

THE NATIONAL NEGRO CONGRESS: 1933-1940

by

Lincoln Rolling

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A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

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Few Americans were prepared for the devastating impact of the Great Depression. Black workers, because of their particularly vulnerable position in the economy, were especially hurt by the economic decline of the 1930's. Neither the administration of Herbert Hoover nor that of Franklin Roosevelt proved able or willing to attack the problems of poverty and unemployment in the Black community.

Two young, Black Harvard graduates, John P. Davis and Robert Weaver, created the Negro Industrial League to demand fair treatment of Black workers under the National Recovery Administration. Their efforts led a number of other organizations to join with the League to form the Joint Committee on National Recovery. Although the Joint Committee engaged in a vigorous public relations campaign attacking NRA discrimination against Black workers, its general lack of influence convinced many leaders in the Black community that a more powerful organization was necessary. In 1935 the Joint Committee and the Department of Social Science at Howard University sponsored a special conference to explore this need. The most important result of the conference was the formation

of the National Negro Congress.

Under the leadership of John P. Davis and A. Philip Randolph, the Congress initially intended to bring all Black improvement groups under one umbrella organization. They also planned to attack a broad range of issues facing the Black community. However, an ideological split developed between Davis and Randolph which eventually shattered the National Negro Congress in 1940. Randolph believed that the Congress should have pursued a program emphasizing Black unity and a broad, sometimes contradictory set of reforms. Davis, on the other hand, believed that the organization of Black workers into industrial unions would be far more appropriate in improving the living standards of the Black lower class. While Randolph emphasized racial solidarity, Davis called for an inter-racial class consciousness among all workers. Their views openly clashed at the 1940 convention of the Congress, and the majority of the delegates decided to support the class consciousness position of John P. Davis.

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## CHAPTER I

### BLACKS AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Few periods in American history have been as influential as the Great Depression of the 1930's. The prelude to the disaster, the stock market crash of October 1929, was a rude shock to the American people. Blissfully confident during the 1923-1929 Republican "new era" of economic prosperity, most Americans believed in Herbert Hoover's electoral prediction of "a chicken in every pot and two cars in every garage." Yet, scarcely a year after Hoover's election victory, the "new era" had become the "new nightmare," thrusting the United States into the worst depression of its history. For Black Americans, the Great Depression was especially disastrous, an economic cataclysm which threatened to destroy the very foundations of their lifestyles.

For Black workers, the Great Depression weakened their already marginal and economically insecure position. The relatively few jobs which had customarily been offered to Black workers suddenly became attractive to unemployed white workers. As the depression deepened, white displacement of Black workers became a major problem for the Black community. Several observers noted the trend. T. Arnold Hill, an employee of the National Urban League, reported that in the

South "colored janitors of white and Negro schools have been replaced by whites. Coal wagons on which a Negro would be employed to shovel the coal and a white man to drive, now make use of two whites, both of whom shovel."<sup>1</sup> He also noted that at "no time since slavery has his economic and social outlook seemed so discouraging. The present period of unemployment is sapping the foundation of Negro family life."<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the New York Times commented that in "the South white men are pushing him out of work," and advocated specific employment bureaus "to look after the special needs of Negroes."<sup>3</sup> Everywhere, observers were struck by the fact that whites no longer left domestic and service jobs to Blacks, but frequently invaded and attempted to dominate these fields. Pittsburgh Courier columnist J.A. Rogers, commenting on conditions in the South, remarked that in 1911 when he made his first trip to the South he was "very much struck by the seeming monopoly that the Black man had on all the humbler kinds of work." Returning in the midst of the depression, he was

1

T. Arnold Hill, "Briefs from the South," Opportunity, XI (February, 1933), 55.

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The New York Times, April 5, 1931.

3

The New York Times, May 8, 1931.

"equally struck by the change in the color of those men now holding these jobs. These despised occupations have become respectable. They are white men's jobs."<sup>4</sup> The National Urban League, in a 1931 pamphlet, declared that "there is abundant proof in reports from all sections of the country that many jobs Negroes once held are now being held by whites."<sup>5</sup>

White workers used a number of methods to displace Black workers. For instance, some cities passed municipal laws prohibiting Blacks from certain types of jobs. In West Palm Beach, Florida and Tulsa, Oklahoma, Black carpenters could work only in Black neighborhoods or on buildings to be inhabited by Blacks. Similarly, many North Carolina towns decreed that Black barbers had to confine their work to patrons who were Black. One Texas town refused to grant Blacks licenses that would have allowed them to sell garden produce at the local farmers' market.<sup>6</sup> More often, appeals to white "race" loyalty were used to displace Blacks. The

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The Pittsburgh Courier, August 22, 1936.

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Quoted in Raymond Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1970), p. 113; The New York Times, June 11, 1931.

6

Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 114.

best known example of the use of this appeal involved an organization known as the American Fascist Association and Order of Black Shirts. This group, particularly active in the Atlanta area, claimed a national membership of 21,000. Its daily newspaper, the Black Shirt, advocated sending urban Blacks back to the farm and the dismissal of Black workers by white businessmen. Between weekly parades, the Black Shirts visited white businessmen, often accompanied by unemployed whites, gathering support for their program.<sup>7</sup> Jesse O. Thomas, Southern Field Secretary for the National Urban League, reported in 1929 the existence of a similar organization in the Jacksonville, Florida area. Patterned closely after the Black Shirts, this group was headed by Billy Parker, former editor of an anti-Catholic tabloid entitled The Minutes. He was currently editing The Blue Shirt, a periodical declaring that white employers should dismiss Black workers and employ only Caucasians. He also took pains to warn whites against the obvious danger of patronizing "unhealthy, syphillis-ridden" Black barber shops.<sup>8</sup> Thomas went on to relate the following

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The New York Times, August 30, 1930; Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 115.

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Charles Rayford Lawrence, "Negro Organizations in Crisis: Depression, New Deal, World War II," (unpublished Ph.D dissertation, Columbia University, 1953), p. 125.

incident which involved a construction camp in Ringold, Georgia, employing twenty-five whites and fifty Blacks:

On May 27, 1929, a crude poster appeared near the camp signed "KKK" saying 'Nigger don't let the sun set on you here Saturday.' Thirty Negro workers left the job as soon as the sign was posted, which was accompanied by a strike on the part of the workers demanding that the Negro workers be discharged. The remaining twenty Negro workers were transported to a neighboring town and discharged by the following Saturday.<sup>9</sup>

In view of these appeals, many white employers were forced to dismiss their Black workers. In Richmond, Virginia the mayor attempted to limit municipal employment to whites and advised private employers to do the same. Similarly, in Columbia, South Carolina, Blacks were replaced by whites as maintenance workers, while at the University of Mississippi, Black laborers were dismissed and whites hired in their places. Northern areas also practiced displacement of Black workers, though perhaps not as extensively as the South. The evidence is clear that during the depression many Americans agreed that when it came to the allocation of jobs, whites should be granted preferential treatment.<sup>10</sup>

In the struggle to seize the employment positions of Black workers, whites occasionally resorted to outright murder.

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9

Ibid.

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Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 115.

For example, the battle among railroad firemen in the Southwestern Division of the Illinois Central Railroad was particularly intense. Prior to the depression the work of firemen was dirty and difficult; thus it was considered to be a "Negro job." Hardworking whites would not think of taking such a position. However, by the early 1930's, the work had become attractive to unemployed white workers. To remove Black employees, white workers first attempted to persuade them to sign over their bargaining rights to white union representatives. When that failed, whites resorted to murder and intimidation. A gang of white terrorists was formed and Black firemen were systematically attacked. George Mitchell and Horace Cayton noted that between September 7, 1931 and July 10, 1934, twenty-one Black railroad workers were killed,<sup>11</sup> wounded, or assaulted. In response, these workers began a loose organization to protect themselves, and at various times agents of the Department of Justice were called in to investigate the outbreaks of violence. Nevertheless, arrests were rare, and prosecutions and convictions were rarer still. Even in the few instances of convictions, sentences levied by judicial authorities were relatively mild. For Black

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Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell, Black Workers and the New Unions (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939), pp. 440-43.

workers, the Great Depression was a time of enormous tension and severe frustration because of the constant threat of job displacement.<sup>12</sup>

Some Black leaders, such as Walter White of the NAACP, believed that lynching was also a weapon in the white arsenal to displace Black workers. White noted in 1933 that the number of lynchings had more than tripled since 1932 and that the mobs often attacked stores owned by whites who employed Blacks.<sup>13</sup> It seems that the times were accurately reflected by a white observer who complained that "there are too many niggers and too many white people looking for the same job."<sup>14</sup>

The displacement of Black workers was not halted by the New Deal. Indeed, the decision of the National Recovery Administration in September 1933 to prohibit racial differentials in the payment of wages, while often evaded or ignored, nevertheless contributed to the problem of Black unemployment. Many employers hired Black workers only because Blacks generally

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Ibid., p. 444.

13

Walter White, A Man Called White (Bloomington, Indiana: The University of Indiana Press, 1948), p. 166; Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 116.

14

Quoted in Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 117.

were willing to work for less than what whites received. Consequently, when the various NRA codes became effective, employers often preferred to hire whites rather than pay equal wages to Blacks. For example, the Scripto Pencil Company of Atlanta warned Black workers in a message "To All Colored Employees" that 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 ..."<sup>15</sup> The Tri-State Manufacturing Company of Memphis took a more direct approach. The day before the NRA code went into effect, Tri-State fired fourteen Black workers who had been working forty-four hour weeks for \$4.50, and hired white workers to replace them at \$12.00 for a forty-<sup>16</sup> hour week.

More often, however, owners of marginal firms simply could not afford to pay equal wages because of their inefficient methods of production. These firms existed only as long as they had access to cheap Black labor. As a result of their competitive disadvantages with larger and more mechanized firms, they were either driven out of business or forced to

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Quoted in Philip S. Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1973 (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 201.

16

Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 118.

mechanize by the NRA codes. Either alternative often doomed Black workers to unemployment.

In light of the above problems, it is not surprising that unemployment among Blacks was greater than among whites. The general decline of the economy, combined with the pre-existing prejudice in the white community, created serious discrimination against Black workers. Table I indicates the extent of Black unemployment in nineteen of the nation's major cities during January 1931.

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Table I

CITY	PER CENT UNEMPLOYED			
	MALE		FEMALE	
	BLACK	WHITE	BLACK	WHITE
Boston	26.2	28.2	30.3	17.6
Buffalo	50.2	34.5	42.0	17.3
New York				
Bronx	24.6	21.0	18.5	16.7
Brooklyn	30.5	23.0	28.5	16.7
Manhattan	25.4	19.4	28.5	11.2
Philadelphia	42.4	27.3	41.0	20.8
Pittsburgh	46.0	30.2	50.8	15.9
Cleveland	52.5	33.5	55.1	17.2
Chicago	43.5	29.7	58.5	19.4
Detroit	60.2	32.4	75.0	17.4
St. Louis	40.2	23.4	47.9	15.0
Birmingham	36.0	18.2	30.6	14.8
New Orleans	36.2	19.2	46.2	13.4
Houston	36.4	18.1	46.2	13.4
Los Angeles	29.9	18.5	38.3	12.7

It is clear that Black workers were hardest hit by the depression in the large industrial centers. It is also important to note that the unemployment figures for Black women often equalled and sometimes exceeded those for Black men.

The percentage of Blacks on the relief rolls corresponds with the percentages of Blacks who were unemployed. The National Urban League published in 1931 its study How Unemployment Affects Negroes, and found that in urban areas Black families were from two to six times more likely than white families to be on relief. Table II illustrates that situation as it stood in March 1931.

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Table II

CITY	Per Cent of Negroes in the Pop- ulation.	Per Cent of Negroes in Total Relief Cases.
Akron, Ohio	4.5	25.0
Baltimore	17.0	34.0
Chicago	4.0	25.0
Columbus, Ohio	10.0	43.0
Dayton, Ohio	10.0	50.0
Little Rock, Ark.	20.0	65.0
New York	3.5	10.5
Philadelphia	7.0	35-40.0
Pittsburgh	8.0	44.0
St. Louis	9.0	60.0

Clearly, Black families were more likely to be on relief than

white families, yet these figures do not fully describe the extent of Black suffering. Relief during this period was in the hands of private and local government agencies which lacked uniform standards for dispensing assistance. Often these agencies discriminated against Blacks. Black families generally had to be much worse off than white families to be eligible for relief. Once they qualified, they were more likely to receive a smaller allotment than similar white families.<sup>19</sup> According to T. Arnold Hill, there was "abundant evidence that ... Negro workers are receiving scant consideration ... unless there is some definite planned effort ... the plight of the Negro ... will be wretched indeed."<sup>20</sup>

The Hoover administration proved itself inept at providing a "definite planned effort" for whites during the depression, much less for Blacks. Hoover's belief in "rugged individualism" compelled him to reject any thought of federal assistance to individual victims of the depression. In reply to critics of his position, Hoover maintained that "it is not the function of government to relieve individuals of their responsibilities to their neighbors, or to relieve private institutions of their important responsibilities to the

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Sterner, The Negro's Share, p. 233.

20

The New York Times, April 5, 1931.

public ..."<sup>21</sup> Consequently, during the height of the depression, federal relief was restricted to big business and large banks through such agencies as the National Credit Corporation and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, while individual Americans were forced to rely on private agencies and local governments for their relief needs.

Black people found it difficult to applaud Hoover's policy on federal relief. Even before the dimensions of the Black dilemma became clear, large segments of the Black community doubted Hoover's commitment to equality. Their fears were first aroused when at the 1928 Republican convention Hoover fought to have "lily-white" delegations from the South recognized rather than those that were integrated. After his election, Hoover failed to even mention Blacks in his inaugural address. Furthermore, as Black leader W.E.B. DuBois noted, Hoover appointed fewer Blacks to important positions<sup>22</sup> than any President since Andrew Johnson. Having established a pattern, Hoover further angered Blacks by his callous treatment of Black Gold Star mothers and widows. The Gold Star mothers and widows were survivors of American servicemen

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21

The New York Times, August 12, 1932.

22

Barbara Joyce Ross, J.E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP, 1911-1939 (New York: Atheneum, 1972), p. 147.

who had been interred in Europe during World War I. A law signed by Calvin Coolidge shortly before Hoover became President provided that these Gold Star women would be allowed at government expense to visit the graves of their relatives. According to the measure, they were to be given first-class accommodations on government-owned vessels. As it developed, however, the Hoover administration segregated Black women and forced them into second-class accommodations. Many Black women were so incensed that they refused to take the trip, while the image of the Hoover administration deteriorated another degree in the Black community.

The furor created by the Gold Star incident was nothing compared to the reaction of Blacks to Hoover's unsuccessful attempt to place Judge John T. Parker, a "lily-white" Southern Republican, on the Supreme Court. Parker's nomination "permanently alienated Negroes" from Hoover and the Republican Party, because most Blacks believed Parker was opposed to their best interests. Black people naturally looked askance at a Supreme Court nominee who publicly favored the poll tax,

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23

Richard B. Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America From McKinley to Hoover, 1896-1933 (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1973), pp. 246-48.

24

White, A Man Called White, p. 114.

the literacy test, and the grandfather clause. Worse still, Parker was on record as saying that as far as he was concerned, "The participation of the Negro in politics is a source of evil and danger."<sup>25</sup> Yet, no amount of Black protest could persuade Hoover to withdraw the nomination. Fortunately, the nomination was defeated in Congress due to the pressure of a Black-labor coalition, but the damage to Hoover's image in the Black community had been done.<sup>26</sup>

The lack of sensitivity that seemed to characterize Hoover's attitude toward Blacks was again reflected by his lackadaisical approach to the special problem of Blacks during the depression. In spite of overwhelming evidence provided by the Urban League that Blacks were suffering disproportionately from the depression, Hoover refused to implement any new programs in their behalf. Although T. Arnold Hill was allowed to serve as a liaison officer between Hoover's Emergency Committee for Employment and the Black community,<sup>27</sup> his influence on presidential policy was minimal. For in-

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Quoted in White, A Man Called White, p. 105.

26

Gilbert Ware, "Lobbying as a Means of Protest: The NAACP as an Agent of Equality," Journal of Negro Education, XXXIII (Spring, 1964), 103-07.

27

Nancy Joan Weiss, The National Urban League 1910-1940 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 238.

stance, when Hill urged that the President call a White House meeting with Black leaders to discuss the problem of unemployment and relief, his request was denied.<sup>28</sup> It appears that Hoover's only positive act toward Blacks was his request for a report in 1930 on the economic status of Black Americans,<sup>29</sup> but again nothing came of the report.

As a result of his laxity, Hoover was attacked bitterly in the Black community. Joel Spingarn, President of the NAACP, was invited by Hoover to serve as a representative on the Presidential Conference on Hoarding, but he ridiculed the affair as silly because Blacks had nothing to hoard. He likened the Conference to offering a starving man lectures on the dangers of extravagance and castigated the Hoover administration for not doing enough to alleviate the Black man's plight.<sup>30</sup> Walter White, also of the NAACP, described Hoover as a man who failed to demonstrate "in any fashion that he regarded Negroes as citizens and human beings."<sup>31</sup> Even con-

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28

Lester Brooks and Guichard Parris, Blacks in the City (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 219.

29

Ibid., p. 217.

30

Ross, J.E. Spingarn, p. 148.

31

White, A Man Called White, p. 101.

servative Black spokesman Kelly Miller complained that "Hoover has a national program, but no Negro policy.... During his whole public career he has never uttered one word concerning the Negro as a separate entity; nor engaged to deal with his separate problem as such."<sup>32</sup> The Chicago Defender, long a supporter of the Republican Party, reluctantly reported that the "Republican Party is no longer the party of the people but is the party of the white people."<sup>33</sup> Throughout most of Black America, Hoover was seen as "The Man of the Lily White House"<sup>34</sup> who cared little for Black people.

The Hoover years signaled a turning point for Black America. The increasing emphasis Republicans had placed on developing their strength in the South, coupled with Hoover's insensitivity toward Blacks, steadily undermined the traditional support of Blacks for Republicans. The "Party of Lincoln" in the eyes of many Blacks no longer seemed concerned with improving their condition. Black people faced widespread

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32

The New York Times, October 6, 1929; Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, p. 234.

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Quoted in Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, p. 238.

34

White, A Man Called White, p. 104; Sherman, The Republican Party and Black America, p. 252.

unemployment and inadequate relief, and sought a new alliance. Enraged by the antics of the Republicans and aware of their growing political power, Black people turned to Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal.

## CHAPTER II

### THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL RECOVERY

Black poet Langston Hughes, remembering the depression in his autobiography The Big Sea, commented, "The depression brought everybody down a peg or two. And the Negroes had but <sup>1</sup> few pegs to fall." Franklin D. Roosevelt's defeat of Herbert Hoover in the election of 1932 did little to halt the Black descent. Roosevelt's election victory was based largely on his promise to provide a "new deal" for the American people, but as so often happens with American reform movements, the "new deal" did not really include Blacks. Despite promises for aid to the hungry, jobs for the unemployed, and profits for the business community, the New Deal discriminated against Black Americans. Out of that discrimination came the National Negro Congress.

Typically, American presidents have interpreted large election victories as "mandates" from the people, and just as typically, these mandates have often been detrimental to Black people. Roosevelt was typical in both instances. During his inaugural address, he maintained that his "mandate" was a call from the American people for "direct, vigorous action"

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Quoted in Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, p. 188.

in attacking the depression. Responding to the mandate, the New Dealers feverishly created the famous "alphabet" agencies to relieve suffering, reform traditional economic abuses, and restore the economy to its pre-1929 levels. Perhaps the most important agency in the early New Deal was the National Recovery Administration.<sup>2</sup>

When pressed to explain the causes of the depression, New Dealers often replied that underconsumption or a lack of demand lay at the heart of the problem. They pointed out that during the 1920's, because of advances in business technology and organization, the nation's productive capacity increased greatly. During the same period, however, wages and salaries remained relatively stable. The result was a very poor distribution of income. University of Chicago economist Paul Douglas, for example, estimated that in 1933 eleven million American families earned less than the minimum amount necessary to support average standards of health and decency.<sup>3</sup> A similar study demonstrated that the nation's richest 631,000 families received a larger share of the national income than the 16,000,000

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Franklin D. Roosevelt, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, ed. by Samuel Rosenman, II (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 15.

3

Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 84.

families at the bottom of the economic ladder. Consequently, New Dealers reasoned that large numbers of Americans simply could not afford to help the country consume its ever-increasing output of industrial goods. The lack of demand for consumer goods forced manufacturers to curtail production and to lay off workers. These newly unemployed workers could no longer afford to buy goods, causing further drops in purchasing power and production. It was this vicious cycle which threatened the entire economy.

New Dealers believed that increasing the purchasing power of workers was one way to shatter that vicious cycle of declining demand, production, and employment. Eventually, increased demand, they believed, would stimulate manufacturers to expand production, employ more workers, increase consumption, and help end the Great Depression. This was the philosophy implicit in the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). As Roosevelt explained in his third "fireside chat" to the country, the United States needed "general increases in wages and shortening of hours sufficient to enable industry to pay its own workers enough to let those workers buy and use the things that their labor produce."<sup>5</sup> The NIRA became law on

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Ibid.

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Roosevelt, The Public Papers, II, p. 256.

June 16, 1933 and President Roosevelt selected Hugh Johnson<sup>6</sup> to head the National Recovery Administration (NRA).

Generally, the NRA decided it could achieve its goals through four major programs: 1) reducing working hours to provide more work for all laborers; 2) raising the wages of low-paid workers; 3) encouraging collective bargaining between employers and employees; and 4) allowing industries to eliminate unfair competition and to set prices collectively. In the interest of the recovery effort, employers were to raise wages and grant labor the right to organize unions. The government in return agreed to suspend the Sherman Anti-Trust Act so that industry could coordinate and combine its resources.<sup>7</sup>

But the NRA, with its goal of "a reasonable profit to industry and living wages for labor,"<sup>8</sup> proved to be an instrument of the nation's most powerful manufacturers. More often than not the various NRA "codes" were formulated by the largest concerns in a given field to the benefit of themselves and to the detriment of their smaller competitors. For instance, those firms not blessed with the latest technology and depen-

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<sup>6</sup>  
Ibid., pp. 246-47.

<sup>7</sup>  
Cayton and Mitchell, Black Workers, p. 90.

<sup>8</sup>  
Roosevelt, The Public Papers, II, pp. 246-47.

dent on cheap labor often discovered that the NRA literally drove them out of business. Also, labor was often not represented fully among the code makers. Indeed, among the 734 various types of codes formulated, only 37 contained direct representation from workers. Amazingly, only three codes<sup>9</sup> were developed with voting members speaking for consumers.

As other historians have pointed out, code making was essentially a bargaining process between big business and organized labor, with a deputy administrator of the NRA acting as a referee. In accord with its purchasing power theory, the NRA required that every code allow collective bargaining, provide for shorter hours, and increase wages to the point that workers earned at least as much as they had before hours were shortened. In return for these concessions, the NRA allowed industry to write into the code "fair trade practices." These practices were, in the words of one observer, designed to<sup>10</sup> "eliminate competition and establish business cartels." To compound the problem, most deputy administrators of the NRA were drawn from the industrial or military sector and generally

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Ibid.

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Ellis Hawley, The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 57.

shared business views. Thus, NRA code making was little more than "a bargain between business leaders on the one hand and businessmen in the guise of government officials on the other."<sup>11</sup> In sum, the NRA provided ample benefits to the powerful, but meager rewards to the weak and unorganized. Unfortunately, Black people in general and Black workers in particular were among the weak and disorganized during the 1930's.

Worse still for the Black people of the United States, the machinery of the NRA was conceived without regard to the Black community. The major Black improvement organizations, the NAACP and the National Urban League, found themselves unprepared to represent Black interests before the code authorities. For instance, the NAACP, traditionally geared to the fight for civil rights, was not able to reorient its efforts soon enough to aid Black workers. Similarly, the National Urban League, pressed for funds, could not represent Blacks before the National Recovery Administration. Indeed, when invited by Dr. Gustan Peck, an executive of the NRA's labor advisory board to cooperate with his office on the problems of Black workers, the League declined because of its lack of funds.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, Black people needed an agency in Washington

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<sup>11</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>  
Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 110.

that could represent their case before the NRA. That need was recognized by John P. Davis and Robert Weaver, who in 1933 began appearing before the earliest code hearings demanding fair treatment for Blacks. Both Davis and Weaver were Harvard graduates, in law and economics respectively, and both were residents of Washington, D.C. They called their "largely paper organization" the Negro Industrial League and have been described as having "neither money, organizational backing, nor experience," but possessing "high intelligence, excellent education, and the faculty for making themselves seem ubiquitous."<sup>13</sup>

The Negro Industrial League charged itself in June of 1933 with the task of "securing ... equal treatment of Negroes in industrial codes of fair competition."<sup>14</sup> They immediately sought allies among established Black improvement organizations. Their efforts were rewarded in September 1933 when, through the assistance of Walter White of the NAACP and George Edmund Haynes of the Race Relations Department of the Federal Council of Churches, fifteen other organizations joined with

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Lawrence, "Negro Organizations in Crisis," p. 249.

14

U.S. Congress, Senate, Alleged Communistic Activities at Howard University, May 18, 19, and 20, 1935, no. 217, 74th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1935, p. 39.

the Negro Industrial League to form the Joint Committee on National Recovery. Rather than narrowly concentrating on industrial codes of fair competition, the Joint Committee expanded on the promise of the Negro Industrial League and functioned as an ad-hoc lobby for Black equality in all phases<sup>15</sup> of the New Deal.

The membership of the Joint Committee grew to over twenty-four organizations by 1935 and included four Black denominational groups, five church auxiliaries, three women's organizations, five professional and technical associations, four Greek letter fraternities and sororities, the Elks, and the NAACP. The National Urban League refused to join, perhaps because it hoped to open its own office in Washington, D.C., or perhaps because it feared competition for scarce funds from another organization.<sup>16</sup> Theoretically, the expenses of the Joint Committee were to be shouldered on a pro-rata basis, but as Davis himself ruefully observed, most of the member organizations were themselves in financial difficulties and hence the more financially sound members were forced to bear a larger share of the burden. Thus, the NAACP contributed

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Lawrence, "Negro Organizations in Crisis," p. 249.

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Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 159.

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the major share of the Committee's operating fund. Similarly, as in the case of financial support, the impressive list of member organizations is not indicative of the number of people who actually staffed the Joint Committee. In fact, after Robert Weaver resigned to join the Department of the Interior, the staff usually consisted of Davis and a technical advisor, Rose M. Coe. They worked with a budget of less than \$5,000 per year.

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These staff and funding handicaps make even more impressive the wide range of activities of the Joint Committee. First, the Committee monitored the progress of the NRA, studying the hundreds of announcements, press releases, proposed codes, and the executive and administrative orders which daily were issued by the NRA. Having completed this first phase, the Committee then judged those codes which seemed to discriminate against Blacks in terms of "the number of Negro workers affected, the seriousness of the differential treatment, and the availability of factual material upon which to

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U.S. Congress, Senate, Alleged Communistic Activities, p. 48.

18

Lawrence, "Negro Organizations in Crisis," p. 250.

19

U.S. Congress, Senate, Alleged Communistic Activities, p. 41.

build a case." Finally, according to Davis,

Those judged most important in these terms are set down for public appearance. Those next in importance are set down for written briefs and conferences with government officials. The others are given such treatment as possible. Sometimes letters of protest will be written concerning them. Sometimes the deputy administrator in charge of the code will be phoned. Sometimes nothing is done.<sup>21</sup>

Appearing at public code hearings was a long, laborious process for the Committee. Often, just the compilation of facts on the industry concerned and its Black workers required days of study. Afterwards, an analysis of the labor provisions of the proposed code and a Committee strategy conference were necessary. Publicity had to be secured, and conferences between labor advisors, government officials, and pro-labor representatives were also necessary. Finally, public presentation of the Committee's findings and recommendations had to be made, which were sometimes followed by more conferences and interviews with various officials. Written briefs required the same amount of work as public appearances, but the public presentation of the Committee's findings was not necessary. In the case of protest letters, the primary emphasis was placed on the compilation of relevant facts concerning the industry

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Ibid.

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Ibid.

and the effect of the proposed code on Black workers. Davis surveyed the Committee's record in February of 1934 and reported that his organization had participated in the formulation of forty-eight codes. By 1935, the year the Supreme Court declared the NRA unconstitutional, that number had more<sup>22</sup> than doubled.

To many observers, however, the efforts of the Joint Committee seemed to provide very few benefits for Black workers. These critics noted that while the Committee had succeeded in thwarting the request of Southerners for racial wage differentials, the NRA had nonetheless allowed employers to pay Black workers lower wages through occupational and geo-<sup>23</sup>graphical differentials.

Aware of these criticisms, Davis and his supporters were troubled. For instance, the code established for the cotton textile industry set a minimum wage of twelve dollars a week for the South and thirteen dollars a week for the North, with a maximum of forty hours a week. Additionally, certain occupations were exempt from code protection. On the surface, as Davis pointed out, nothing indicated discrimination against

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Ibid.; Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 112.

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Cayton and Mitchell, Black Workers, p. 102.

Black workers, but closer examination revealed that of 14,000 Blacks employed in the industry, 10,000 fell within the groups denied the benefits of the code. For these workers, according to Davis, "the NRA meant increases of from 10 to 40 percent in the cost of everything they had to buy, without a single penny in increased wages, without a single hour subtracted from their working period."<sup>24</sup> No doubt Davis exaggerated the extent of the inflation caused by New Deal policies, yet such occupational differentials did discriminate against Black workers.

Meanwhile, in the lumber industry, a different type of differential was employed. Most lumber workers in the South were Black, while in the North and West they were white. Thus, a Southern differential was established. In the South, wages were set at twenty-three cents an hour, while in other sections of the country, the wage was set at forty cents an hour. For Black workers, the result was a loss in pay totaling more than \$40,000,000.<sup>25</sup> The steel industry established a geographical differential while other industries resorted to occupational differentials, all of which received government

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John P. Davis, "What Price National Recovery," Crisis, XL (December, 1933), 271.

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Ibid., pp. 271-72.

approval. Davis was especially vocal in his condemnation of  
<sup>26</sup>  
 laundry, shipping, hotel, and restaurant trades. Yet, his  
 brilliant, persistent advocacy was no match for the organized  
 power of bug business. In most instances, he recognized that  
 "the codes as approved contained the same provisions against  
<sup>27</sup>  
 which we fought." The Committee's constant criticism none-  
 theless kept the plight of Black workers before governmental  
 authorities, and by following a policy of Black organizational  
 unity in defense of Black workers, the Committee helped lay  
<sup>28</sup>  
 the foundation for more effective protests later.

Although much of the Joint Committee's time was consumed  
 by the code making process, it was not oblivious to other as-  
 pects of the New Deal. For instance, the activities of the  
 Federal Emergency Relief Administration were of great concern  
 to Davis. He and other members of the Joint Committee fre-  
 quently negotiated with government officials for the creation  
 of adult education classes, the acquisition of government  
 markets for Black farmers in the Surplus Relief Corporation,

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The New York Times, March 1, 1934.

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U.S. Congress, Senate, Alleged Communistic Activities,  
 p. 41.

28

Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 112.

and the placement of Black doctors on the rolls of those who treated indigent Black families. Also the Committee pressured the government for a statistical breakdown on unemployment figures by race. Here too success was limited. Davis offered this assessment:

Some Negro doctors have been placed on county relief rolls of medical practitioners. A number of adult education classes for Negro workers have been started. Nothing has been done to make possible some benefit to Negro farmers from the large purchases of the Surplus Relief Corporation. Statistics of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration are now broken down in terms of race.<sup>29</sup>

With regard to the Civil Works Administration, the Public Works Administration, and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Joint Committee fought with varying degrees of success against discrimination on the basis of race. For instance, Davis received "almost daily" field reports that indicated local Civil Works Administration supervisors abused their authority by hiring whites while refusing to employ Blacks. Yet, as Davis noted, there was little the Committee could do, aside from reporting such abuses to the "proper officials."<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the Committee's association with the

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U.S. Congress, Senate, Alleged Communistic Activities, p. 43.

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Ibid.

Agricultural Adjustment Administration was marred by a lack of effectiveness. Upon investigation in the spring of 1934, Davis found that Black tenant farmers in the South were not receiving their fair share of government relief funds; instead, these funds were often pocketed by white landlords and "credited" to the account of their tenants. To correct this situation, Davis recommended in a conference with AAA administrators that government subsidies be paid directly to the tenants, rather than landlords. Apparently, the recommendation was ignored. The same fate befell proposals that Blacks be hired by the Department of Agriculture as advisors on the special problems of Black farmers. The Committee's relationship with the Public Works Administration, however, was more fruitful. Aside from prohibiting wage discrimination on PWA projects, the PWA also hired Black architects, engineers, and skilled workers on projects such as low-cost housing, schools, and hospitals erected to aid the Black community.<sup>31</sup>

One final area of concern to the Joint Committee was that of public relations. Davis believed that the Committee, through its public relations programs, "made Negroes everywhere know that there is something to be aware of in the recovery pro-

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 44; Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 41.

gram."<sup>32</sup> In addition to its many press releases and radio broadcasts, the Committee conducted seven full scale research projects, and provided information on the New Deal to member organizations as well as to individual Black workers.<sup>33</sup>

Evaluating the efforts of the Joint Committee against the evils of the New Deal is difficult. The organizations supporting the Committee were weak and disorganized; this fact and the Committee's lack of funds militated against its effectiveness. Certainly, Davis and his associates failed in their attempt at assuring that "real dollars find their way into the pockets of jobless Negro men and women."<sup>34</sup> The Committee did frustrate Southern efforts to have wage differentials based solely on race given federal sanction, but governmental approval was given to geographical and occupational differentials, both of which discriminated against Black workers. Efforts by the Committee to correct the situation failed because the industrialists were better organized and possessed unlimited financial resources. Similarly, the banning of discrimination in public works projects was a victory, but it

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<sup>32</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Alleged Communistic Activities, p. 45.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Davis, "What Price National Recovery," p. 272.

was marred by evasion at the local level. Perhaps Walter White of the NAACP offered the best assessment when he declared that the Joint Committee had done an enormous amount of work,

under terrific handicaps as to finance, human endurance, facilities for getting the facts, ... we cannot always measure effectiveness by things gained; we must also measure results by considering evils which have been prevented. Consider what might have been the Negroes' plight had the Joint Committee not been in existence.<sup>35</sup>

White's praise of John P. Davis and the Joint Committee notwithstanding, the NAACP severed its connection with the Joint Committee in June 1935. The ostensible reason for the decision was that the NAACP's own budget was being pressed and the organization could no longer afford contributions to the Joint Committee. But factors other than finance may have influenced Walter White's decision. For instance, as in the case of the leadership of the National Urban League, White realized that the Joint Committee represented a threat to the NAACP in terms of securing scarce philanthropic funds. In the eyes of many members of the NAACP, a strong Joint Committee might well replace the Association, especially in the economic field. Another reason for the recommendation and the one most often alluded to by White was his personal distrust of Davis and the fear that the Committee's leaders might be a little

too "pink."<sup>36</sup> White and other leaders of the NAACP looked askance at Davis's radical nature. They noted that Davis had been a member of the left-wing International Labor Defense organization and questioned whether he could successfully work within the limits of a relatively conservative group like the NAACP. Mary White Ovington, an Association founder and board member, remarked that Davis "has seen the absurdity of the present Social Welfare method of relieving labor and he knows something drastic must be done. The others are playing with radicalism, but not he."<sup>37</sup> Thus, the NAACP in November 1935 accepted White's recommendation and withdrew its funds from the Joint Committee, nearly bankrupting the young organization.

The termination of funds from the NAACP for the work of the Joint Committee firmly convinced Davis and dissident elements within the Association that a new organization, more closely attuned to the needs of the masses in the Black communities, was necessary. Since 1933, at least, a growing number of young Black intellectuals had been critical of the NAACP's refusal to attack economic problems vigorously. For instance, delegates to a second Amenia conference held at the country estate of Joel Spingarn, President of the NAACP in

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36

Ibid., p. 334.

37

Ibid.

1933, all agreed that the Association failed to attack economic problems, and these were the problems they considered primary.<sup>38</sup>

In another instance, Abram Harris, board member of the Association and closely tied to those critical of the group, issued a report in 1934 recommending that the Association place more emphasis on economic problems, mass action, and decentralization.<sup>39</sup>

But the NAACP, gripped by organizational inertia, continued its policies of centralized control and emphasis on struggles for civil rights, thus avoiding major changes and preparing the way for the creation of the National Negro Congress.

While the underlying sentiments for a National Negro Congress already existed, it was through the efforts of Davis and his supporters that the idea became a reality. Reeling under the impact of the NAACP's termination of funds, the Joint Committee co-sponsored in 1935 a conference at Howard University on "The Position of the Negro in Our Economic Crisis." Ralph Bunche, chairman of the Howard University Department of Political Science, assisted Davis in the planning of the conference. The meeting featured a number of prom-

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W.E.B. DuBois, "Youth and Age at Amenia," Crisis, XL (October, 1933), 226-27.

39

Ross, J.E. Spingarn, p. 145.

inent Black leaders, New Deal officials, and a few white radicals. The Black participants at the conference generally agreed

that as far as the Negro is concerned, the New Deal ... generally has availed him little either because of its underlying philosophy or because its administration has been delegated to local officials who reflect the unenlightened mores of their respective communities.<sup>40</sup>

John P. Davis surveyed the problem of Blacks under the New Deal and found them numerous as well as complex. T. Arnold Hill discussed the "Plight of the Negro Industrial Worker," finding it deplorable. Scholars such as E. Franklin Frazier, W.E.B. DuBois, and Abram Harris also offered penetrating criticisms of the New Deal.<sup>41</sup>

At the conference government officials attempted to defend the New Deal against these critics. A. Howard Meyers, director of the Labor Advisory Board, pointed out that "the New Deal inherited the Negro Problem" and therefore that explains "to a certain extent ... the ineffectiveness of the NRA."<sup>42</sup> He further explained that what the Black workers

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"The National Conference on the Economic Crisis and the Negro," The Journal of Negro Education, V (January, 1936), 1.

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U.S. Congress, Senate, Alleged Communistic Activities, pp. 24-25; Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 355.

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A. Howard Meyer, "The Negro Worker Under the NRA," The Journal of Negro Education, V (January, 1936), 48-49.

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needed most was organization. Another government official was J. Phillip Campbell of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. After offering his weak defense of the New Deal, Campbell complained that the conference "was held merely for the purpose of attacking the New Deal."<sup>44</sup> Other government officials present were Robert K. Strauss of the Resettlement Administration and Nels Anderson of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration.

The final session of the three day conference was the most controversial. The topic of the session was the way out for Blacks, and the featured speakers were Norman Thomas of the Socialist Party, James W. Ford of the Communist Party, and Ernest McKinney of the American Labor Party. The Socialist and Communist Parties had appealed for Black support throughout the depression. In fact, the Communists directed more of their resources toward the Black community than to any other single sector of American society. The American Labor Party, on the other hand, was a relatively new voice in Black America. All three speakers advocated a basic restructuring of American society, which was interpreted by some observers as a call for revolution. But the attitude of most of the conferees toward

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Ibid.

44

U.S. Congress, Senate, Alleged Communistic Activities, p. 23.

the three radicals was probably best expressed by W.E.B. DuBois who, referring to the Communists specifically and those violently inclined generally, declared:

The Communists of America have become dogmatic exponents of the inspired word of Karl Marx as they read it. They believe, apparently, in immediate violent and bloody revolution and they are willing to try any and all means of raising hell anywhere under any circumstances. This is a silly program even for white men, for American colored men it is suicide.<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, the radical nature of these advocates so upset conservative Blacks, such as Kelly Miller that they demanded an investigation of the conference. They feared that the conference served to lead Blacks to Communism, and complained that at the conference, "the New Deal was criticized, denounced, and condemned. Nothing good was found in it."<sup>46</sup>

Miller and his friends, however, missed the point. What emerged from the conference was not the ideology of Communism but rather the crystallization of the need for an organization to fight for all Black people, not just for the middle-class elite. This need led several participants in the conference, including Ralph Bunche, A. Philip Randolph, and John P. Davis,

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W.E.B. DuBois, "Social Planning for the Negro: Past, Present, and Future," The Journal of Negro Education, V (January, 1936), 50.

46

Quoted in Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 356.

to meet immediately afterwards and issue a call for a National Negro Congress. Their campaign began with the publication of a pamphlet entitled "Let Us Build a National Negro Congress," which outlined their objectives, and continued with a nationwide tour by Davis to rally support for the group. Meanwhile, Bunche contacted Black leaders and secured the support of many of them. Their efforts culminated successfully on February 14, 1936 when the first National Negro Congress convened in Chicago.<sup>47</sup>

### CHAPTER III

#### THE ORIGINS OF THE NATIONAL NEGRO CONGRESS

Racial unity has always been an attractive but elusive goal for Blacks in America. Indeed, perhaps the most persistent cry in the Black community from the days of slavery to the present has been the idea of Black solidarity. David Walker, for example, in an address to the General Colored Association in Boston in 1818, charged the organization with "the task of uniting Blacks" and forming "a general body to protect, aid, and assist each other to the utmost of our power ..."<sup>1</sup> Walker advocated a form of Black unity or nationalism, based on racial solidarity. He reasoned that the conditions peculiar to Blacks in America were the result of their common racial heritage, and thus were best attacked in a unified fashion. As historians John Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick maintain, there are many forms of Black nationalism, but that based on the concept of racial solidarity is the least complex. For these historians, nationalism based on racial solidarity generally has no ideological or programmatic implications beyond the decision for Black people to

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David Walker, "To Unite the Colored People," in Black Nationalism in America, ed. John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 30-31.

organize themselves on the basis of their color and oppressed  
<sup>2</sup>  
 conditions.

The National Negro Congress, during its short life, exemplified this characteristic. Attempts within the organization to develop a comprehensive and coherent program that would aid the Black working class as well as upper and middle class Blacks were attacked because they hindered the development of "Black unity," and strayed from the goal of a "simple minimum program." The failure of certain leaders in the Congress to realize that the Black community was not monolithic, but rather a diverse grouping of interests bound more by their particular interests than their common racial heritage spelled the doom of the organization.

In a pamphlet entitled "Let Us Build a National Negro Congress," the leaders of the organization heavily stressed the theme of racial solidarity, calling attention to an impressive array of problems confronting Black people. These problems ranged from the plight of unorganized Black domestics to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. A. Philip Randolph, the prominent Black labor leader, discussed the potentialities of the Congress and declared:

On every fundamental problem a ringing and mili-

tant declaration of policy could be promulgated by such a Congress and since it would represent the collective expression and will of millions of Negroes embraced in their various organizations, government nor industry could view it with indifference and unconcern.<sup>3</sup>

As conceived by its leadership, the Congress was to be "a federation of forward thinking organizations" dedicated to the advancement of Black people.<sup>4</sup> The organizers of the Congress also pledged to refrain from duplicating the work of any existing group. Eventually, more than 250 well known Black leaders endorsed the Congress. Among these leaders were Lester Granger, organizer of the National Urban League's workers' councils; Elmer Carter, also of the National Urban League; Alan Locke, advocate of the "New Negro Movement;" and Ralph Bunche, one of the members of the organizing committee of the Congress as well as a professor of social science at Howard University. Others endorsing the Congress were Communist Party member James W. Ford; Black churchmen, Bishops James A. Bray, R.A. Carter, and W.J. Walls; and popular Black poet Langston Hughes. These men represented a broad cross-section of Black leadership and signified the success of the effort to make the Congress responsive to all elements of the Black community

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Quoted in Cayton and Mitchell, Black Workers, p. 416.

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National Negro Congress, Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress (Washington, D.C., 1936), p. 4.

in America.

The first National Negro Congress convened in Chicago on February 14, 1936, amid charges of "radicalism" from the white community and conservative Blacks. Four general sessions had been planned, but the failure of Chicago Mayor Edward J. Kelley and Chicago Defender editor Robert S. Abbott to appear and give official sanction to the proceedings caused the cancellation of the first session. The Chicago Police Department's "red squad" threatened to close the Congress because it was a "radical organization meeting for the purpose of spreading a subversive doctrine."<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, a number of Chicago's Black leaders intervened, narrowly averting a premature closing of the Congress.

The interests represented at the Congress were as diverse as those who signed the original call. According to the proceedings of the group, 817 delegates representing 585 organizations from twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia attended. Several hundred visitors and official observers were also present. Estimates of non-affiliated individuals attending the three general sessions of the Congress which

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Lawrence S. Wittner, "The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment," American Quarterly, XXII (Winter, 1970), 884.

Quoted in Cayton and Mitchell, Black Workers, p. 417.

were open to the public ranged from 5,000 to 8,000.<sup>7</sup>

The broad outline of the widely varied interests of the sponsors of the Congress was presented in a keynote address by A. Philip Randolph. Randolph opened the Congress by declaring that "black America is a victim of both class and race prejudice."<sup>8</sup> For Randolph, the Black community was confronted with such problems as relief cutbacks, unemployment, discrimination,<sup>9</sup> and Mussolini's attack on Ethiopia. He also called for a heightened struggle by Black and white workers against<sup>10</sup> "the exploitation of the employers."

To meet these problems, Randolph suggested several tactical approaches. Foremost in his mind was the development of "industrial and craft unions with the emphasis on the former." According to Randolph, industrial unions offered the most hope because modern business consisted of giant trust and holding companies with which craft unions could not compete. He also objected to the discrimination against Black workers in the

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National Negro Congress, Official Proceedings, p. 41.

8

Ibid., p. 8.

9

Ibid., p. 11.

10

Ibid.

the craft unions. Secondly, Randolph advocated the development of an independent working class party. He believed the party should be composed of farmer and labor political organizations. The old Democratic and Republican parties, he complained, were bankrupt in "principles, courage, and vision." In his view, they were "committees of Wall Street which could no more protect or advance the interest of workers than can a sewing machine grind corn."<sup>11</sup>

On the question of Black civil rights, Randolph, while praising the efforts of the NAACP and the International Labor Defense Committee, argued that both needed a broadened mass base, which he believed could be accomplished through the united front. Randolph defined the united front as:

The formal organization and coordinating of the various Negro groups, church, fraternal, civil, trade union, farmer, professional, college and what not ... for a common attack upon the forces of reaction.<sup>12</sup>

Randolph also maintained that the united front strategy should be executed through the methods of mass demonstrations, such as picketing, boycotting, mass protest, and the mass distribution of propaganda literature. He also called for any appro-

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Ibid., p. 10.

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Ibid.

priate action through the courts. Finally, Randolph stressed that "the Negro people should not place their problems for solution down at the feet of sympathetic white allies; the salvation of the Negro, like the workers, must come from within."<sup>13</sup>

To a large degree Randolph's speech mirrored the ambivalence and confusion that was to spell the doom of the Congress. On the one hand, he called for a powerful Black-white labor alliance, which he believed afforded a major means of uplift for Black workers. Yet, on the other hand, he demanded total Black unity on all fronts. Apparently, Randolph failed to realize that not all Blacks would rally to the cause of working class unity. For non-working class Blacks, such a call had very limited appeal. The issues most important to upper class and middle class Black people were not primarily economic, but rather revolved around the problems of civil rights. For instance, the NAACP, composed largely of middle and upper class elements in the Black community, found it difficult in spite of a great deal of criticism to reorient its efforts from civil rights to the economic plight of Blacks during this period. Another organization, the National Urban League, found itself similarly paralyzed. Although both groups verbally committed themselves to the fight against economic exploitation, the

record indicates that both failed to commit their admittedly  
<sup>14</sup>  
 limited resources to action. Hence, it can be noted from  
 the outset that the future of the National Negro Congress was  
 a question of emphasis and domination. If the Congress ex-  
 phasized racial unity, civil rights, and Black nationalism,  
 then middle class elements were assured control. If, on the  
 other hand, the Congress emphasized working class, interracial  
<sup>15</sup>  
 cooperation, the Black working class would be in control.  
 Either way, however, a split was likely.

This contradiction was not apparent to the delegates to  
 the first Congress when they optimistically began to organize  
 the group. The sponsoring committee dissolved itself and a  
 presiding committee was elected to govern the conference. Af-  
 terwards the delegates elected a seventy-five member national  
 council to direct the work of the Congress for the remainder  
 of the year. As national officers, the Congress elected A.  
 Philip Randolph as President; John P. Davis as Executive Sec-  
 retary; and Marion Cuthbert as Treasurer. The Congress passed

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Cayton and Mitchell, Black Workers, pp. 415-420; Wolters,  
Negroes and the Great Depression, pp. 359-365.

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Earl Ofari, "The Dilemma of the Black Middle Class,"  
Ebony, XXVIII (August, 1973), 138-143; Lerone Bennett, Jr.,  
 "Black Bourgeoisie Revisited," Ebony, XXVIII (August, 1973),  
 51-55.

more than a hundred resolutions, all essentially amplifications of the points raised earlier by Randolph.

Reaction to the Congress was mixed. Conservative Blacks such as Kelly Miller looked askance at the organization's obviously leftist organization. Miller condemned the "spirit of radicalism which predominated throughout the proceedings," noting that "everywhere the reds, the socialists, and Communists, were ... in ascendancy, either in number or indomitable purpose, or in both."<sup>16</sup> Another critic, Lawrence Oxley, Black race relations advisor to Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins, reported that "religion, philanthropy, and patriotism, the three pillars upon which the life and hope of the Negro have been built, were either ruthlessly flouted or tepidly tolerated out of a sense of prudence."<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the American Communist Party, later to assume greater influence within the Congress, enthusiastically endorsed the conference. James W. Ford believed that the organization represented the fulfillment of Frederick Douglas's desire "for unity of action in every field of endeavor among

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<sup>16</sup>

Quoted in Cayton and Mitchell, Black Workers, p. 421.

<sup>17</sup>

Quoted in Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 363.

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Black people and their friends." Earl Browder, leader of the Communist Party, declared that the Congress had found

the correct road to a broad unity of the varied progressive forces among the Negro people and their friends. It is a broad people's movement which ... has a firm working class core of Negro trade unions and working class leaders.<sup>19</sup>

Almost immediately, internal defections from the organization occurred. Speaking out in the Chicago Defender, Bishops W.J. Walls, J.A. Bray, and R.A. Carter blasted the proceedings because "with the exception of serving in sectional programs and making invocations and pronouncing benedictions, the church leaders, clergy and lay, are entirely ignored in the program of the National Negro Congress." This state of affairs, they continued,

prevents the church which has the largest following of any organized group among us from having any real part in shaping opinions that may emanate from the Congress through the spread of delegate influence and personal propaganda.<sup>20</sup>

The criticism of the bishops was to a large degree correct. But while delegates to the conference from religious, civic, and educational groups greatly outnumbered other dele-

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National Negro Congress, Official Proceedings, p. 16.

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Earl Browder, The People's Front (New York: International Publishers, 1938), p. 47.

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The Chicago Defender, February 21, 1936.

gates, they were not prepared to speak forcefully on the economic issues which dominated the proceedings. Therefore, the leadership of the Congress fell to groups such as trade unions, which did have well-defined views on these economic problems. The vast majority of the delegates were "swept along by the enthusiasm of the economic pressure group representatives to approve the well-defined program of the Planning Committee."<sup>21</sup>

The Congress established its national office in Washington, D.C. Fifteen national districts were created to carry out the program adopted at the convention, obtain affiliations from organizations and individuals, and raise funds. Local councils were soon established in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Gary, Detroit, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, and other large cities.

During its first year local councils carried out a great deal of the work of the Congress. These councils, composed of representatives of the various organizations affiliated with the Congress, fought local prejudice against Blacks. The Chicago Council, for instance, campaigned vigorously to improve employment opportunities, housing conditions, and relief efforts in the Black community. The Council's South Side Tenants League conducted protests against the policies of slum

landlords, sometimes winning rent reductions and improvements in conditions. Local councils also campaigned in Boston; there, they secured removal of textbooks offensive to Blacks from the school system. In Washington, D.C., the Congress fought police brutality, and inadequate recreational facilities, enjoying a degree of success. The local councils waged similar battles in Newark, Oakland, Detroit, St. Louis, and Baltimore.<sup>22</sup> As late as 1939, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal noted while studying Black America that in many areas these local councils were "the most important Negro organizations."<sup>23</sup>

While the battles of the local councils of the Congress were important, its labor organizing activities had a much greater impact on the lives of the Black masses. The American labor movement by 1936 was divided between proponents of craft unionism, the American Federation of Labor, and proponents of industrial unionism, the Committee of Industrial Organizations. The two groups viewed the unionization of Black workers quite differently. AFL unions, according to Randolph, generally raised "the color bar" against Black workers, while the CIO

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Wittner, "The National Negro Congress," pp. 887-89.

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Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1949), Vol. II, p. 818.

realized that industrial unionization demanded vigorous Black participation. John P. Davis, national secretary of the Congress, noted even before the Congress was officially organized that

at the very heart of the program of the National Negro Congress will be the question of the organization of the hundreds of thousands of unorganized Negro workers. We feel the necessity of throwing the whole influence of the Negro population ... solidly behind organized labor.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the CIO and the National Negro Congress forged an alliance, eventually organizing thousands of Black workers in the steel, auto, rubber, textile, and shipping industries. The first and most crucial campaign occurred in the steel industry.

The steel campaign began in June 1936 with the absorption of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers by the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). Headed by United Mine Workers Vice-President Phillip Murray, the SWOC sent 400 union organizers into the steel towns. These SWOC organizers faced a barrage of anti-union publicity from the American Iron and Steel Institute. The Institute complained that the CIO organizers were "emissaries from Moscow," but was certain that no "god-fearing patriotic American worker" would

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Quoted in Wittner, "The National Negro Congress," p. 891.

be foolish enough to "pay tribute for the right to work."

Seldom have such predictions proven more inaccurate.

Black workers occupied a pivotal position in the emerging battle between the CIO and the steel industry. The steel industry employed roughly 85,000 Blacks at the start of the campaign. They made up twenty percent of the laborers and six percent of the operators. They received the lowest wages, averaging between sixteen and twenty dollars a week, for the most dangerous jobs in the industry. Although the steel companies employed wage differentials, they were generous to Black church and fraternal organizations and believed their generosity would retain the loyalty of Black workers as it had during the attempted unionization of steel workers during the 1919-1920 period.

Leaders of the National Negro Congress, however, were determined to win the loyalty of Black workers for the union, in spite of the industry's paternalism. For instance, Davis viewed the campaign as an opportunity to "write a Magna Carta for Black labor." He believed that the unionization of Black steel workers would mark the beginning of the unionization of all Black workers. Yet, he cautioned against "writing the

CIO a blank check," noting that the best guarantee against union treachery was the solid organization of the 85,000 Black steel workers.<sup>26</sup>

Collaboration between the Congress and the CIO resulted in the naming of a dozen Black organizers by Davis to the SWOC. The men Davis recommended included veteran organizers from the United Mine Workers, leaders of the local councils of the Congress, and a few of the active Communists. In steel areas, local councils of the Congress were called upon to organize volunteer groups in support of the SWOC and to publicize the committee in the heart of the Black community. Their efforts persuaded many conservative Black clergymen previously friendly to the industry to make their facilities available for mass meetings of the union. In a similar reversal of traditional patterns, Black fraternal and professional organizations also supported the union drive. The National Bar Association, for example, at its 1936 annual convention, endorsed the CIO and the SWOC. Indeed, the pro-union efforts of the National Negro Congress were so successful that in many areas the industry's influence in the Black community was not only neutralized but supplanted by support for the union.

Henry Johnson, a leader of the Congress and organizer for the SWOC, after delivering a speech at a local Black church in Gary, Indiana, saw a local minister announce:

I have always been against the AF of L and organized labor, but I am convinced that this CIO move is the only thing for my people. I want every steel worker of my church to sign up for this union. And ... I want you to ... sign up every steel worker you come in contact with in Chicago Heights. If anybody asks you what you are doing, tell them Rev. Tinkett told you to sign them up and he has God and the people with him.<sup>27</sup>

The efforts of the National Negro Congress and the SWOC were so successful that in the Pittsburgh and Chicago areas proportionally more Blacks joined the union than whites. One Black worker was so impressed by the efforts of the committee that he claimed that the CIO was "doing away with this color  
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question."

Apologists for the NAACP and the National Urban League suggest that the Congress was not alone in its support of the CIO and the steel campaign. They point out that both of these established Black improvement organizations endorsed the SWOC. T. Arnold Hill of the Urban League, for example, noted that:

In ... light of the tremendous effort that the CIO is making to enroll Negro members, it would

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Quoted in Wittner, "The National Negro Congress," p. 894.

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Ibid.

seem to be the very apotheosis of stupidity if Negro steel workers deliberately remain outside the ranks of organized labor within the industry.<sup>29</sup>

The Crisis, house organ of the NAACP, maintained that Black workers had "nothing to lose and everything to gain by affiliation with the CIO."<sup>30</sup> Yet, their verbal support notwithstanding, neither group committed resources or organizers to the effort.

Meanwhile, the United Auto Workers (UAW), in cooperation with the CIO and the National Negro Congress, began an organizing drive in the automotive industry. The motor industry was in many respects similar to the steel industry. Both were mass production industries; both relegated Blacks to the worst jobs at the lowest pay; and both relied on paternalism to retain the loyalty of the Black community. For the most part, the union coalition directed the organizational effort at the General Motors plant in Detroit. These two targets posed difficult problems for organizers of Black workers. The General Motors plant employed too few Blacks for them to influence the outcome significantly, while at the Ford plant Black workers were numerous, 11,000 out of 80,000. They could deter-

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"Steel," Opportunity, XV (May, 1937), 133.

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Quoted in James S. Olson, "Organized Black Leadership and Industrial Unionism, 1936-1945," Labor History, X (Summer, 1969), 477.

mine the success or failure of the organization drive.

Paternalism in the steel industry paled when compared to that of the Ford Motor Company. According to one Black newspaper, many ministers in the Detroit area were on the Ford payroll and were "against any movement likely to jeopardize their position."<sup>32</sup> Henry Ford also had sponsored the development of a city for Blacks at Inkster, Michigan, and counted a number of nationally known Black leaders as personal friends. To further pacify Black workers, the plant employed two Black personnel officers and allowed a few Blacks to work in semi-skilled and technical jobs.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the Congress and the UAW enthusiastically fought the anti-union bias among Blacks in Detroit. UAW organizers attended Black churches vowing that the UAW was not a Jim Crow union. The Congress operated in much the same fashion as it did during the steel campaign. The organization approached Black workers in the plants and bombarded them with

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Frank Winn, "Labor Tackles the Race Question," The Antioch Review, III (Fall, 1943), 349.

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Quoted in Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, p. 223; Lloyd H. Bailer, "The Automobile Unions and Negro Labor," The Political Science Quarterly, LIX (December, 1944), 552-53.

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Winn, "Labor Tackles the Race Question," pp. 349-350.

pro-union propaganda. Even so the attitude of Detroit's Black community remained in favor of Ford, with local leaders sometimes<sup>34</sup> openly endorsing the company.

But there were minor victories. For instance, in the fall of 1936, a UAW local organized a small shop in the Detroit area. The local, in violation of its UAW constitution, excluded Blacks, who composed about twenty-five percent of the work force. To win their demands for more wages and better working conditions, the local decided to strike and at that point realized that they could never be successful with a quarter of the labor force unorganized. The local then attempted to recruit the Black workers into the union. In a meeting between the two groups, a Black spokesman explained the position of the Black workers in the following words:

We represent most or all of the Negro workers in the plant. If we recommend that they join the union or participate in the strike, they will do so. We think we should be in the union and support the strike if one is necessary. We cannot recommend that unless we are guaranteed full membership privileges and equal consideration under the contract.<sup>35</sup>

The white workers quickly agreed to the demands of the Black workers, and a few weeks later the union went on strike. The

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Bailer, "The Automobile Unions," pp. 552-53.

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Quoted in Winn, "Labor Tackles the Race Question," pp. 346-47.

strike was successful, and, breaking with past practices, the union did not desert the Black workers after the victory. Unfortunately, this example represented the exception rather than the rule in the automotive industry. Had white workers been less racist and the Black community more sophisticated in their view of unions, perhaps the outcome would have been different.<sup>36</sup>

The second National Negro Congress convened on October 15, 1937, in the midst of the victory of the SWOC and the defeat at the Ford plant in Detroit. While one observer noted that "nothing important happened," the strain of conflicting ideologies for control was apparent.<sup>37</sup> The two national leaders of the Congress, A. Philip Randolph and John P. Davis, were obviously pursuing different lines of reasoning. Davis stressed "the steady march forward of thousands of Negro workers into the progressive trade union movement . . .," noting that "under the banner of the Committee for Industrial Organizations we have won new victories, tens of thousands who heretofore have not been a part of organized labor have gained increases in pay, shorter hours at work, and improved living

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Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, pp. 218-223.

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Myrdal, An American Dilemma, p. 818; Lawrence, "Negro Organizations in Crisis," p. 297.

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conditions." According to Davis, these "victories" were the result of class and interracial cooperation.

Randolph, conceding the importance of industrial unionization and interracial cooperation, nonetheless placed more emphasis on the need for racial solidarity. Randolph believed that the Congress should shun too close a relationship with outside forces. He noted "the task of realizing full citizenship for the Negro people is largely in the hands of Negro people themselves." Therefore, the duty of the Congress, according to Randolph, was to

integrate and coordinate the existing Negro organizations into one federated and collective agency so as to develop greater and more effective power. The Congress does not stress or expouse any political faith or religious creed, but seeks to formulate a minimum political, economic, and social program which all Negroes can endorse and for which they can work and fight.<sup>39</sup>

In Randolph's view, a "simple minimum program" was all that was needed to rally all Blacks to the Congress. In the tradition of David Walker, Randolph believed divisions and conflicts within the race could be superceded by a collective dedication to the progress of the entire group. Apparently, he failed to realize that what constituted progress for one segment of the

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Second National Negro Congress, Official Proceedings (Washington, D.C., 1937), unpagged.

39

Ibid.

Black community did not necessarily mean progress for other segments. Yet, the idea of racial solidarity remained at the core of Randolph's thinking, and eventually his views would shatter the Congress.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE NATIONAL NEGRO CONGRESS

After the 1937 meeting of the National Negro Congress, John P. Davis looked to the future and declared that "the challenge has been met. We have formulated a program which will serve to guide us successfully in the path to freedom."<sup>1</sup> The program to which Davis referred included the passage of federal anti-lynching legislation, the continued organization of Black workers, support for Roosevelt's plan to reorganize the judiciary, attention to the problems of Black tenant-farmers in the South, and the inclusion of domestic and farm workers in the proposed social security legislation. But because of funding problems, the Congress concentrated its resources almost exclusively on anti-lynching legislation and the union organization drives, particularly during the interim between the 1937 meeting and the near "fatal" meeting in 1940.<sup>2</sup>

The Congress lobbied for anti-lynching legislation through mass action and the united front technique. Announcing that the National Negro Congress "cannot be satisfied ... until we

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<sup>1</sup> Second National Negro Congress, Official Proceedings, unpagged.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

have made America a lynchless America," Davis vowed to rally the "liberty-loving" forces of the country behind the NAACP's<sup>3</sup> fight for passage of the Wagner-Van Nuys anti-lynching bill. In support of the bill, the Congress convened meetings in Black communities across the United States. In New York City, representatives of over one hundred Black organizations met under the auspices of the Congress to plan a campaign in that city. In April of 1938, the Congress coordinated a series of mass demonstrations in several major cities to support the bill. The Congress's efforts also included a telegram campaign in behalf of the legislation, while Davis busied himself lobby-<sup>4</sup>ing among Congressmen for its passage.

The NAACP, however, doubted the usefulness of the Congress's campaign. Believing that such legislation was the special province of the NAACP, Walter White complained that Davis was needlessly hindering the Association's activities. According to White, it made more sense "to concentrate on the task immediately ahead of us, with the established machinery now in existence ... instead of starting out at this point to create additional machinery and divide the already inadequate funds

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<sup>3</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>  
The New York Times, April 18, 1938.

for the fight." <sup>5</sup> Like many other supporters of the NAACP, White believed that the Congress was competing rather than supporting the Association on the issue. Roy Wilkins, aware of the "informal talk" about the Congress replacing the NAACP, feared that Davis was "attempting ... to cut in" on the Association's program. <sup>6</sup> His fears were hardly diminished by persistent field reports from William Pickens that Davis and the Congress were trying to displace the NAACP "in every way, everywhere they can do so." <sup>7</sup> From the perspective of these leaders, the "ballyhoo" raised by the Congress was really a disguised effort to raise funds and keep the name of the Congress before the public because, according to Wilkins, there was "absolutely no chance short of a miracle" for the anti-lynching bill to become law. <sup>8</sup>

There was considerable merit to Wilkins' charge. Indeed, powerful Southern congressmen prevented passage of the measure as they did all other anti-lynching bills in spite of massive

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Wolters, Negroes and the Great Depression, p. 366.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 366.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.; Lester B. Granger, "The National Negro Congress---Its Future," Opportunity, XVIII (June, 1940), 165.

public support. More importantly for the Congress, it was a costly defeat. The organization's effectiveness was questioned and its efforts had clearly alienated important segments of American society which supported the NAACP. From this point on the Congress's ability to secure funds was impaired and the organization was driven to an even closer alliance with left-wing CIO unions. Increasingly, the Congress turned to these unions for financial support, resulting in serious repercussions at the 1940 convention of the organization.

Meanwhile, the unionization of Black workers by the CIO and the National Negro Congress continued. The success of the steel campaign and the experience gained during the fight to unionize the auto industry increased the confidence of Black workers, the Congress, and the CIO. In May of 1937, when Black workers in the Richmond, Virginia area struck to protest working conditions and wages, the National Negro Congress, through its youth affiliate the Southern Negro Youth Congress, joined the CIO in rallying to the cause. Although the percentage of Blacks employed in the tobacco industry was higher than in any other industry, most were not unionized because the AFL's Tobacco Workers' International Union preferred to represent only white skilled workers. Therefore, Black workers employed in unskilled jobs as stemmers and laborers were forced to work for wages ranging from two to five dollars a week.

Their organization began with a spontaneous strike of three hundred stemmers at the Carrington and Michaux plants in Richmond. The strikers sought aid from the AFL but were refused on the grounds that Black workers were unorganizable. Desperate, they notified the Southern Negro Youth Congress, which in turn consulted with the National Negro Congress. With the aid of the Youth Congress the strikers settled with the company twenty-four hours later after having gained wage increases, a forty-hour week, and union recognition. The drive to organize other tobacco workers in the area continued for eighteen months, eventually organizing several thousand workers into seven locals of the new CIO union. The new Tobacco Stemmers and Laborer's Industrial Union negotiated contracts that raised wages \$300,000 and provided extra pay for overtime and holiday work. As one observer noted:

The successes of the tobacco unions have stirred other ranks in the Richmond community ... for the first time an organizational drive is here to stay that will reach ... the thousands of Negro tobacco workers.<sup>9</sup>

The maritime unions on the East and West coasts, aided by organizers from the National Negro Congress, were simultaneously increasing their Black membership. The roots of their success on the West coast lay in the strike of 1934 which had

led to the elevation of Harry Bridges to the presidency of the West Coast Longshoremen Union. Upon assuming his new position, Bridges announced that "Negro labor will never again find the doors of the San Francisco longshore locals closed."<sup>10</sup> In 1937 Bridges led most of the locals out of the AFL International Longshoreman's Association and Wharehousmen Union (ILWU). True to his promise, Bridges created interracial anti-discrimination committees and ordered that work be divided<sup>11</sup> fairly between Black and white workers.

At the same time on the East coast, Black workers faced discrimination within the AFL International Seaman's Union. After a series of strikes against their union leadership as well as against the shipping lines, they and other dissident elements formed the National Maritime Union and affiliated with the CIO. The NMU was organized so that not only were Blacks "entitled to all the benefits of membership, such as protection of wages, working and living conditions," but he "votes; he voices his opinion at meetings and in the union's paper ... and he holds office."<sup>12</sup> The International Seaman's

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Quoted in Herbert Northrup, Organized Labor and the Negro (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishing, 1944), p. 153.

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Ibid.

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Ferdinand C. Smith, "The Negro Seaman," Opportunity, XVIII (June, 1940), 114.

Union, on the other hand, had organized Blacks into "colored  
<sup>13</sup>  
 locals." Communist seamen initiated much of the change.

They led the fight for the new union and attacked racism at every opportunity. As one observer noted,

the last traces of prejudice in the minds of the Union's membership are being burned out under the powerful light of education .... It has shown them that their destiny is linked up with all other workers, that their problem is not separate and apart from the broader problems of society ... they must fight side by side with other workers ... to win a future of dignity and freedom.<sup>14</sup>

The CIO drives to organize Black workers continued well into the next decade, but even so their success during the late 1930's was impressive. For instance, before the creation of the CIO, there were only about 100,000 Black union members, but by 1940 that number had increased to approximately 500,000. The number of Black union officials also increased dramatically. Similarly, the wages and working conditions of members of CIO unions improved greatly. Undoubtedly, the CIO would have enjoyed less success had it not been aided by the organizers, propaganda, and volunteers supplied by the National Negro Congress. John P. Davis and other members of the Congress hastened

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<sup>13</sup>  
Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>14</sup>  
Ibid., p. 114.

the destruction of the longstanding animosity between Black and white labor.

Unfortunately, the CIO proved itself less capable of reversing discriminatory policies within industries than in enticing Blacks into their unions. The result was usually a freezing of Black workers in unskilled and low-paying jobs. Yet, few observers would deny "that Negroes as a group ... made far more progress since the formation of the CIO than at any time before."<sup>15</sup> Black workers were even more emphatic:

Has the CIO played fair with us Negro workers? Well look at the new clothes our children wear; the homes that we are paying for since the SWOC enrolled us and showed us how to wage a successful fight for decent wages and better working conditions. See how the white and colored steel workers get along together since they started wearing the union buttons.<sup>16</sup>

The National Negro Congress held no national meetings in 1938 and 1939, but reconvened during April of 1940 for the third and fatal Congress. This Congress, like the two preceding it, was well attended. A total of 1,264 delegates were present, but unlike the previous conferences, one-third of the representatives were white. The ideological differences between

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<sup>15</sup>

The Pittsburgh Courier, January 25, 1940.

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Quoted in Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, p. 232.

John P. Davis and A. Philip Randolph had become common knowledge by 1940. In fact, the ideological tension between racial unity and class solidarity which had manifested itself several times in the Congress's history, reached its logical conclusion in the 1940 convention.

John L. Lewis, President of the CIO, addressed the first session of the Congress. Lewis demanded an end to the poll tax and also demanded anti-lynching legislation by the United States Congress. Lewis further castigated Roosevelt and the Democratic Party for their failure to live up to their campaign promises of 1932 and 1936, and also demanded that "political leaders ... deliver or give way to those who can."<sup>17</sup> Continuing his attack on Roosevelt, Lewis demanded that the nation stay out of the European war, and he accused the Democrats of attempting to "obscure knotty, unsolved domestic problems by emphasis on foreign crises."<sup>18</sup> Finally, and most importantly, Lewis asked the Congress "to affiliate with or to reach a working agreement with Labor's Non-Partisan League that our common purposes may better be attained."<sup>19</sup> Lewis's

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<sup>17</sup>  
The New York Times, April 27, 1940.

<sup>18</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>  
Quoted in Wittner, "The National Negro Congress," p. 898.

invitation to the Congress to join with the labor movement in the political sphere represented a logical extension of the alliance of the two groups dating from the steel campaign of 1936. Apparently, Lewis struck a responsive chord, for as Ralph Bunche recalled, "he received a tremendous ovation."<sup>20</sup>

A. Philip Randolph, fully aware of the leftward sectarian feelings of the Congress, attempted to redirect its emphasis toward its original goal of Black unity and racial solidarity. Addressing himself to "The World Crisis and the Negro People Today," he reiterated his belief that the Congress should seek the development of a "minimum program" around which all Black groups could unite. Such a "minimum program" could include more jobs for Blacks, an end to the poll tax, and anti-lynching legislation, but coalition with Labor's Non-Partisan League was impossible because it was a controversial issue. It would split the Black community. Reminiscent of his speeches of 1936 and 1937, Randolph stressed the necessity of the Congress remaining independent, non-partisan and based on the efforts of Black people alone. He advised Blacks against reliance on any outside group, be it one of the major parties, the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, or the Soviet Union, noting

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Ralph Bunche, "The Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievement of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations," (unpublished manuscript prepared as a part of the preliminary research for Gunnar Myrdal's An American Dilemma, Schomburg Library, New York City Public Library), p. 372.

that each of these groups placed other interests ahead of the  
<sup>21</sup>  
 needs of Black people. Particularly concerned by charges  
 that the Congress was a Communist front organization, Randolph  
 maintained, "The Communist Party is not primarily or funda-  
 mentally concerned about the Negro ...." It was, he believed,  
 most interested in "the consolidation of the foreign position  
 of the Soviet Union." In Randolph's view, its policies "may  
<sup>22</sup>  
 or may not be in the interest of ... the Negro people." Sim-  
 ilarly, Randolph voiced his opposition to the closeness of  
 the financial relationship between the Congress and left-wing  
 CIO unions. Finally, Randolph called for leadership in the  
 Congress "which is controlled by Negroes and responsible to  
 none but the Negro people." Two-thirds of Randolph's 1,700  
 member audience walked out before the completion of his speech,  
 apparently distressed by his unflattering remarks concerning  
 the Soviet Union and his implicit rejection of Labor's Non-  
<sup>23</sup>  
 Partisan League.

The poor reception Randolph's nationalistic speech re-  
 ceived is best explained through an examination of the dele-

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Ibid.

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The New York Times, April 28, 1940.

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Bunche, "Programs," p. 373.

gates to the Congress. Of the 1,285 delegates representing various organizations, roughly one-third was represented by whites. More importantly, however, was the fact that the largest single group of delegates, totaling 459, represented trade unions, with most of them representing CIO affiliates.<sup>24</sup> In comparison, the first conference of the National Negro Congress had drawn only 83 labor delegates, while the second drew only 219. Communist strength in the Congress had also increased greatly. Not only were a significant number of the trade union delegates Communists, but according to rumors, so was Executive Secretary John P. Davis.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Randolph had lashed out at exactly those forces that now dominated the Congress, and it is not surprising that his emphasis on racial solidarity and Black unity now found little support.<sup>26</sup>

The task of presenting the pro-CIO, pro-Communist counter-attack fell on John P. Davis. Davis opened his address by criticizing Randolph's characterization of the Soviet Union as a calculating "dictatorship" seeking power "over weaker

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<sup>24</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>  
U.S. Congress, House, Hearings Regarding Communist Infiltration of Minority Groups, p. 512; U.S. Congress, House, Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States, 76th Cong., 1st Sess., 1939, p. 7029.

<sup>26</sup>  
Wittner, "The National Negro Congress," p. 898.

peoples."<sup>27</sup> Instead, Russia was a place where its many nations and people "were busy working in amity, collaboration, and peace," while offering friendship and aid to all of the oppressed.<sup>28</sup> Where Randolph saw danger in too close collaboration with the Communists, Davis welcomed cooperation from any group, Communists included. The two leaders also disagreed on the role Blacks should assume in the event of war with Russia. Randolph maintained that American Blacks would join such a war as readily as they had during other wars. Davis, on the other hand, counseled Blacks to join with others in protesting the "disastrous administration policy" of "taking sides" in the European conflict. He asserted that "I firmly believe that the American Negro will refuse to follow American imperialism in an attack on the Soviet Union."<sup>29</sup> Finally, Randolph's suggestion that the Congress reject Lewis's offer of affiliation with Labor's Non-Partisan League struck Davis as near treachery: "Long has the Negro worker awaited the extended hand of organized labor. Are there those who would have us turn our back upon the friendly offer made by John L. Lewis?"

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The New York Times, April 28, 1940.

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Ibid.

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Ibid.

If there be such, we are doubtful of their loyalty to the  
 cause of our people."<sup>30</sup> There was much less disagreement between the two leaders on other questions of domestic issues. Both men believed larger relief funds were needed, as was anti-lynching and anti-poll tax legislation. Both men also  
<sup>31</sup>  
 denounced the Democratic and Republican parties.

The vote on the report of the Resolutions Committee soon proved that Davis rather than Randolph expressed the sentiments of most of the delegates. For instance, the principal resolution adopted by the delegates argued:

There is again a distinct danger of American envelopment in a war, a war already raging on the continent of Europe. The present war abroad is an imperialist war between fully imperialist rivals and is in no sense a war for the protection of the rights of small nations ... The present drive of the administration to mobilize the American people to support either side in war cannot receive the considerations of the Negro people because we have ourselves not yet secured full citizenship rights.<sup>32</sup>

The passage of this resolution caused consternation within and outside the National Negro Congress. A good many of the non-

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Quoted in Wittner, "The National Negro Congress," p. 899.

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The New York Times, April 28, 1940.

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Quoted in Wilson Record, The Negro and the Communist Party (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), pp. 194-95.

Communist delegates and the non-trade union delegates believed that the resolution was being forced upon them by Communist parliamentary maneuvers. They undoubtedly realized, for instance, that the chairman of the Resolutions Committee was a Communist Party member, William C. Patterson.<sup>33</sup> In one particularly blatant instance of totalitarian tactics to silence the opposition, Edgar Brown, President of the United Government Employees Union, attempted to express his opposition to the resolution and was forced to shout above the catcalls and disturbances of the Communists.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, large numbers of the delegates, even many non-Communists, supported the anti-interventionist stand of John L. Lewis. Also, many of the delegates, while opposed to Nazi Germany, did not consider England or France defenders of racial equality. Thus, the fight for democracy in the United States had much more appeal for them than battles to save Europe. As Lester Granger, a former vice-president of the Congress, noted, "Some of the support for the resolution was thoughtful and honestly arrived at."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>  
The Chicago Defender, May 4, 1940.

<sup>34</sup>  
The New York Times, April 29, 1940.

<sup>35</sup>  
 Granger, "The National Negro Congress," p. 166.

Critics of the Congress and those who believed it to be a Communist front, however, seized upon the resolution as conclusive proof of the Communist Party's complete domination of the organization. According to these detractors, the resolution was nothing more than a reflection of the changed needs of Soviet Russia's foreign policy.<sup>36</sup> Noting that Russia had in 1939 signed a pact with Germany pledging to refrain from military action against one another, these critics maintained that the "anti-imperialist resolution" was only an attempt by the American Communist Party to mobilize Blacks against American efforts to aid Britain and France. Thus, their reasoning believed that "the National Negro Congress, the main front organization among Blacks, was obliging, following the general party line."<sup>37</sup> Their analysis left little room for support of the resolution.

A second resolution proved almost as controversial. When the Resolutions Committee recommended and the delegates accepted unity between the Congress and Labor's Non-Partisan League, it became clear that the Congress was no longer the nationalist exponent of Black unity and solidarity. Randolph spoke clearly and forcefully against the resolution and for Black unity,

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<sup>36</sup>

The Pittsburgh Courier, May 4, 1940.

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Record, The Negro and the Communist Party, p. 184.

declaring,

I am in opposition to the resolution on the grounds that it is in violation of the minimum program of the Congress because it introduces a controversial issue. A minimum program is one on which all members can agree. By aligning the Congress with the League you are breaking up the Congress.<sup>38</sup>

Other resolutions favoring abolition of the Dies Committee, anti-lynching legislation, anti-poll tax legislation, and freeing the remainder of the Scottsboro boys all passed with little debate. However, the destruction of the unity of the Congress  
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was by this time complete.

Immediately after the adoption of the Resolution Committee's report by the Congress, Randolph announced he could no longer serve as President. While he assured the Congress there was no personal animosity between himself and Executive Secretary John P. Davis, he noted that "we do disagree on certain poli-  
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cies of the Congress." Randolph rejected the departure of the organization from the principle of the "minimum program." He was equally distressed by the policy of alliance with Labor's Non-Partisan League because the Congress "tied up too closely

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38  
Bunche, "Programs," p. 316.

39  
The New York Times, April 29, 1940.

40  
The Chicago Defender, May 4, 1940.

with any organization ... loses its mass character."<sup>41</sup> Randolph  
 furthermore objected to the fact that the Congress had received  
 donations from the Communist Party and the CIO because "wherever<sup>42</sup>  
 you get your money, you get your policies and ideas." Fin-  
 ally, Randolph opposed the implicit policy of cooperation with  
 the Soviet Union, objecting specifically to Davis's attempt to<sup>43</sup>  
 get Black people to refuse to fight against Russia.

The willingness of the Congress to allow Randolph to re-  
 sign reflected the transformation that had occurred within the  
 organization. For Randolph, the "united front" idea meant  
 solidarity and a minimum program around which all Blacks could  
 unite. But the Congress had moved away from that position  
 with its emphasis on drawing Black workers into the CIO and  
 this action had fostered a class rather than racial alliance.  
 The large number of labor-oriented delegates to the third Con-  
 gress represented the proof of the class alliance. Since the  
 Communist Party had in many instances maintained a close re-  
 lationship with the CIO, it is not surprising that the trade  
 union delegates to the Congress were not intimidated or opposed

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<sup>41</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>  
 Bunche, "Programs," p. 375.

to their presence. The Communist Party, though a powerful influence on the National Negro Congress, did not completely dominate it. Instead, they articulated positions already held by a majority of the delegates. The transformation of the National Negro Congress had already occurred after years of successful cooperation and struggle with the CIO unions. The 1940 convention of the Congress only crystallized those sentiments which had been accumulating ever since 1936. The National Negro Congress had not become a Communist front organization; on the contrary, the Congress had become the only organization in the Black community which consistently campaigned for the economic rights of working class Black people.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The history of the National Negro Congress between 1936 and 1940 presents a perplexing problem for historians. To be sure, the Congress institutionalized Black survival instincts during the Great Depression. The problems of poverty, unemployment, and discrimination had become more intense under the impact of the economic collapse of the 1930's. The National Negro Congress expressed the deeply-felt need for organized Black power, particularly concerning the economic issues affecting the Black lower class. The evolution of this need is easily discerned in the gradual progression of Black organizations from the Negro Industrial League to the Joint Committee on National Recovery to the National Negro Congress.

But why the resignation of A. Philip Randolph and the departure of the "nationalist" delegates in 1940 shattered the Congress is less easily discerned. For such historians as Wilson Record, Lewis Coser, and Irving Howe, a consensus has developed: Randolph's resignation and the collapse of the Congress followed his realization that by 1940 the Congress was nothing more than a Communist front organization. He left the Congress because he believed that support of such a controversial organization would actually increase the hostility

that the white establishment felt toward all aggressive Black groups. It would also undermine his own credibility. Implicit in this historical consensus is the belief that Randolph had correctly surmised the nature of the Congress and had made the proper decision in renouncing his affiliation with it.

But the condition of the National Negro Congress in 1940 was more complex than the consensus indicates. These historians seem to have overlooked the crucial impact of John L. Lewis and the CIO on the National Negro Congress. The two resolutions in 1940 which led to Randolph's resignation, the support for Labor's Non-Partisan League and the "anti-imperialistic" position, were enthusiastically supported by Lewis and the non-Communist delegates as well as by the Communists. Since 1936, Randolph's intense support for Black unity and the non-controversial "minimum program" had become ideologically contradictory. For the Congress to have accepted Randolph's program, they would have had to ignore four years of successful cooperation with the CIO in organizing Black workers. Throughout the Black community, most leaders clearly recognized that in the entire history of Afro-Americans, no movement had brought more success or more progress in a shorter period of time than the CIO-National Negro Congress organization campaigns of the late 1930's. Most of the delegates to the 1940 convention realized that fact as well. Randolph was in essence

asking them to deny that experience and take a step back in time. The delegates were simply unwilling to take that step.

Also, the delegates to the Congress had become aware of the incredible naivete of Randolph's position. In the first place, he was asking them to support programs which were not controversial, which would not offend people in positions of power in America. But the entire nature of the Black movement involved the very issue of power, whether it be economic, political, or social power. For Black people to assume their proper positions in American society, it was inevitable that power be redistributed. Without that redistribution of power, there would be no progress for the Black community. And redistributions of power are by their very nature controversial, because those in the establishment stand to lose some of their control over the power structure. In demanding that Black people support non-controversial programs, Randolph was in effect asking them to accept their inferior positions in American society. Delegates to the National Negro Congress understood this limitation in Randolph's philosophy.

Finally, the delegates realized that Randolph's hope of developing a program which all Black people could support was also naive. Randolph seemed to assume that the Black community was monolithic, that it was free from any internal economic and political divisions. But the community was not monolithic;

instead, it reflected economic divisions of its own between the Black middle class and the Black working class. The delegates to the National Negro Congress realized that for years the Black middle class had been ably represented by the NAACP and the National Urban League, while the Black lower class had been generally ignored. The Black middle class, enjoying a measure of economic security, were more concerned with political and social issues, such as the end of Jim Crow in the United States. But the Black lower class had to be concerned first with obtaining economic security, and no prominent Black improvement organization concentrated its attention on their plight. The National Negro Congress, through its successful union organization drives with the CIO, realized that they had come upon a means of quickly improving the lot of Black workers. When Randolph asked them to abandon the CIO, the delegates interpreted this as an abandonment of the Black working class. They rejected him for this reason.

Consequently, the controversial 1940 convention of the National Negro Congress was not simply the final assumption of power by the Communists. In reality, the 1940 convention demonstrated the Congress's commitment to the Black lower class and its refusal to adopt positions which would compromise the progress Black workers had made since 1936 under the auspices of union organization. The Communists had not brazenly

taken control as so many historians have assumed. Instead, both Communists and most of the non-Communists had come to believe that interracial, working class solidarity was more relevant to the Black masses than an emphasis on Black unity. If the Communists had become more influential in the Congress, it was only because the Marxist ideology seemed to explain clearly the plight and the potential progress of Black workers.

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