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Transformation of Labor through Black Participation, 1930–1945

Late in November of 1932, the American Federation of Labor convened in Cincinnati, Ohio for what A. Philip Randolph would call "the most important Convention the A. F. of L. ha[d] ever held, and its proposals the most progressive" [1]. The Associated Negro Press would laud the changes that were finally pushed through despite the comparatively small number of Black labor leaders at the convention: it was at this convention that the AFL announced a request for the end of racial discrimination of affiliated chapters. While the fight remained in the coming years, even the *intention* to help was progress, because even without the law in their way, Black workers experienced oppression by their employers and by their fellow workers.

This was perceived as empty rhetoric on the part of the AFL, and while it was formally desegregated, many local chapters still failed to do so in practice, with parallel Black and White unions developing along lines of separate professions, while the White locals used intrigue and manipulation to prevent co-occupation with Black workers. Witwer explores this as an explanation of the conditions that led to the exclusion of African American-dominated Local 609's leader Theodore Johnson from a national Teamsters conference in 1944, a scandal drawing outrage from Black affiliates nationwide[2]. Witwer focuses primarily on the emptiness of the promises of White leaders and efforts by workers under them to undermine Black employment.

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[1] The Associated Negro Press, "Deadline Release: Anti-discrimination position of the American Federation of Labor," in *The Claude A. Barnett Papers: The Associated Negro Press, 1918-1967, Part 1: Associated Negro Press News Releases, 1928-1964, Series A: 1928-1944*. December 1932. Stored in folder 001583-006-0725 of the Module Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century: Organizational Records and Personal Papers, Part 1. https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001583-006-0725&accountid=14709.

[2] David Witwer, "An Incident at the Statler Hotel: A Black Pittsburgh Teamster Demands Fair Treatment During the Second World War," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 65, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 350–67. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27774121.

This approach leaves open the question of what success the Black leaders of local unions were able to achieve in spite of this, and what tools from their newly-migrated communities they had used in order to do so.

Other scholars, however, draw more strongly on the use of community resources. Among these scholars is Cilli, who describes the role of the Urban League of Pittsburgh, an advocacy group for African Americans moving to the North during the Great Migration and regional chapter of the National Urban League, in making key connections and offering crucial services to moving and unionizing Black workers[3]. While Cilli explores the connections made through the Urban League, these were not the only valuable connections that Black workers built to ensure their place in the workforce—they are also, however, not to be discounted. They simply compose a part of a greater whole, albeit a part Cilli focuses on not through the workers' lens, but through that of the ULP itself.

As African American workers discovered their role in the changing labor market of the interwar period, they brought about immense changes of their own that shaped unions and their interactions with government and industry in new ways. I will focus on African Americans in their positions as workers, and how Black labor transformed not only their own role, but the role of labor more broadly, through articulation with a number of factors: Black labor and workers, Black-run community organizations like ULP, white labor leaders, business leaders, non-establishment political actors, and government officials faced with unique interwar and wartime concerns.

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[3] Adam Lee Cilli. "This Great Crusade: Reformers and the Industrial Labor Movement, 1933–1939." In *Canaan, Dim and Far: Black Reformers and the Pursuit of Citizenship in Pittsburgh, 1915–1945* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2021), 168–204.

To convey how out-of-union work is important is by necessity to show how the in-union work was insufficient on its own. One might concede that Witwer was correct, albeit cynical. The promises made by the AFL were indeed empty as time went on, but I recall the excitement of the Associated Negro Press when a promise was made at all. "Remarkable demonstrations and a high pitch of enthusiasm marked the whole convention" [4] at which the AFL put out its call to oppose racial discrimination. The cause of the mostly African American Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was taken up by such high-profile leaders in the union as its vice president Matthew Wold and a separate resolution outlined the AFL's support for the injunction fight and financial needs of the BSCP.

In an address to AFL leadership, Reginald A. Johnson of the Atlanta Urban League demonstrated the ways that this hollow language was insufficient for the St. Louis Black community without a means of enforcing integration three years later:

> The building trades unions of that city show a determined and complete opposition to the employment of Negroes as skilled mechanics on building jobs. They refuse to admit Negroes. The Bricklayers, Painters and Carpenters unions have refused to permit Negro locals to be set up. They have even refused to recognize union cards of Negroes when brought to St. Louis from other cities. Thus far, they have been successful in shutting Negro skilled workers almost completely out of public building program jobs of that city.[5]

It was also in this path of scarce progress that Pittsburgh Teamsters Local 609's leader Theodore Johnson was excluded from the conference, as described by Witwer. When they forced the issue, yet more of these promises were made to help prevent a public relations crisis for the Roosevelt reelection campaign, though these bore more fruit[6]. Black labor leaders were able to push for

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[4] The Associated Negro Press, "Deadline Release," F001583-006-0725.

[5] Reginald A. Johnson, "The Urban League and the A.F. of L .— A Statement on Racial Discrimination" delivered before AFL Committee of Five to Deal with Negro Problems (Washington, 1935). *Opportunity, Journal of Negro Life.* https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/great-depression/the-urban-league-and-the-a-f-of-l/.

[6] David Witwer, "An Incident at the Statler Hotel," 362.

incremental changes in the AFL, but this appeared to result only in hollow words and little action. More effort through a variety of angles would be needed.

One such angle that was used in Pittsburgh was through community organizations like the Urban League. The Urban League of Pittsburgh would facilitate several instrumental programs for African American workers beyond the roles they already played in hygeine and wellbeing for Black communities. One such program was an effort to secure the interest of business leaders towards ensuring the wellbeing of Black workers. The ULP hosted dinners with industrial business leaders to inform them about several conditions in Black workers' lives. "Subjects discussed were [an] 'Outlook for Continued Prosperity'; 'Recruiting Negro Labor', 'How Good Housing affects Safety' and 'Present Trend of Welfare Work'" [7]. They focused on securing livelihoods for African Americans when unions had neglected them by ensuring that business leaders were aware of the concerns they had, including the Urban League's most favored issue of housing. These ties to business leaders would elevate the importance of Black labor organizers in desegregated unions.

The National Urban League also facilitated their participation in unions while relations were still warming through programs like the Negro Workers' Councils. These, a joint effort conducted alongside the American Federation of Labor, would educate Black workers on the ways that existing unions worked while connecting them with other workers who shared the union's cause. The Councils were "organized to discourage dual unionism, to fight blind anti-organized labor sentiment and to instill in Negro workers a true appreciation of the needs and benefits of labor unions and to make easier their entrance into existing labor organizations" [8]. Respect for the importance of the unions was crucial to the reduction of "scabbing," or

[7] Industrial Committee of the Urban League of Pittsburgh, *Industrial Dinner*. Stored in University of Pittsburgh Thomas Blvd Archives, *Urban League of Pittsburgh Records, 1915–1963*, Box 6, Folder 244.

[8] Reginald A. Johnson, "The Urban League and the A.F. of L .— A Statement on Racial Discrimination."

temporary non-contract work during strikes conducted by the unions. Scabbing is broadly seen as the ultimate disrespect for a union and its workers, and an appalling lack of solidarity. If this was why some White workers rejected integration, it would benefit both parties to stop the scabbing and instead cooperate to meet their demands and needs.

Workers' education was an important focus for groups beyond the Urban League, as well. One group that sought to further the education of workers in their unionization efforts was the Communist Party of the United States, which believed that informed democratic participation in the workplace was an extension of the democratic principles of the United States[9]. As such, they operated the Workers' Schools, bodies which educated workers on parliamentary procedure, the kinds of problems unions faced and the history of dealing with these problems, committee work, and legislative and legal relations[10]. While theirs was ideologically driven, and not as focused on the role of African American workers, the Workers' Schools were nevertheless an institution that served to bring Black workers into contact with White counterparts and developed their class consciousness during unionization drives. However, being a Communist-led organization would not land them a warm place in the public consciousness, and they would later be discontinued after a scare campaign by journalists like the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

A more prominent and longer-lasting political body that caught heat was the United States federal government, which by its entry into the Second World War had not yet achieved desegregation in the war industries at home, nor in the military. A report by the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice (later FEPC) from May 1943 outlines the following:

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[9] Pittsburgh Workers' School, *Statement of the Pittsburgh Workers School and Attached Letter*, December 31, 1938. Stored in University of Pittsburgh Thomas Blvd Archives, *Urban League of Pittsburgh Records, 1915–1963,* Box 3, Folder 156.

[10] Workers' Schools Executive Board, *Workers' Schools in Western Pennsylvania: 1937–1938 Term*, 1937. Stored in University of Pittsburgh Thomas Blvd Archives, *Urban League of Pittsburgh Records, 1915–1963,* Box 3, Folder 156.

> …there [was] an insignificant degree of utilization of Negro workers in these companies at the time of the Committee hearings, [and] that there [had] been relatively slight change in the ratio of Negro employment to total employment in these plants. It shows, moreover, that at the close of the year 1942, these plants had less than a third of the proportion of Negroes in their employ than might be expected on the basis of Negroes to the total population in these communities.[11]

Black workers protested across the nation, and most notably in St. Louis, that at a time when the United States desperately needed a greater workforce—as evidenced by the Bracero Program and women labor drives—the shortage was exacerbated by prejudices leveraged against them during war industry hiring. Reducing this prejudice was why the President's Committee was founded in the first place, and its efforts continued because the work thus far had proven insufficient. It would continue to bring Black workers into their rightful place as equal participants on the home front of the war, and eventually President Truman would succeed this with the desegregation of the military itself.

The out-of-union ways that Black workers asserted their place in the labor market were instrumental in defining the place of both these workers and the unions they were struggling to join. While they fought a noble fight to settle themselves as union workers from within, it was by the pressure they had exerted towards business, politics, and the community that they were able to show their importance to those who had resisted their presence in unions. The National Urban League helped them secure their position by building ties with business leaders at industrial dinners and securing education and interaction in their Negro Workers' Councils that would reduce prejudice in the workplace and among White union members. The Communist Party helped to secure further education on union procedures in line with their principles of workplace democracy as a right for all through their own alternative, the Workers' Schools

[11] Fair Employment Practice Committee, "Report of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice," May 1943. *Records of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Series A, Holdings of the Chicago Historical Society, Part 1: Records of the BSCP, 1925-1969*. Stored in folder 001548-022-0515 of the Module Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century: Organizational Records and Personal Papers, Part 1. https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001548-022-0515&accountid=14709.

programs. Eventually, pressure mounted against the federal government brought about equal hiring policies for the war industries as a means to address wartime labor shortages. Through it all, internal pressure was mounted against the AFL for incremental progress and the CIO stayed ahead of these changes to court Black workers for their own causes. By articulating with all of these factors and applying pressure from the maximum angles, Black labor developed its meaningful role in the public consciousness, serving as a predecessor to the Civil Rights Movement that would follow some decades later as in each African American workers fought for fair opportunities in jobs and public life as best fit their respective generations.

PAPER RUBRIC (100 points)

FORMATTING	Double-spaced, 12-point *Times New Roman* font, 1-inch margins. Proper heading. Proper title. Six to eight pages (double-spaced). Grading rubric included at the end of the paper, on a separate page.	10
CITATION	Student demonstrates mastery of Chicago Style citation. The student cites all books, articles, and primary sources according to the formatting specified for *footnotes* in the Chicago Manual of Style.	10
WRITING / GRAMMAR	This is a polished, professional paper. It is clear that the student carefully edited and revised this work. There are no basic grammatical errors, and it is free of typos. [I will deduct two points for every basic grammatical mistake or typo, up to a maximum of ten. Basic grammatical mistakes include incomplete sentences (e.g., sentence fragments), run-on sentences, and misuse of punctuation.]	10
INTRODUCTION	The introductory section begins with an anecdote that connects with the central themes of your work. It then discusses the scholarship on your chosen sub-field and establishes your position (i.e., thesis) within that scholarship.	15
KEY SUPPORTING EXAMPLES	The paragraphs in the paper's body provide examples (drawn from your primary source research) that both illustrate and strengthen your thesis. There is a clear link between each paragraph and a logical flow to the presentation. Each paragraph begins with a strong topic sentence. (A good topic sentence bridges the preceding and forthcoming paragraphs.)	10
NUANCE / COMPLEXITY	The student demonstrates a complex understanding of the historical topic featured in this paper. You may do this in a variety of ways, such as: explaining multiple causes for an event; examining change and continuity over time; qualifying or modifying an argument by considering alternative views or evidence.	10
SECONDARY SOURCES	The student read and mastered at least two scholarly articles on this topic. The student demonstrates this mastery in two ways: (1) by introducing the chosen articles and discussing their key findings/arguments, and (2) by using the information in these articles to further illuminate your chosen topic.	15
PRIMARY SOURCES	The student read and analyzed at least five historical documents (i.e., primary sources) related to this topic. These documents directly and clearly connected to your chosen topic. The student appropriately and effectively used key information from these sources to illuminate or discuss in greater detail key features of your topic.	15
CONCLUSION	Concluding paragraph summarizes your main points and connects your topic to course themes.	5
	Total Points	**/ 100**