds your people too. If we're chained together on the outside, ought to stay chained together in the union." When white landowners evicted sharecroppers in Arkansas, the black STFU vice president, O. H. Whitfield, led some 500 black and white farmers onto the main highway between Memphis and St. Louis and vowed to remain there until the federal government intervened.

Although these radical actions produced few results, they highlighted the increasing

activism of rural black workers in their own behalf. A small number of blacks joined the Communist party and played a role in the party's League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR). According to a recent study of the party in depression era Alabama, blacks made up the majority of the party's membership during most of the period. The party's fight on behalf of the Scottsboro Boys attracted local black steelworkers like Al Murphy and Hosea Hudson.

Al Murphy was born in McRae, Georgia in 1908, grew up in a poor sharecropping family, and moved to Birmingham, Alabama in 1923. In Birmingham, he worked as a common laborer and attended night school there. Unfortunately, as he recalled it, during the depression, "I had to stop night school and join workers on breadlines." Shortly thereafter, he attended a Communist party meeting for the unemployed. Impressed by what he saw and heard, he joined the party that same night, dedicated himself to party work, and soon recruited other black steelworkers for membership.

Born in a sharecropping family in Wilkes County, Georgia in 1898, Hosea Hudson was among those that Al Murphy recruited. Hudson also belonged to a sharecropping family. As a youngster, he also worked hard on the land, moved to Birmingham in 1923, and gained employment as an iron molder at a local foundry. Hudson later recalled that he always "resented injustice" and the way whites treated blacks. After failing to organize black workers independently, and after witnessing the Communist campaign to free the Scottsboro boys, Hudson joined the Communist party in September 1931. Hudson later recalled the social injustice that led him to the party: "Blacks are the last to be hired and the first to be fired. It was we, already existing on the crumbling edge of starvation, who suffered the highest death rate. If we had any medical care at all, it was just a whisper above being nothing." During the struggle to free black party member Angelo Herndon, his black defense attorney, Benjamin Davis, Jr., also joined the party. A graduate of Amherst College and the Harvard Law School, Davis later explained his decision as "the only rational and realistic path to the freedom which burns in the breast of every Negro. It required only a moment to join but my whole lifetime as a Negro American prepared me for the moment."

Most African Americans shunned membership in radical parties and worked hard to broaden their participation in the New Deal coalition. The growing militance of the African American community helped them to broaden their participation in the political system. In 1936, African Americans formed the National Negro Congress (NNC). Spearheaded by Ralph Bunche of Howard University and John Davis, executive secretary of the Joint Committee on National Recovery, the organization aimed to unite all existing organizations -- political, fraternal, and religious -- and press for the full socioeconomic recovery of the black community from the ravages of the depression. Nearly six hundred

organizations attended the founding meeting, which selected A. Philip Randolph as its first president.

The National Negro Congress symbolized a new level of African American political organization and mobilization. Based upon expanding numbers and concentration in cities, black voter registration drives escalated during the 1930s. The proportion of black voters rose dramatically in the major industrial cities -- from less than 30 to 66 percent in Detroit and from 69,214 to 134,677 in Philadelphia, for example. In Chicago, black voter registration exceeded the percentage of whites. In the South as well -- Durham, Raleigh, Birmingham, Atlanta, Savannah, and Charleston -- African Americans formed political clubs to fight for the franchise and increase the number of black voters in that region. As Republicans continued to ignore the pleas of black voters, blacks increasingly turned toward the Democratic party.

As early as 1932, Robert Vann, editor of the black weekly *The Pittsburgh Courier* had urged African Americans to change their political affiliation, "My friends, go turn Lincoln's picture to the wall . . . that debt has been paid in full." In the election of 1936, African Americans heeded his request and voted for the Democratic party in record numbers, giving Roosevelt 76 percent of the Northern black vote. Following the 1936 election, African Americans used their growing support of the Democratic party to demand greater consideration from federal policy makers.

Under the impact of World War II, African Americans gained new industrial opportunities as the nation mobilized for war and called men into the military in rising numbers. It was during this period that African Americans regained a foothold in the industrial economy and broke the unskilled "job-ceiling" and moved into semi-skilled and skilled jobs. Yet, the movement of African Americans into defense industry jobs was a slow process. Employers, labor unions, and government agencies, all discriminated against blacks and undermined their participation in the war effort. *The Chicago Defender*, a black weekly, captured the frustrations of many African Americans in an editorial: "Why die for democracy for some foreign country when we don't even have it here? . . . What Democracy have we enjoyed since the last World War? Are our people segregated? Are they not Jim-Crowed and lynched? Are their civil and constitutional rights respected?" Most African Americans nonetheless supported the nation's declaration of war against Germany and Japan.

Black servicemen and women fought in the European, Pacific, and Mediterranean theaters of war. Unlike World War I, however, African Americans refused to simply "close ranks" and postpone their own struggle for full citizenship and recognition of their rights at home. They now used the war emergency, as well as their growing influence in the

Democratic party and the new unions, to wage a "Double V" campaign -- for victory at home as well as abroad. Their campaign received its most powerful expression in the militant March on Washington Movement (MOWM), which led to the federal Fair Employment Practices Committee. By war's end, African Americans and their white allies had set the stage for the emergence of the modern civil rights movement.

The African American quest for social justice gained its most potent expression in the emergence of the March on Washington Movement. Spearheaded by A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the MOWM was launched in 1941 following a meeting of civil rights groups in Chicago. The critical moment came when a black woman angrily addressed the chair: "Mr. Chairman . . . we ought to throw 50,000 Negroes around the White House, bring them from all over the country, in jalopies, in trains and any way they can get there, and throw them around the White House and keep them there until we can get some action from the White House." A. Philip Randolph not only seconded the proposal but offered himself and the BSCP as leaders: "I agree with the sister. I will be very happy to throw [in] my organization's resources and offer myself as a leader of such a movement."

By early June, the MOWM had established march headquarters in Harlem, Brooklyn, Washington D.C., Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco. The movement spread through the major rail centers and soon joined forces with local NAACP and Urban League chapters, churches, and fraternal orders. *The Black Worker*, the official organ of the BSCP, became the official newspaper of the MOWM. The paper's May 1941 issue reprinted the official call to march: "We call upon you to fight for jobs in National Defense. We call upon you to struggle for the integration of Negroes in the armed forces . . . of the Nation . . . We call upon you to demonstrate for the abolition of Jim Crowism in all Government departments and defense employment . . . The Federal Government cannot with clear conscience call upon private industry and labor unions to abolish discrimination based upon race and color so long as it practices discrimination itself against Negro Americans."

The MOWM helped to mobilize the masses of black working people as well as the middle and upper classes. According to Randolph, "It was apparent . . . that some unusual, bold and gigantic effort must be made to awaken the American people and the President of the Nation to the realization that the Negroes were the victims of sharp and unbearable oppression, and that the fires of resentment were flaming higher and higher." Though the MOWM welcomed liberal white support, Randolph insisted that African Americans lead the movement.

Randolph was wary of the labor movement, the major political parties, and the

growing communist influence in black organizations like the National Negro Congress (NNC). When the Communist party gained control of the NNC in early 1940, for example, Randolph resigned from the presidency and soon left the organization. Ralph Bunche reported on Randolph's departing speech, which urged blacks to pursue a more independent course in their struggle against racial subordination:

Randolph's speech was a very fair one. He merely cautioned the Negro that it would be foolish for him to tie up his own interests with the foreign policy of the Soviet Union or any other nation of the world. Nor would the Negro be sensible in hoping that through tying himself to any American organization, political or labor, he would find a ready solution for the problems. He cautioned the Congress against too close a relationship with any organization, mentioning the major parties, the Communist Party (of which he is a member) and the CIO. He expressed the view that the Negro Congress should remain independent and non-partisan and that it should be built up by Negro effort alone.

Although Roosevelt resisted the movement as long as he could, the MOWM finally produced results. Roosevelt met with black leaders A. Philip Randolph and Walter White of the NAACP on 18 June 1941. A week later, on 24 June 1941, FDR issued Executive Order 8802, banning racial discrimination in government employment, defense industries, and training programs. The order also established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to implement its provisions. The FEPC was empowered to receive, investigate, and address complaints of racial discrimination in the defense program. A. Philip Randolph recalled the details of the initial meeting with FDR. The turning point came when FDR turned to Walter White and asked, "How many people will really march?" According to contemporary accounts, White's eyes did not blink. He said, "One hundred thousand, Mr. President."

Executive order 8802 proved to be a turning point in African American history. It linked the struggle of African Americans even more closely to the Democratic party and helped to transform the federal government into a significant ally. African Americans used the FEPC to broaden their participation in the war effort, but it was a slow process. Despite the persistence of discrimination, as the wartime labor shortages increased, the FEPC played a key role in facilitating the movement of black workers into defense plants.

Although black workers faced ongoing obstacles in their struggle for skilled, managerial, and clerical positions, by the end of World War II they claimed the CIO, the Democratic party, and the federal government as important allies in their struggle for social change. After a long period of unemployment, relief, and public service work, World War

II enabled African Americans to regain and strengthen their foothold in the industrial economy. Although war production created new economic opportunities for African Americans, their path was fraught with numerous difficulties. Labor unions, employers, and the state pursued racially discriminatory employment policies. Only the organizational and political activities of African Americans in their own behalf insured access to industrial jobs and full employment. They had learned that "closing ranks" in support of the nation did not preclude the continuation of their own struggle for equity. The "Double V" campaign for victory at home and abroad, the March on Washington Movement, and the growing use of the federal government to secure their aims, all helped to write a new chapter in the history of African Americans and set the stage for the modern civil rights movement during the postwar years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what does this story suggest to the labor movement today? First, black workers are a kind of barometer for measuring the onslaught of hard times for the African American community, the working class, and the nation as a whole. Thus, any socioeconomic and political difficulties confronting African Americans should be perceived as vital to the health of the entire working class and the nation. Second, the experiences of the Depression and World War II suggest that the larger labor movement can be a foe as well as a friend in the lives of black workers. Consequently, its record on race issues must be scrutinized as much in the present as it has in the past.

Third, whatever happens in the ongoing relationship between black workers and the labor movement, the lives of black workers are inextricably interwoven with those of the African American middle class. Despite important conflicts of interests, African Americans continue to share certain aspects of persistent racial discrimination across class lines. Moreover, based on evidence from the early years, members of the black middle class are potential allies in the struggle against class and racial inequality. Finally, the depression and World War II tell us that crises not only present obstacles, but opportunities for social, political, and cultural change.

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