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**Bonded by Class, Divided by Race: Labor Radicalism and the Origins of the Freedom
Struggle in St. Louis from 1877-1945**

An Honors Thesis

by

Kevin Scannell

Submitted to Connecticut College in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for honors

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List of Abbreviations

AAA - Agricultural Adjustment Act

AASREA - Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees of America

AFL - American Federation of Labor

ASFL - Alabama State Federation of Labor

AWU - American Workers Union

BSCP - Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

CCC - Civilian Conservation Corps

CCC - Colored Clerks Circle (referred to as the Circle in this thesis)

CCRC - Citizens Civil Rights Committee

CCRE - Citizens Committee on Relief and Employment

CFEB - Citizens Free Employment Bureau

CIO - Congress of Industrial Organizations

CTLU - Central Trades and Labor Union

CWA - Civil Works Administration

FEPC - Fair Employment Practices Committee

FERA - Federal Emergency Relief Act

FOTLU - Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions

IWW - Industrial Workers of the World

MOWM - The March on Washington Movement

NAACP - National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

NIRA - National Industrial Recovery Act (1933)

NLB - National Labor Board

NLRA - National Labor Relations Act aka Wagner Act

NLRB - National Labor Relations Board

NNC - National Negro Congress

NWLB - National War Labor Board

PWA - Public Works Administration

SFEB - State Federal Employment Bureau

SPUSA - Socialist Party of America

UBC - United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America

UCL - United Citizens League

UE - United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America

UMW - United Mine Workers of America

USES - United States Employment Service

WPA - Works Progress Administration

Introduction

In 1941, the March on Washington Movement, a Black labor and Civil Rights organization, convinced President Roosevelt to create the Fair Employment Practices Committee to ensure that defense industries in World War II would desegregate and employers would hire Black workers. Three years later, Congress proposed two bills that would ensure that the Fair Employment Practices Committee would be a permanent force employers would have to contend with. In a hearing with the Committee on Labor in the House of Representatives, David M. Grant, a member of the March on Washington Movement in St. Louis, argued that the Fair Employment Practices Committee was necessary for the benefit of both Black workers and the entire nation. Grant informed the Committee on Labor that there were, as of 1944, a pool of 25,000 unemployed Black women in St. Louis who were approved by the federal government to work in defense industries, yet were ignored by companies simply because they were Black. Several defense companies in St. Louis were actively hiring, yet did not consider Black women skilled enough workers.¹ The March on Washington Movement in St. Louis managed to get thousands of Black workers hired during World War II, integrating previously segregated industries and allowing Black workers to gain access to higher paying jobs. However, the March on Washington Movement did this all without assistance from the Fair Employment Practices Committee. One telling of history could claim that, following the creation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee, thousands of Black workers were integrated into numerous

¹ Theodore D. McNeal Scrapbook, State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis, microfilm roll 2.

defense industries in St. Louis. By telling the history of labor with Black workers as a “white alternative” or as “victims” of their own history, it devalues not only the struggle of Black workers, but veils the 1940s as a mere labor struggle, rather than as a growing movement of Black workers fighting for rights in the larger Freedom Struggle.

This thesis not only centers Black workers in the history of the labor movement, but traces their efforts to fight for interracial unionism as the roots of the Black Freedom Struggle. African American workers were at the forefront of labor radicalism in the early twentieth century, and their experiences reveal that the only true labor radicalism is radicalism that challenges racial as well as class hierarchy.² Through engagement with a plethora of radical, interracial organizations from the Knights of Labor through the Industrial Workers of the World and the Communist Party in the 1930s, this thesis demonstrates the conditions in which radical and lasting institutional change was possible and, conversely, when it was not possible. The Depression and New Deal years emerge as the most important moment for labor radicalism, not because of the pro-labor laws passed by President Roosevelt, but because of the weakness of capitalism. Interracial unionism spurred by Black workers organizing with the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the Communist Party, and independent Black entities like the Urban League forced the labor movement to reconcile with its inherent racism and conservatism. Gradually, white workers began to similarly emphasize interracial unionism and value the

² Defining a “radical labor organization” is particularly difficult as radical tends to mean anything with socialist or communist views, or is associated with any violent movement. There are also examples that border on the edge of radical. In particular, the Knights of Labor were an organization that were “radical” as they organized both Black and white workers in the nineteenth century, while actively excluding Chinese workers who they perceived as a threat to their labor. Would they be considered “radical” by rejecting the Black and white segregation in labor, or are they similarly facilitating segregation by still actively excluding racial groups?

success of the entire labor movement over upholding segregation. Though segregation was still rampant in many industries and unions in the 1930s and 1940s, labor radicals provided tangible opportunities for African Americans to organize and accumulate social, political, and economic capital. When the United States became involved in World War II several years later, African Americans forced the federal government to value wartime production over segregation in the defense industries, leading to the establishment and eventual enforcement of the Fair Employment Practices Committee. The structural and moral change encouraged by the activism of Black workers in the 1930s and 1940s constituted the origins of the better-known Black Freedom Struggle of the mid-20th Century.

For decades, capitalists had been using Black and white workers as strikebreakers for each other. In any instance where white workers went on strike, Black workers were brought in as strikebreakers. In cases where Black workers went on strike, white workers were brought in to replace them. Racial divisions allowed employers to use Black and white workers to crush most labor movements, and further fuel the hatred between white and Black. In the 1930s and 1940s, Ford Motor Company began employing more Black workers. Automobile manufacturing had historically been a white industry, and Ford was one of the first to employ large numbers of Black workers. Henry Ford set up a special division for hiring Black workers and by 1941 had 10,000 Black workers who made up around 10% of his workforce. Ford was benevolent and gave large amounts of money to Black churches to further develop Black communities. Though Black workers were limited in their ability to gain access to promotions and filled lower wage income brackets, in addition to brutal treatment by white supervisors, Black workers were only too eager to work for Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford was not a benevolent man, and expected

the Black workers to repay him. By constantly employing Black workers and treating them relatively well, Ford hoped that when white workers went on strike, his Black workers would stay loyal and maintain production. In 1941, white workers did strike, and 8500 of his 10000 Black workers joined them.³ Ford's efforts to divide white and Black workers ultimately failed due to a growing class consciousness as unions progressively became more integrated during the New Deal era. As integration in the labor movement progressed, both white and Black interests reaped the rewards as a unified working class fought back against the horrid economic conditions of the Great Depression. Employers historically treated workers as mere workers, as "mere units of labor commodity" in furthering their own economic benefit.⁴ Black workers in particular were treated, as in the case of the Ford Motor Company, as an alternative to white workers, useful for cheaper unskilled labor and strikebreakers. Black workers have been treated as alternatives, not only by the American labor movement, but by labor historians as well.

This thesis comes out of a dramatic reassessment of the role of Black Workers in the post-Reconstruction American labor struggle. The histories written by Clarence Lang, Joe William Trotter, Robert Korstad, Walter Johnson, Keona Ervin, Melissa Ford, and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall all place Black workers at the heart of the story of American labor, correcting an earlier generation that viewed them as pawns of the struggle between White labor and White capital.⁵ St. Louis has played a significant role in both Black and labor history, and this thesis

³ Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: 20 Years of the CIO* (New York: Pathfinder Pr, 1982), 102-103, 107-108.

⁴ Milholland 47

⁵ See in order by author: Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75*, (Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Joe William Trotter, *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019); Robert Korstad and Nelson

argues that the telling of these two histories cannot be separated, using St. Louis as the primary example. But more crucially, these historians all discuss elements of the significance of the Black working class in the origins of the Black freedom struggle. Korstad and Lang notably focus on the Black working class as the focal point of the civil rights movement in the 1940s as well as the 1960s. Keona Ervin's *Gateway to Equality* and Melissa Ford's *Brick and a Bible* not only are exemplary examples of the significance of Black women's labor activism, but are both centralized around St. Louis. I would argue the weakest point of this thesis stems from the large exclusion of African American women. Though more prominent in the 1960s civil rights movement, Black women played a significant role in nearly every historical event touched on in this thesis, and are still largely left out.⁶

The city of St. Louis provides an interesting perspective into interracial unionism in the United States. Located along the Mississippi River, St. Louis was one of the largest cities in the country during the early twentieth century.⁷ Between 1860 and 1870, around the time period this

Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement." *The Journal of American history* (Bloomington, Ind.) 75, no. 3 (1988); Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2020); Keona Ervin, *Gateway to Equality: Black Women and the Struggle for Economic Justice in St. Louis* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2017); Melissa Ford, *A Brick and a Bible: Black Women's Activism in the Midwest during the Great Depression* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2021); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 1, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.2307/3660172>.

⁶ The lack of Black female representation originates from two key reasons. The first being the lack of time and resources available to actively search for sources about Black women. The second is that, in telling a labor centralized history, the majority of sources are focused on the men themselves. Male dominated sources disproportionately control labor histories, making it more difficult to tell the story about the key female figures who are involved. This is partly what makes the works of Keona Ervin and Melissa Ford so notable.

⁷ Taylor Desloge, "The Lost Politics of Blight: A Grassroots Pre-History of Urban Renewal in St. Louis, MO 1877-1940." Unpublished manuscript, draft of May 1, 2023, 14.

thesis begins at, the Black population in St. Louis grew by around 600%, with thousands more becoming residents of the city during the Great Migration, particularly during the 1910s. Though numerous cities had a higher percentage of African American populations, only Philadelphia and Baltimore had a higher number of African Americans.⁸ Due to such a large Black population, African Americans in St. Louis maintained franchisement as a key political sector of the city, contrary to cities in other border states. While Jim Crowism still existed in St. Louis, it shifted between de jure and de facto segregation throughout its history. Public libraries and conveyances in the city were unrestricted, but hotels, swimming pools, hospitals, and restaurants were segregated as “the peculiarities of a city that was curiously both midwestern and southern.”⁹ Labor also struggled to find footholds in the city as 98% of the hiring in the mass production industries in St. Louis were controlled exclusively by the employer, not by unions.¹⁰ Studying the city of St. Louis provides a window into one of the key battlegrounds of labor in the United States. Key legal battles occurred for the Black Freedom Struggle, like *Shelley v. Kraemer* and *Gaines v. Canada*, while grassroots movements like the March on Washington Movement similarly found a home in St. Louis, hosting its most active branch. By analyzing interracial unionism in St. Louis, it provides a better perspective into one of the most complicated webs of Jim Crow segregation blended with Black empowerment in the nation.

Chapter 1 begins with a study on the 1877 Railroad Strike, also known as the Great Strike, a massive interracial strike that shut down the majority of the nation's railroads, and

⁸ Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America*, 143.

⁹ Kersten, Andrew Edmund, and Clarence Lang, eds. *Reframing Randolph: Labor, Black Freedom, and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 206.

¹⁰ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

marked the first time in American history that the federal government intervened in a labor strike in order to maintain order.¹¹ The Great Strike is particularly significant as it encouraged the 1877 St. Louis General Strike, an interracial city wide strike that shut down nearly every manufacturer for several days.¹² While African Americans were involved in the general strike, they faced strong opposition from the German dominated Workingmen's Party who headed the strike. The lack of cohesion between the Black workers and white Workingmen's Party is part of the reason the St. Louis General Strike quickly collapsed. Following the 1877 Great Strike, the relatively new Knights of Labor became the most prominent union collective in the United States, emphasizing integration between Black and white workers. Due to their radicalism, the Knights of Labor were crushed out of existence and in their place came the American Federation of Labor, to this day the largest labor federation in the United States. The Federation upheld segregation in the majority of their unions, and as the mainstream labor union, set the baseline for the next several decades of conservative American labor.

Chapter 2 documents the Great Migration of African Americans leaving the south, integrating and establishing new communities in the north. Northern whites were forced to compete for political and economic resources against the new population of northern African Americans. In cases like the 1917 July Massacre in East St. Louis, whites used their superior social power to eradicate competing African Americans, exemplifying racial relations and the coming Red Summer of 1919. Most whites stoutly upheld segregation in all facets of life, either

¹¹ Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes in the United States*, 42; Yard 3

¹² Bellesiles, *1877*, 172; David Roediger, "'Not Only the Ruling Classes to Overcome, But Also the So-Called Mob.' Class, Skill and Community in the St. Louis General Strike of 1877." *Journal of social history* 19, no. 2 (1985): 213.

through law or the violent enforcement of unwritten practices. Organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World, also known as the Wobblies, were created as alternatives to mainstream segregated labor as an outlet to organize Black workers. Like the Knights of Labor, the Wobblies only lasted for a handful of years and failed to create any lasting change. The Wobblies still showed the strength of integrated radicalism in many of their strikes in the face of violent government suppression. The chapter concludes with a recounting of the 1933 St. Louis Funsten Nut Strike, a Black and communist led integrated strike that radicalized the local St. Louis Urban League. While many of the provisions of the Funsten Nut Strike were never enforced, the success of the communist and Black organizers built a trust between the two groups that allowed them to accomplish more during the New Deal era, and encouraged further radical involvement by the Urban League.

Chapter 3 traces the injustices of only several aspects of the New Deal programs designed to end the Great Depression. Despite being given significantly more favorable treatment from the federal government, the 1930s was a period in which many white workers realized that integrated labor only strengthened their numbers and furthered their own interests. As capitalism was at its weakest during the Depression years, they had little strength to fight back against labor unions revitalized by the pro-labor 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and the 1935 Wagner Act. Though unions were forced to uphold both NIRA and Wagner, the mere passage of the two acts encouraged many workers to organize. In 1935 a schism in the AFL resulted in the creation of the formidable Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), an integrated collection of labor unions that rivaled the AFL. With organizations like the CIO and the Urban League, the 1930s proved to be a very active time for Black workers to strike and fight for integration in

many labor unions and industries. Even integrated industries still frequently employed overqualified African Americans in the lowest paying positions. It was not uncommon to find Black “cleaning cuspidors or running elevators, and expert machinists working as day laborers.”¹³ But in spite of the staunch color line in the AFL, the 1930s also marked the first time a Black union was allowed into the AFL when the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters led by A. Philip Randolph was given a federal charter by the Federation.

Chapter 4 follows the advancements made in the 1930s with the deeper Black Freedom Struggle in the war years of the 1940s. In January 1941, A. Philip Randolph created the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) to pressure President Roosevelt into forcing integration in war industries. Though called off, the MOWM succeeded when President Roosevelt ordered the desegregation of all defense related industries in Executive Order 8802, and created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). Though both 8802 and the FEPC were relatively unenforced, the MOWM, combined with the radical actors in the 1930s (the Urban League and in some cases the CIO), actively fought to uphold their government given rights. Despite the newly intensified action taken against strikers during World War II, the MOWM helped lead many strikes to force the integration of many defense plants. Many Black organizations during the 1940s as a whole furthered the Double V Campaign to promote winning the war abroad while also winning the fight for social justice in America. However, a strike wave in 1945-1946 resulted in further government crackdown on labor with the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in

¹³ Herman Feldman and Bruno Lasker, *Racial Factors in American Industry*, (Harper & Brothers 1931), 36-37.

1947, permanently neutering the influence of labor unions. The chapter and thesis concludes with the eventual collapse of the March on Washington Movement, but how the work of the organization led to the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s.

Chapter 1: Labor in Black and White

“The countryman who waited on the banks of the river until the stream would flow past before attempting to cross has generally been laughed at for his folly. But in these days of strikes and labor reforms, his philosophy has become respectable, and may be accepted as good common sense, worthy of imitation.” - *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*¹

Introduction

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided America with the opportunity for labor unions to develop in the states. As capital consolidated into larger monopolies, wages were cut, and working conditions became drastically worse and more dangerous, unions had more to fight for. The American public grew particularly sympathetic to workers facing horrible conditions in factories, popularized by works like Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*.² Though unions in America had existed in the eighteenth century, larger national and international unions reached unprecedented heights near the end of the nineteenth century. Class struggle and solidarity would be the unifying force behind most labor unions, but some collections of unions valued the preservation of segregation and white supremacy more than the betterment of the labor movement as a whole. In this chapter, I argue that state violence against labor and union

¹ *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “In St. Louis” July 25, 1877.

² Though Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* was released in 1906, the conditions still existed for decades before in the American Gilded Age following postwar reconstruction.

segregation are what kept large unions like the American Federation of Labor (AFL) conservative and restricted the progress of the American labor movement.

The following pages explore a series of connected developments in the US labor movement at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1877, the Great Railroad Strike and the St. Louis General Strike showed the potential strength of class organizing that crossed the color line. In the following years, the interracial Knights of Labor gained enormous support from American workers, yet would ultimately crumble a decade later. The collapse of the Knights spurred the formation of the AFL, a collection of labor unions which actively sought to avoid interracial unionism. The 1900 St. Louis Streetcar Strike shows how AFL strikes could appear to foster violence associated with radical unionism, while still conservatively maintaining union segregation within the entirely white Street Railway Employees of America local in St. Louis. Following the McNamara trial in 1911 that set labor radicals back decades, the AFL became even more conservative: discouraging the use of violence in strikes and dropping their prior pretense of attempting to organize Black workers. By rejecting radicalism and enforcing segregation, rather than integrating unions and industries, the AFL actively restricted both Black and white workers' progress.

Strike and Be Damned: The 1877 Great Strike and St. Louis General Strike

The first unions that existed in the United States formed near the end of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. These first unions were generally local craft unions among

printers, cordwainers, bakers, shipwrights, and carpenters.³ They first appeared as a result of the “coming capitalist conditions” as evidenced by the lengthening of work hours, lowering of wages, and labor competition perpetuated by the employing class. The labor structure of a master, journeymen, and apprentice system made it not only possible, but easy, for journeymen to organize into unions.⁴ Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, working conditions became drastically worse and the need for unions and labor organizations grew, particularly as the American economy became more and more industrialized. However, when the global economy stumbled in May 1873 with the collapse of the Vienna stock market, and the resultant collapse of the domestic railroad empires, workers’ conditions in America deteriorated further with reduced wages.⁵

Jay Cooke & Company was an American bank strongly associated with stability. In 1870, Cooke began investing in the ever-expanding railroad industry, by facilitating the development and expansion of the Northern Pacific Railroad. However, lending the money of his clients resulted in Jay Cooke & Company overextending, and the company eventually went under as his clients began withdrawing their money. On September 18, 1873, Cooke diverted his assets to his wife so they would not be seized by government authorities and officially suspended all operations. Cooke admitted to the public that he had been using his depositors’ money in order to keep Northern Pacific afloat, saying “where else could we get the money?” In a “panic”, Americans from all over the country began withdrawing their money from other companies,

³ Robert Franklin Hoxie, Lucy Bennett Hoxie, and Nathan Fine, *Trade Unionism in the United States* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1917), 78.

⁴ Hoxie, *Trade Unionism in the United States*, 82.

⁵ Mark Kruger, *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 137.

sending those banks under as well.⁶ The actual panic withdrawals occurred over a very short time, and American banks had their total capital reduced by 23% in only a month.⁷ Banks were reluctant to loan money following the panic, collapsing the real estate market as thousands of mortgages were closed by the end of the year, further sending the economy into disarray.⁸ In the same year, unemployment rates in many east coast cities grew to 25%. As the loosening labor market made workers increasingly replaceable and readily available, companies capitalized by firing and blacklisting any unionists, a privilege they could not afford in a more competitive labor market.⁹ In New York City, union membership dropped from 45,000 in 1873 to 5,000 in 1876 as workers fled from unions in order to maintain their jobs.¹⁰ Railroad companies, who were the largest employers in the United States and had been thriving for the past decade, defaulted on bonds worth \$400 million. In 1874, half a million railway workers had lost their jobs. The workers who kept their jobs were still paid next to nothing. In his election of that year as head of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Grand Chief Engineer P. M. Arthur, gave his inaugural address saying that “the highest wages paid engineers at the present time is \$4.00 a

⁶ Michael A Bellesiles, *1877: America's Year of Living Violently* (New York: New Press, 2010) 3-4.

⁷ Bellesiles, *1877*, 5.

⁸ Bellesiles, *1877*, 5.

⁹ A normal practice both before and after the Panic of 1873, but the depression provided a rich opportunity for employers who were only held back prior by a shortage of labor. As they had a nearly endless supply of available labor, companies sought to remove union members and leaders with a renewed vigor.

¹⁰ Piper, Jessica. “The Great Railroad Strike of 1877: A Catalyst for the American Labor Movement.” *The History Teacher*, 47, no. 1 (November 1, 2013): https://www.jstor.org/stable/43264188#metadata_info_tab_contents (Accessed January 31, 2023), 3-4.

day, and they are on duty 15-18 hours,” earning around 25 cents an hour.¹¹ By June of 1876, 40% of all railroad bonds, valued at nearly \$800 million, had defaulted.¹²

The situation was made worse as Congress passed the Coinage Act of 1873, demonetizing silver and devaluing the already shot currency. In 1876, Congress voted to return back to the gold standard, which shortened the money supply even further. Many Americans who could not find employment ended up homeless and living in horrible conditions. In 1877, future AFL President Samuel Gompers and his family of six would eat soup made of flour, water, salt, and pepper.¹³ By 1878, the average American citizen had \$16.95 to their name. The economic situation was so bad that “a sufficient proportion of the population literally did not have money.”¹⁴

Pennsylvania Railroad, the largest corporation in the United States, with two million employees, repeatedly cut wages throughout the depression without informing the Brotherhood of Engineers, violating their agreement which required the company to consult with the union before they could adjust wages. The committee of the Brotherhood visited the superintendent, J. M. McCullough, and threatened to strike. McCullough fired them all, saying “strike and be damned.” Baltimore and Ohio Railroad cut wages by 50% in 1873, and cut wages even further several times through the depression, though they never missed or decreased a dividend throughout the entirety of the depression.¹⁵ On July 11, 1877, B&O president John W. Garrett

¹¹ A Brief History of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, (S1193), box 1, Mark Waldemere Labor Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, St. Louis, MO.

¹² Bellesiles, *1877*, 5-7.

¹³ Harold C. Livesay, *Samuel Gompers and Organized Labor in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1978), 50.

¹⁴ Bellesiles, *1877*, 7-8, 26.

¹⁵ Bellesiles, *1877*, 145-146.

announced a 10% pay cut. Four days later, B&O announced another 10% pay cut, set to go into effect the following day.¹⁶

Shortly before noon on July 16th, the fireman on Engine 32 abandoned his train at Camden Junction, two miles from Baltimore, encouraging many workers to join him.¹⁷ The strike spread like wildfire as engineers and other railway workers abandoned their posts. In less than four days after the commencement of the strike on B&O, “no inconsiderable portion” of the United States was in the hands of the strikers as workers at nearly every railroad company joined the strike: the 1877 Railroad Strike, also referred to as the Great Strike, had begun. Across the nation, “transportation was embargoed; shops closed, factories deserted, and the great marts which but a few days before had been so noisy, had become silent as banquet halls deserted.”¹⁸ Within a week of the strike beginning, two-thirds of the nation's 75,000 miles of track were directly impacted.¹⁹ The 1877 Great Strike marked the first time in American history that the federal government had to intervene in a labor strike to maintain order.²⁰

Six days after the beginning of the Great Strike, on July 22, railroad workers gathered in a crowd at the rail yards in East St. Louis. Speeches given by the workers were aggressively anti-capitalist, further perpetuated when the St. Louis branch of the Workingmen’s Party arrived in

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 148.

¹⁷ Yearley Jr., Clifton K. “The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Strike of 1877.” *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 51, no. 3 (September 3, 1956): <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/speccol/sc2200/sc2221/000009/html/0008.html> (Accessed January 31, 2023), 194.

¹⁸ J. A. Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes in the United States: a Reliable History and Graphic Description of the Causes and Thrilling Events of the Labor Strikes and Riots of 1877* (St. Louis: Scammell, 1877), 23.

¹⁹ Alex Yard, *Workers, Radicals, and Capitalists: The St. Louis Strike of 1877*, S0320, box 1, folder 1. St. Louis Strike of 1877 Manuscript, State Historical Society of Missouri, 3.

²⁰ Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes in the United States*, 42.

support of the strike. Formed in 1876, the socialist Workingmen's Party of the United States played a notable role in organizing many of the railroad strikes during the strike wave of 1877. Encouraged, the local rail workers union voted and decided to officially strike.²¹ They would be joined by workers of other unions, and this coalition of strikers formed an executive committee. The following day, the executive committee issued General Order No. 1, officially blockading all rails. General Order No. 2 required all negotiations to be through the executive committee. The mayor of East St. Louis, John Bowman, was forced into a corner. Needing the votes of the workers for his upcoming election, combined with the fact he only had twelve police officers at his disposal, Bowman sided with the strikers and volunteered to serve as an ambassador to the railroad companies in St. Louis on behalf of the strikers. Bowman also appointed several strikers as special police in order to protect railroad property.²² Throughout the entire strike, no property was damaged or stolen in St. Louis or East St. Louis.²³ The strikers and executive committee effectively controlled East St. Louis within the span of two days. Following these events, James H. Wilson, receiver for the St. Louis and Southeastern Railroad, telegraphed the United States Secretary of the Interior, Carl Shurz, saying: "The railroad employees met at East St. Louis tonight and have resolved to stop all freight trains and switching engines after midnight. No violence yet. Are there any troops at arsenal here the situation is alarming."²⁴

²¹ Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 156.

²² James Callahan, "Unlawfully and Righteously Assembled in the City of St. Louis: The Workingmen's Party's Role During the Great Strike of 1877 in St. Louis" (unpublished manuscript, 2004, p. 17-18)

²³ Bellesiles, *1877*, 170; Roediger, D. R. "'Not Only the Ruling Classes to Overcome, But Also the So-Called Mob.' Class, Skill and Community in the St. Louis General Strike of 1877." *Journal of social history* 19, no. 2 (1985): 213–239.

²⁴ Kruger, *The St. Louis Commune of 1877*, 148.

Across the river in St. Louis, disgruntled Missouri Pacific Railroad employees sought to restore their wages. Subject to multiple pay cuts during the depression, employees of Missouri Pacific sent a committee requesting that their wages be restored to what they were at the beginning of the year. Missouri Pacific offered a compromised wage between the two, but this proposal was rejected by the workers. Upon further conference, the company decided to fully restore the workers' wages to their January 1 total, fearful that the actions of the East St. Louis railway workers would spread into St. Louis.²⁵ James H. Wilson condemned this "betrayal of capitalist solidarity" saying that there would then be "no end to their demands."²⁶

The organizers of the Workingmen's Party in St. Louis organized a rally held in the city. The assembly in attendance elected five men to talk to the mayor, one of which was a Black man. The Workingmen's Party which had actively avoided organizing Black workers was now being led in part by a Black representative, and ultimately being driven to a decision on whether to form a natural alliance with Black workers of St. Louis, or to continue to ignore their call.²⁷ The following day, on July 24, the Workingmen's Party organized another meeting. Despite barely consisting of a thousand members in St. Louis, ten thousand St. Louisans attended the second Workingmen's Party rally. There, they proposed that the ongoing strike become a city-wide general strike, fighting against child labor and in support of an eight-hour workday.²⁸ Those in attendance voted, and a decision was made. What followed was one of the first general strikes in the history of the United States.

²⁵ Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes in the United States*, 376.

²⁶ Bellesiles, *1877*, 171.

²⁷ Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America*, 156.

²⁸ Roediger, "Not Only the Ruling Classes to Overcome," 213.

Just two years after the Paris Commune, the St. Louis general strike appeared to be one of the first instances of true labor radicalism in the United States. Karl Marx predicted this radicalism could potentially be the catalyst for the downfall of American capitalism. Several of the leaders heading the St. Louis General Strike were members of the First International headed by Marx.²⁹ The strike even appeared to ignore the previously rigid racial boundaries of St. Louis. At an early meeting during the general strike, a Black worker gave a stirring speech, asking if white workers would support demands made by Black workers, and the crowd responded with a resounding “we will!”³⁰ In addition to organizing nightly mass meetings, the St. Louis Workingmen’s Party organized an executive committee of roughly 47 members, sending delegates to different shops asking them to stop working and join the other strikers.³¹ By July 26th, nearly every manufacturer in St. Louis had temporarily been closed, and the economic activities of the city of 350,000 had reached a standstill.³² On the 27th, the appearance of a radical revolution was seemingly confirmed by the Workingmen’s Party who claimed that they were not partaking in a strike, but rather a social revolution. They also stated that they were fighting for general welfare for all workers, including Black workers. The local St. Louis press was particularly anti-strike, criticizing the radicalism of the strike and claiming that all the strikers involved were Black. Every newspaper that mentioned the strike outside of St. Louis noted that Black workers were a minority party involved in the strike.³³ But the *Missouri*

²⁹ Terry Moon and Ron Brokmeyer, *Then and Now: On the 100th Anniversary of the First General Strike in the U.S.*, (Detroit News and Letters Committees, 1977), 6.

³⁰ Roediger, “Not Only the Ruling Classes to Overcome,” 225.

³¹ James Callahan, “Unlawfully and Righteously Assembled in the City of St. Louis”, p. 19-20

³² Bellesiles, *1877*, 172; Roediger, “Not Only the Ruling Classes to Overcome,” 213.

³³ Roediger, “Not Only the Ruling Classes to Overcome,” 215-216.

Republican claimed that the strike was controlled by “notorious Negroes” and accused the Workingmen’s Party of race mixing.³⁴

Shortly after the general strike was called, the Workingmen’s Party and other strikers paraded around the city. During the parade, different organizations, shops, unions, and various worker collectives took their turn leading the parade. The Workingmen’s Party became uneasy when it was the Black workers’ turn to lead the parade. As Black workers began showing up to mass meetings in greater numbers, the Workingmen’s Party banned mass meetings altogether, afraid that their presence would dissuade white workers from joining the strike. Some mass meetings would still be held despite the order of the Workingmen’s Party, and smaller meetings were held daily in each individual shop who formed their own committees and held their own processions.³⁵ Albert Currin, a recent immigrant who led the German section of the ethnically divided Workingmen’s Party, said his section was completely unwilling to work with African Americans: “a gang of n****rs... sent word that they wanted to join the [Workingmen’s Party]. We replied that we wanted nothing to do with them.”³⁶ Following the strike, *Labor Standard*, the magazine of the Workingmen’s Party, bragged that “white and Black workmen stood together in... struggle. Labor recognized neither color, creed nor nationality,” despite the fact that the Workingmen’s Party still refused to hold meetings with Black workers in attendance.³⁷

When the state troops called by James H. Wilson of St. Louis and Southeastern Railroad finally arrived on July 24, St. Louis Mayor Overstolz spoke with General Jeff Davis and advised

³⁴ Bellesiles, *1877*, 172.

³⁵ Moon, *First General Strike in the U.S.*, 10.

³⁶ James Callahan, “Unlawfully and Righteously Assembled in the City of St. Louis, p. 28

³⁷ David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (London: Verso, 2007), 167.

restraint. Believing that Overstolz was on the side of the strikers, the manufacturers' committee and the St. Louis Police Board formed their own posse comitatus (a group of civilians recruited by authorities in a time of emergency) to suppress the strikes.³⁸ They even requested that the mayor order strikers back to work, but he refused to do so.³⁹ The posse was jointly led by Civil War generals A.J. Smith (Union) and John S. Marmaduke (Confederate).⁴⁰ The two opposing Civil War generals managed to jointly lead an armed force together, while the Workingmen's Party could not manage to tolerate Black workers at their rallies. Though Mayor Overstolz initially remained largely neutral and valued the protection of the city above all else, by July 27, Overstolz decided that the activities of the Workingmen's Party threatened the peace, fearing that their parades could easily turn to riots. That afternoon, he led the police force and posse to the Workingmen's Party's headquarters, taking several members of the executive committee into custody. He then ordered all members of the posse to return to their homes and accomplished this without any violence.⁴¹ This would be a very anticlimactic end to what the Workingmen's Party promised would be a very radical struggle. Despite the collapse of the party, following the raid, even more workers abandoned their jobs. Several individual strikes continued into the

³⁸ The posse comitatus was called by the Board of Police Commissioners to recruit 5,000 men to protect public property. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that "recruits are coming in by the hundreds, and by night it is safe to say 20,000 men will be ready to move at the command." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 25, 1877, 1.

³⁹ Alex Yard, *Workers, Radicals, and Capitalists*, 50.

⁴⁰ James Callahan, "Unlawfully and Righteously Assembled in the City of St. Louis, p. 21

⁴¹ The only real instance of violence during the entirety of the strike was when Patrick Develin, a soldier brought in to restore order, was robbed of 50 cents by a prostitute, Sylvia Hammon. Develin went back to his camp, grabbed a gun, and shot and killed her, as well as another prostitute who tried to come to her aid. Bellesiles, *1877*, 196.

following week as Overstolz refused to get involved in any of these smaller disputes, and many St. Louis bosses had no option but to increase wages in order to lure their workers back.⁴²

Even prior to the raid on the Workingmen's headquarters, strikers had criticized the Executive Committee for their lack of action, considering that they had all the power they could have ever hoped for, yet accomplished very little. Following the raid, the Workingmen's Party was criticized further for not fighting back against the police in the name of their so-called revolution.⁴³ The following day, U.S. troops invaded East St. Louis and seized the depot that the strikers were using for their headquarters without any resistance, arresting some hundred workers in the process, ending their strike as well.⁴⁴

The St. Louis General Strike was significant in that it provided an opportunity for a radical labor organization to make significant gains. The Workingmen's Party had the complete run of the city with all the power in their hands. This forced the St. Louis aristocracy and employing class to request the support of federal troops in order to crush the uprising, despite the drastic need for troops around the country to eliminate other strikes. Because the Workingmen's Party attempted to fight against both the government and the capitalists, it was unable to survive under the force of both. As the entire existence of the St. Louis General Strike was formed around mass meetings, their attempt to ban them doomed the integrity of the strike. The ultimate potential of the strike remained unrealized as the Workingmen's Party feared Black worker militancy which led them to shut down the mass meetings that were the lifeblood of the strike. Racist members of the party also divided the interests of workers between fighting the capitalists

⁴²Alex Yard, *Workers, Radicals, and Capitalists*, 51.

⁴³ Moon, *First General Strike in the U.S.*, 12.

⁴⁴ Bellesiles, *1877*, 174

and fighting Black workers trying to become involved in the strike. Though African Americans only comprised 6.3% of the St. Louis population in 1880, this small population would continue to be ostracized throughout the history of the city as local whites valued upholding Jim Crow segregation more than dealing with their own needs.⁴⁵ However, as the Black population would grow in the coming decades, whites had little choice but to concede to the efforts of Black civil rights organizers fighting for integration, whether it be in union strikes or at lunch counters.

The Knights of Labor and the AFL

In protest of all the local politicians who called for military support during the Great Strike, new labor parties across the country were formed and won local elections throughout the following year. In St. Louis, the Workingmen's Party carried five of the city's wards. In statewide races, however, labor parties performed poorly.⁴⁶ Many labor unions and organizations lost significant membership during the depression and following the Great Strike as the unions struggled to aid workers in times of need. Without gaining any benefit from the unions, many workers sought to distance themselves from the violence and hate directed towards organized labor. One of the few labor organizations that gained popularity following the Great Strike was the Knights of Labor.

⁴⁵ Lilian Brandt, *The Negroes of St. Louis: A Statistical Study*, (Wellesley College, 1901).

⁴⁶ Bellesiles, *1877*, 188-189.

Officially the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, the Knights were first formed as one of several secret societies among Philadelphia artisans in the late 1860s.⁴⁷ The first mass organization of the American working class, the Knights were ahead of their time in that they organized industrial workers, both skilled and unskilled, across racial and gender lines.⁴⁸ The Knights sought to overcome racial boundaries in order for working people to advance, but this interracial organizing only existed in terms of Black and white. The Knights organized Black workers who, they argued, were not a competitive threat in the labor market to the white worker, but would eventually become a threat if they were not organized. However, the Knights actively rejected Chinese and other immigrants, arguing that they already were a threat in the labor market and viewed them a very active and competitive “other.”⁴⁹ The Knights officially threw off their secrecy in 1878. Due to their efforts in aiding and organizing strikers and their willingness to organize both Black and white workers, many workers joined their ranks.⁵⁰ Despite this “interracial radicalism” that contributed to their success, being painted as a radical union would ultimately lead to their downfall. Originally, the Knights’ leadership was opposed to strikes and boycotts, until the rank-and-file forced their leadership to accept these tactics, though Master Workman and leader of the Knights, Terence V. Powderly, still preferred arbitration to striking.⁵¹ The majority of the Knights’ history consists of the general membership encouraging their leadership to become more radical and take progressive stances on labor

⁴⁷ Leon Fink, *Workingmen’s Democracy: the Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 7.

⁴⁸ Fink, *Workingmen’s Democracy*, 221.

⁴⁹ Joseph Gerteis, *Class and the Color Line: Interracial Class Coalition in the Knights of Labor and the Populist Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3, 8.

⁵⁰ Sterling Spero and Abraham Lincoln Harris, *The Black Worker: the Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 40.

⁵¹ Livesay, *Samuel Gompers and Organized Labor in America*, 76.

policy. Following the Great Strike, the Knights evolved to become what was considered a militant labor organization pushed by the interracial radicalism among the ranks of the Knights.⁵²

While the Knights grew in popularity following the Great Strike, nearly every other union in the United States lost membership. Samuel Gompers, future leader of the AFL, and member of his Cigar Makers Union local, saw the failings of his then current union. Gompers, with fellow Cigar Maker Adolph Strasser, formed his own union and committed the cardinal sin of labor: dual-unionism. Dual-unionism is the practice of creating a second union parallel to an already existing union, dividing organized labor and reducing the power of each individual union. Gompers justified this breach in morality as a matter of life or death, an argument he would use throughout his illustrious career in labor, and he maintained his membership in his old union.⁵³ Instead of assembling a group of prominent leaders, creating an organization, and designing a theoretical plan with broad, sweeping promises in order to attract workers, Gompers started from the bottom up. He recruited full-time workers and full-time workers only. On one hand, if a worker wanted to join the union, and they were a Republican, Democratic, or Socialist, they could join. There were no bars on political memberships or views, as being a worker was the only requirement. On the other hand, one could not join the union just because one had sympathetic views to the union or were in a political party aligned with the union's needs. His new union, the United Cigar Makers, also did not focus on nationwide political or economic struggles, instead only focusing on their own workers' conditions.⁵⁴

⁵² Livesay, *Samuel Gompers and Organized Labor in America*, 78.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 42.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 43.

Throughout the next few years following the Great Strike, the United Cigar Makers developed inwardly, expanded membership, and fought for better wages and working conditions. Despite having fewer than three hundred members, the United Cigar Makers was the largest cigar making union in the United States. Gompers proposed his general plan to improve the union even further. This plan consisted of increased dues in opposition to “Cheap John Unionism,” unions that used low membership dues to attract workers but could not afford to fight employers who could simply outlast any strikes with their far superior economic advantage, as seen with many of the strikes during the 1877 strike wave. His plan also established strike protocols, sick pay, and death benefits, among other union programs. The United Cigar Makers finally accepted his plan at the beginning of 1881. From the time it was accepted in January, by September of the same year, their total membership had increased from less than three hundred members to more than three thousand.⁵⁵

Competition between international labor organizations competing for the same workers had been, and would be, a point of contention. The Knights of Labor recruited cigar makers from New York, in the same area that Samuel Gompers’ United Cigar Makers Local 144 existed. Gompers and his associates immediately cried in outrage of dual unionism, which was how their own union had been formed. The Knights still succeeded in attracting many members from Gompers’ United Cigar Makers, including some socialists from Gompers’ own local.⁵⁶ Yet the Knights were not the only union violating the fundamentals of worker solidarity, as when the Knights’ Cigar Makers local went on strike, Gompers’ and his organization were only too eager

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 46.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 78.

to serve as strikebreakers, sabotaging the strike.⁵⁷ The United Cigar Makers and the Knights of Labor provide one of many examples in labor history in which opposing unions were constantly at odds with each other, violating worker solidarity to each other's detriment. By pitting union against union, employers actively benefited not only from dual unionism, but by employing skilled members from opposing unions as strikebreakers.

The downfall of the Knights of Labor did not originate from their practices of dual unionism, but their promotion of the more radical eight-hour workday movement and the untimely events of the Haymarket Riot.⁵⁸ On May 3, 1886, police shot and killed four workers and injured many others who were attacking strikebreakers in Chicago.⁵⁹ The following day, a crowd of 1,500 showed up for a series of speeches following the police shooting. Rain showers reduced the number in attendance to around 600 total workers when the police arrived to disperse the crowd.⁶⁰ As those gathered began to leave, an individual, standing separately from the crowd, threw a dynamite bomb at the police line. Immediately after regaining their senses, the police opened fire on the crowd for nearly two minutes straight, firing around 250 rounds. As the firing ceased, the crowd, who had taken refuge in saloons and nearby houses wandered out. The police re-opened fire on them and then eventually ceased permanently.⁶¹ Following what was termed as the Haymarket Square Riot, the police grabbed the first eight “anarchists” they could find and charged them with murder; despite only three of the suspects being in the square

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 79.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 81.

⁵⁹ Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014), 46.

⁶⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, “A Hellish Deed”, May 5, 1886, 1.

⁶¹ *Chicago Tribune*, “A Hellish Deed”, May 5, 1886, 1.

when the bomb was thrown. All eight were convicted.⁶² While a number of the so-called rioters were injured, the majority of casualties came from the side of the officers, further terrifying the citizens of Chicago who now feared an impending anarchy that would inevitably rain down upon the city.⁶³ Following the incident, one newspaper cried that the “anarchists of Chicago inaugurated in earnest last night the reign of lawlessness which they have threatened and endeavored to incite for years.”⁶⁴

While no officer of the Knights of Labor or of any trade union spoke at the rally, the Knights came under attack as a radical labor organization that was associated with the bombing.⁶⁵ Following Haymarket, employers’ associations all over the United States began processes to further restrict workers. The Knights of Labor had organized many strikes in support of an eight-hour workday in the months before the Haymarket affair. The few employers that accepted the eight-hour workday immediately reverted back to the ten- or twelve-hour work days in their factories. When workers threatened to strike, employers shut down their plants which heavily demoralized the would-be strikers. Employers sent spies into unions and most labor leaders were blacklisted from work.⁶⁶ In some cases, entire unions were blacklisted, reducing union membership across the United States as workers were reluctant to join with a target on their back, and many union members quit in order to keep their employment.⁶⁷ The

⁶² Livesay, *Samuel Gompers and Organized Labor in America*, 83.

⁶³ *Chicago Tribune*, “A Hellish Deed”, May 5, 1886, 1.

⁶⁴ *The Inter Ocean*, “Now it is Blood!”, May 5, 1886, 2.

⁶⁵ Livesay, *Samuel Gompers and Organized Labor in America*, 83.

⁶⁶ The practice of employers sending spies into unions was a well-established practice, but it intensified following the Haymarket affair.

⁶⁷ Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* (New York: Viking Press, 1931), 85-86.

“Iron-Clad Oath” (later known as yellow-dog contracts) prohibited workers from joining a labor organization as a requirement for employment and became widely mandatory for workers to sign following Haymarket and the Knights’ eight hour workday movement.⁶⁸

Peter J. McGuire of the Brotherhood of Carpenters called a conference of national trade unions in Philadelphia on May 17, two weeks after the Haymarket incident. This group, which included Gompers, drafted a treatise to be delivered at the next national gathering of the Knights of Labor, demanding that the Knights disband all forms of dual unionism, refrain from establishing new unions that violated dual unionism, kick strikebreakers and scabs out of their organization, and included several other limiting provisions. This proposal effectively demanded that the Knights of Labor withdraw from the American labor movement. This proposal was rejected, but the Knights would never recover from the events of Haymarket Square. In 1886, the Knights had 702,000 members, but by 1887 this dropped to 510,000 members, and the following year their total dropped again to 259,000.⁶⁹ While they would still exist in the following years, the Knights all but faded out of existence by the 1890s.⁷⁰

The fear of violent labor organizations and anarchists grew in the minds of those Americans who could easily recall the nationwide bloodshed that accompanied the Great Strike. This presented an opportunity for conservative labor to become accepted as the norm in labor politics. The same heads of the national trade unions who sent the list of demands to the Knights of Labor would form the AFL at the end of the year. The unions in the AFL were organized in a

⁶⁸ Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!*, 50.

⁶⁹ Leo Wolman, *The Growth of American Trade Unions, 1880-1923*, (National Bureau of Economic Research, 1924), 32.

⁷⁰ Livesay, *Samuel Gompers and Organized Labor in America*, 83-84.

way that reinforced pre-existing divisions between both skilled and unskilled workers, and excluded Black workers, women, and new immigrants; this directly contradicted the founding principles of the Knights of Labor.⁷¹ Gompers argued that these exclusions and imperfections of the labor movement must be endured by both unions and society, and that by giving them time, labor unions undergo a process of evolution on their own, and must not be manipulated by the state.⁷² However, Gompers' idea of union evolution took a very long time to develop, as the AFL maintained a long practice of excluding Black workers from many of their unions. Though Gompers endorsed a racially unified AFL for the first years after its founding, this standard was quietly dropped by the late 1890s.⁷³ It was not until 1900 that the AFL agreed to grant charters to separate local unions and central bodies of Black workers.⁷⁴ It took until 1964 for the last affiliate of the AFL-CIO to remove the "whites only" clause in its constitution and bylaws.⁷⁵ Black workers who had shown their strength in organizing during the Great Strike and with the Knights of Labor and their eight hour day movement, though they were still left out by white workers who—when pushed onto the defensive—valued maintaining their supposed racial superiority over integrated unions.

⁷¹ Eric Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" *History workshop* 17, no. 17 (1984): 68.

⁷² *Samuel Gompers Under Cross-Examination, Before the New York Legislature Committee Investigating Housing Conditions, 1922*, (Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor), 3.

⁷³ Marla Hughes, Introduction to the Minutes of the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor, University of Maryland Microfilm Project, 17.

⁷⁴ Brailsford Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters: Its Origin and Development* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 159.

⁷⁵ Norman Hill, "Forging a Partnership Between Blacks and Unions," *Monthly Labor Review* 110, no. 8 (1987): 38.

The Violently Conservative St. Louis Streetcar Strike

First introduced to the city in 1887, streetcars in St. Louis became an increasingly popular mode of transportation.⁷⁶ The AFL gave the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees of America (AASREA) an official charter on November 8, 1893.⁷⁷ In 1899, the railcar companies in St. Louis combined into two large corporations: the Suburban Line Company and the St. Louis Transit Company. The all-white St. Louis local of the AASREA was formed in the same year due to poor treatment of the workers.⁷⁸ The St. Louis Transit Company had around 4,000 workers, and 2,100 of them had joined the newly established division of the AASREA. Many workers were working twelve-hour workdays for only twelve to sixteen cents an hour, and could be fired for wearing a union button or admitting they were a part of the union.⁷⁹ On March 7, 1900, streetcar employees met at Harmone Hall and demanded that employees who were fired for being union members be rehired. They also requested higher wages, a shortened ten-hour workday, overtime compensation, and general union recognition. The streetcar workers gave a twenty-four-hour ultimatum for the company to accept their terms, under threat of strike. The company was granted a three-day extension and eventually compromised with the workers. Under the new contract, the majority of provisions requested by

⁷⁶ St. Louis Electrical Board. *A Century Plus of Electrical Progress: History of the Electrical Industry in Metro St. Louis*, (St. Louis Electrical Board, 1983), 8.

⁷⁷ History of Organizations Affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, AFL-CIO Archive, University of Maryland, College Park, MD., <https://lib.guides.umd.edu/c.php?g=327462&p=2196193>.

⁷⁸ St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 Scrapbook, State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis.

⁷⁹ Zachary Palitzsch, "ST. LOUIS LABOR RETROSPECTIVE: Wild West St. Louis: Street Railway Employees Fight for Rights." *The Labor Tribune*, November 22, 2021. <https://labortribune.com/st-louis-labor-retrospective-wild-west-st-louis-street-railway-employees-fight-for-rights/>.

the union were approved by the companies, but this contract would never be upheld. While agreeing to the contract, the streetcar companies never followed through, maintaining the twelve-hour workday, freezing wages, and refusing to rehire union workers.⁸⁰

Tensions between the streetcar workers and the companies grew to a boiling point, and on May 5, 11:30pm, a Suburban Company car at the Wabash and Sarah street crossing was blown up by workers with dynamite in protest of the company refusing to uphold the contract, killing several passengers.⁸¹ Two days later, 2,500 streetcar workers met at Masonic Hall to discuss the ongoing negotiations with the streetcar companies, as they still refused to implement the March 10th agreement.⁸² The meeting carried on into the night, and at two in the morning the following day, the workers unanimously voted to strike. They demanded that the companies implement the provisions from the March 10th agreement, and grant unions the power to suspend any worker they wanted to, revoke the ability of the companies to fire union members, and force all workers to join their union.⁸³ That day, the strikers walked off their jobs and gathered throughout the city to block the streetcars, joined by many sympathizers.⁸⁴ The strike officially began the day after, on May 9. White strikebreakers were brought in from Cleveland, and the strikers threw stones, bricks, soggy bread, and frogs at the passing trains and streetcars.⁸⁵ As one streetcar was passing by the crowd of strikers and sympathizers, the protesters charged

⁸⁰ St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 Scrapbook, SHSMO.

⁸¹ Ken Zimmerman, *St. Louis Civil War: The Streetcar Strike of 1900*, (Ken Zimmerman Jr. Enterprises, 2014), 8, 10.

⁸² Zimmerman, *St. Louis Civil War: The Streetcar Strike of 1900*, 14.

⁸³ Zimmerman, *St. Louis Civil War: The Streetcar Strike of 1900*, 14-15.

⁸⁴ Palitzsch, "Wild West St. Louis."

⁸⁵ Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America*, 177; James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri, 1764-1980*, St. Louis: [Columbia]: Missouri Historical Society Press; Distributed by University of Missouri Press, 1998, 359.

the vehicle. The armed scabs on the car fired into the crowd, wounding several and killing a spectator at the end of the street. Policemen drove the protesters back with their clubs, and the scabs on the car were never charged with any crime, arguing their actions were in self-defense. As violence increased throughout the strike, the governor offered to arbitrate negotiations, but both sides refused.⁸⁶

St. Louis Mayor Ziegenhein ordered strikers back to work on May 13, stating that the strikers were public service workers and had an obligation to work. The streetcar workers refused and organized horse-drawn freight wagons as a mode of alternative transport.⁸⁷ The police board called upon Sheriff Pohlmann to summon a posse comitatus of 1,000 men, which increased to 2,500 a few days later. Service was mandatory if called upon by the police.⁸⁸ The posse was tasked with the protection of property and ordered to suppress any possible rioting. These men consisted of upper and middle class St. Louisans, armed with shotguns known as “riot guns.”⁸⁹ By May 15, there were up to 3,600 striking employees, and the police were still actively dispersing the crowds with clubs and the flat side of their sabres.⁹⁰ By this point, the Suburban Line had decided to negotiate an agreement with the strikers in order to put an end to the violence. Both sides made concessions in an effort to end the strike, and as a result, the Suburban Line lost very little money over the course of the strike. However, the Transit Company still refused to negotiate with the strikers.⁹¹ So great was the public support for the

⁸⁶ Zimmerman, *St. Louis Civil War: The Streetcar Strike of 1900*, 19-23.

⁸⁷ Zimmerman, *St. Louis Civil War: The Streetcar Strike of 1900*, 117.

⁸⁸ Primm, *Lion of the Valley*, 359.

⁸⁹ St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 Scrapbook, SHSMO.

⁹⁰ “St. Louis Street Car Strike,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 1900, p1.

⁹¹ St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 Scrapbook, SHSMO.

strikers that the St. Louis Central Labor Union elected a committee of fifty members to form an organization that raised \$100,000 to carry on the strike until it was won.⁹²

Violence persisted throughout the strike until May 21, when there was a ten-day lull in violence. The public and the strikers began to think that perhaps the bloodshed was over, but they were mistaken. On May 31, violence renewed as a mentally ill strike sympathizer shot a police officer and was then killed in retaliation.⁹³ On June 10, a parade of unarmed strikers returning from a picnic were shot by police, and three were killed. Twenty of the strikers were then arrested and held for trial.⁹⁴ The following day, Mayor Ziegenhein issued a proclamation barring the citizens from “gathering in numbers on the street or in public places” for a period of three days in an effort to quell the strike.⁹⁵ To a degree, this order worked to reduce the violence.

The strike persisted without much violence until July 2, when President Whittaker of the Transit Car Company finally agreed to honor the original March 10th agreement. What appeared to be the official end of the strike was nothing more than a facade, as he immediately began hiring strikebreakers and non-strike workers permanently. For the next week, the Transit Company began very slowly putting strike workers back on the payroll.⁹⁶ By July 15, the strikers realized that again, the Transit Company was not going to commit to their agreement, and the strike was renewed with violence again.⁹⁷

⁹² “St Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 – WE NEVER FORGET,” July 12, 2021.

<https://weneverforget.org/tag/st-louis-streetcar-strike-of-1900/>.

⁹³ Zimmerman, *St. Louis Civil War: The Streetcar Strike of 1900*, 26-27.

⁹⁴ Palitzsch, “Wild West St. Louis”; Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America*, 178.

⁹⁵ Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America*, 178.

⁹⁶ St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 Scrapbook, SHSMO.

⁹⁷ St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 Scrapbook, SHSMO.

On September 14, 1900, the strike was ended with a court settlement between the AASREA and the Transit Company, resulting in little progress for the strikers.⁹⁸ The strike had broken as streetcar workers could not afford to continue the strike. The workers had to apply for their old jobs, if they were even still available.⁹⁹ Throughout the entirety of the strike, 14 were killed, with over 200 wounded, and several streetcars were blown up.¹⁰⁰ During the strike, Eugene V. Debs wrote:

I do not doubt this strike has opened the eyes of many of the working class to the power of capitalism in such crisis. All departments of government are subjected to the orders of the class which owns the means of production. Only the capitalistic class can secure the issuance of injunctions, call into action the posse comitatus, swear in deputy sheriffs, call out the militia, and command the federal troops to commit the crowning acts of despotism. The working class have only to submit, or to be jailed or shot down.¹⁰¹

Though the strikers had been the victims of police and company aggression, they committed their fair share of violent acts. While they endured violence from the strikebreakers, police force, and the sheriff's posse, they enacted violence on the strikebreakers and innocent passengers in streetcars. While their justification was that passengers were directly facilitating the company in breaking the strike, shooting into and blowing up cars invoked little sympathy. In several instances, strikers grabbed passengers off cars, beating and stripping them bare. In one scenario, strikers grabbed a woman off a car, hitting her and tearing the clothes off her body. She fled to a nearby storm drain and was only given relief when a child begged the vengeful crowd to stop.¹⁰² The way that the workers were treated and violence from the police and strikebreakers

⁹⁸ Palitzsch, "Wild West St. Louis."

⁹⁹ Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America*, 179.

¹⁰⁰ St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 Scrapbook, SHSMO.

¹⁰¹ "St Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 – WE NEVER FORGET," July 12, 2021.

<https://weneverforget.org/tag/st-louis-streetcar-strike-of-1900/>.

¹⁰² Zimmerman, *St. Louis Civil War: The Streetcar Strike of 1900*, 36, 66-67; St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 Scrapbook, SHSMO.

was enough to draw sympathy at the beginning of the strike, but as the strikers retaliated, they progressively lost more support as the general populace wanted the bloodshed to end. As the strike began fading into twilight, the AASREA made a last ditch effort to garner support of the city, proposing a city-wide general strike, similar to that of the 1877 St. Louis general strike. However, they garnered little support from fellow workers, and only a local electrical union expressed their support, offering to shut off the power of the Transit Company, so the general strike never got off the ground.¹⁰³

Many of the strikers would lose their jobs permanently and could gain little satisfaction in the economic losses of the Transit Company, which lost around half of their riders throughout the entirety of the strike. In contrast, the Suburban Company maintained consistent numbers throughout due to their willingness to negotiate early on, suggesting the short-term benefits of arbitration and negotiation as opposed to dealing with drawn-out strikes. Strikers lost \$3,830 in wages daily during the strike, while the company lost \$20,000 daily in fares. Over the course of the strike, an estimated number of people compelled to walk reached 400,000.¹⁰⁴

The St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 provides a perspective on the values of white strikers, businesses, and the typical AFL union at the turn of the twentieth century. Like most AFL unions, the St. Louis local of the AASREA was entirely white. Though many unions did not contain explicit clauses barring members based on race, Black members were restricted in two main ways. First, eligible Black members who applied to white unions would simply have their applications rejected. But second, and more common, Black workers held positions that the

¹⁰³ Zimmerman, *St. Louis Civil War: The Streetcar Strike of 1900*, 25-26; St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 Scrapbook, SHSMO.

¹⁰⁴ St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 Scrapbook, SHSMO.

unions were not interested in organizing. Skilled and high paying jobs (like streetcar engineers) were considered “white jobs,” while low paying and dangerous jobs that white workers would not take (like track cleaners) were “Black jobs.” During most white union strikes, companies would bring in Black strikebreakers to take their jobs, but this only occurred in integrated industries and for jobs where white and Black workers were already in contention for the same position. The AASREA was not fighting for better pay and working conditions of Black workers in janitorial positions which they had historically been pushed into by white employers.¹⁰⁵ The St. Louis Transit Company did employ Black workers, but by virtue of their jobs had no direct stake in the strike and were much less likely to join. This put them in the crosshairs of white strikers who took out their frustration on non-striking workers whom they viewed as staying “loyal” to the Transit Company during the strike.¹⁰⁶ Though not the reason that the strike failed, the barring of Black workers from joining the AASREA and their exclusion from wage negotiations ultimately hurt the potential success of the strike in St. Louis by damaging the basis of class solidarity.

Conclusion

On October 1, 1910, the *Los Angeles Times* building was blown up early in the morning, killing twenty one workers. The L.A. Times, who had been actively criticizing recent strikes and

¹⁰⁵ Theodore D. McNeal Scrapbook, State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis, microfilm roll 1; St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 Scrapbook, SHSMO.

¹⁰⁶ “Transit Employee [sic] Shot,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 16, 1900, p4.

bombings by local unions, immediately blamed the same unions.¹⁰⁷ During the investigation, two union members, the McNamara brothers, were arrested under questionable police practices. Secretary-Treasurer of the International Union of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers, John J. McNamara, was kidnapped and dragged across several state lines to face trial with his brother, James B. McNamara. Fully in support, the AFL raised funds and organized the best defense that money could buy to fight against the charges brought against the McNamara brothers.¹⁰⁸ During the trial, the brothers would retract their not-guilty plea and plead guilty to the charges brought before them. JB McNamara admitted to setting the bomb in the L.A. Times building, and JJ McNamara pled guilty to a separate charge of destroying the Llewellyn Iron Works on December 25.¹⁰⁹

Immediately following the guilty plea, the entire labor movement felt betrayed by the McNamara brothers. By fighting against the charges, it would have allowed the unions to complain of more unfair treatment against the workers. Though the evidence was overwhelmingly against the brothers, the prosecution was eager to provide the brothers with a plea deal in order to further demoralize and crush the local labor unions; otherwise, unions would claim the brothers were framed. Before the brothers pled guilty, Gompers would call the trial a “frame-up.”¹¹⁰ After their conviction, Gompers announced that “the McNamaras have betrayed

¹⁰⁷ “Twenty-One Killed and More Injured in the Dynamited “Times” “Building,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1910, p1.

¹⁰⁸ James Martinez, *Terrorist Attacks on American Soil: from the Civil War Era to the Present*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 92; William Burns, *The Masked War: the Story of a Peril That Threatened the United States*, (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1913), 12.

¹⁰⁹ Martinez, *Terrorist Attacks on American Soil*, 95.

¹¹⁰ Burns, *The Masked War*, 208.

labor” by refusing to fight.¹¹¹ The McNamara trial heavily demilitarized the AFL and set back the entire US labor movement. The only way that Gompers and the AFL could maintain any respectability following the trial was to avoid radicalization and violence in all ways. Gompers had always preached anti-violence, yet had tolerated the violence of strikes as a necessity to stay in power as president of the AFL. However, following the trial, Gompers’ anti-violence stance gained further credibility and became the practice of the AFL.¹¹² The Federation also began rejecting radicalization in all forms, opposing violent strikes and the International Workers of the World (IWW).¹¹³

Though some unions and strikes were violent, it was the frequent, unwarranted violence against labor by federal, state, and local governments that created an environment inhospitable to many labor unions. Radical labor organizations struggled to gain public support and would fall victim to violence, resulting in their frequent downfall, as seen with the Workingmen’s Party and the Knights of Labor. In order to maintain support, the AFL, who already opposed violence and upheld segregation in many of their unions, was forced to become an even more pacifist and segregated organization. By refusing to organize Black workers or denying them entrance, the Federation directly constituted the growth of the strikebreaking pool. Black workers were

¹¹¹ Martinez, *Terrorist Attacks on American Soil*, 96.

¹¹² Though important, it is difficult to draw a concrete conclusion on the McNamara trials and their impacts on the whole labor movement and the AFL. Strike statistics have always been useful, provided they are placed in the correct context of the time. However, from 1906-1915 the American government did not record any strike totals, limiting the conclusions that can be drawn. Melvyn Dubofsky, “Labor Unrest in the United States, 1906-90,” *Review - Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations* 18, no. 1 (1995): 125.

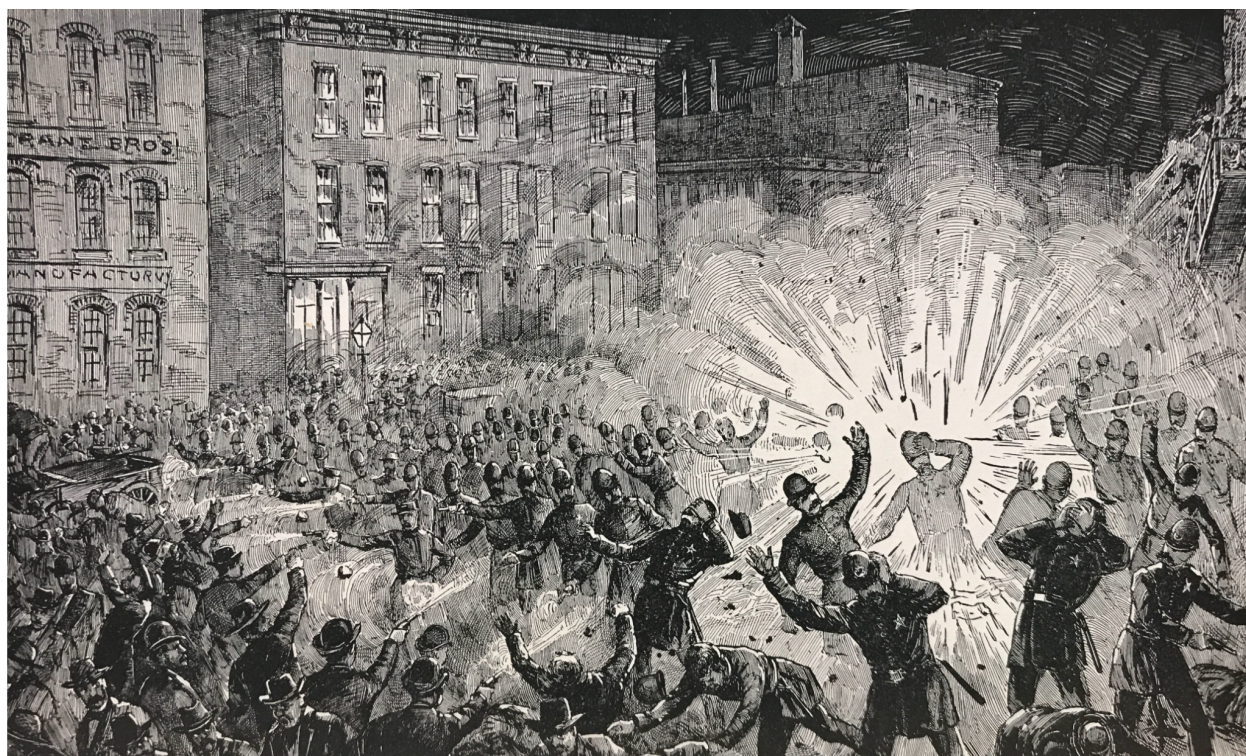
¹¹³ Adamic, *Dynamite*, 251-252.

frequently hired as strikebreakers in white dominated strikes, like in the Great Strike of 1877.¹¹⁴ Black workers were forced into a difficult situation: they could either work as strikebreakers and disrupt the attempted advances of the labor movement, or they could uphold Jim Crow segregation practices by assisting the same white workers who refused to allow them to join their local. Any leftist labor organization like the Knights, or future organizations like the Wobblies (IWW) and the CIO, were forced to try and remedy this situation, and these organizations would rely heavily on the mobilization of Black workers in order to further the struggle of the labor movement. White workers were faced with a separate dilemma: did they value upholding segregation more than they valued their own labor advances? Communist Angelo Herndon would later ask the white working class, “Can’t you realize that as long as one foot is chained to the ground the other can’t travel very far?”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ William Harris, “The Black Labor Movement and the Fight for Social Advance.” *Monthly Labor Review* 110, no. 8 (1987): 37.

¹¹⁵ “‘You Cannot Kill the Working Class’ | Angelo Herndon (1937).” <https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/herndoncannotkill.html>.

Appendix A



*A depiction of the 1886 Haymarket Massacre from Michael Schaack, *Anarchy and Anarchists*.*

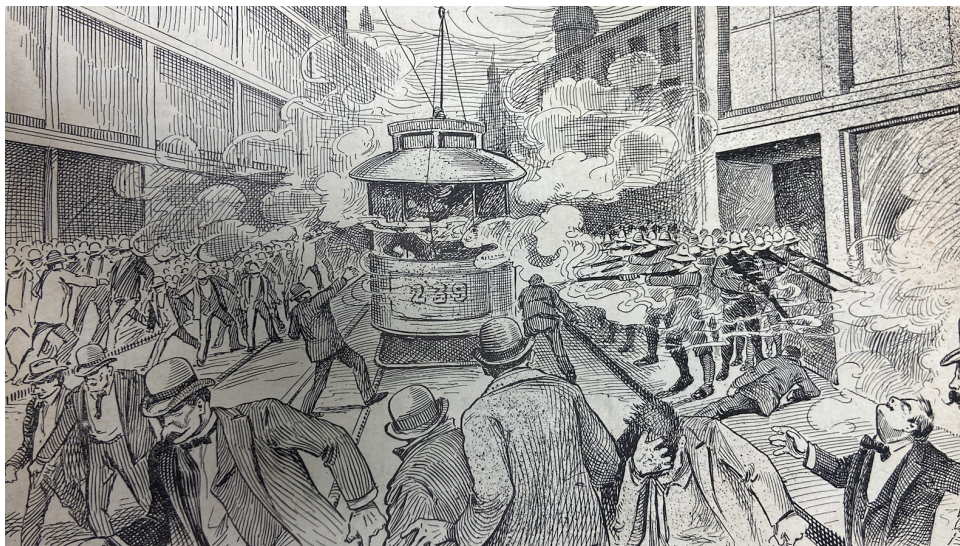
TABLE 1.—MEMBERSHIP OF SELECTED AMERICAN LABOR UNIONS, 1880-1896

Year	Knights of Labor ^a	A. F. of L. ^b	Iron Molders ^c	Brick-layers ^d	Cigar-makers ^e	Railway Conductors ^f	Typographical ^g	Locomotive Firemen ^h	Railroad Trainmen ⁱ	Car-penters ^j	Steel Workers ^k
1880.....	28,136	.....	.....	.....	.....	1,050	6,520	.....	.....	.....	9,550
1881.....	19,422	40,000	.....	2,500	.....	1,420	7,931	3,160	.....	2,042	10,359
1882.....	42,517	65,000	10,000	.....	11,430	2,014	10,439	5,125	.....	3,780	16,003
1883.....	51,914	76,000	.....	.....	13,214	3,298	12,273	7,888	.....	3,293	11,800
1884.....	60,811	105,000	.....	.....	11,871	6,109	16,030	12,246	901	4,364	9,242
1885.....	104,066	125,000	.....	7,000	12,000	7,944	16,183	14,694	4,766	5,789	5,702
1886.....	702,924	138,000	13,000	.....	24,672	10,330	18,484	16,196	7,993	21,423	7,219
1887.....	510,351	160,000	.....	.....	20,566	11,947	19,190	17,047	8,662	25,466	11,426
1888.....	259,578	175,000	16,000	.....	17,199	13,224	17,491	18,278	11,413	28,416	14,946
1889.....	220,607	210,000	.....	.....	17,555	13,720	21,120	17,087	.....	31,494	16,117
1890.....	100,000	225,000	23,000	24,000	24,624	14,453	22,608	18,657	13,562	53,769	20,781
1891.....	.....	238,000	.....	.....	24,221	17,906	25,165	22,460	20,409	56,937	24,068
1892.....	.....	255,000	.....	.....	26,678	20,224	28,187	25,967	28,540	51,313	20,975
1893.....	74,635	260,000	.....	.....	26,788	20,356	30,454	28,681	22,359	54,121	13,613
1894.....	.....	275,000	.....	.....	27,828	19,827	31,379	26,508	.....	33,917	10,000
1895.....	.....	270,000	20,000	19,500	27,760	19,737	29,295	21,408	.....	25,152	10,000
1896.....	.....	265,000	.....	.....	27,318	19,810	28,838	22,461	22,326	29,691	11,000

Membership data of early American unions. Although the AFL was formed in 1886, the data begins in 1881 with the formation of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU) which consisted of various unions that would merge into the AFL. This membership table comes from: Leo Wolman, *The Growth of American Trade Unions*, 32.



Depiction of the 1877 Great Strike. The above picture shows the 1877 Great Strike, originally in a historical pamphlet of the History of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, in the Mark Waldemere Labor Collection, SHSMO.



The above pictures are drawings from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch depicting the 1900 St. Louis Streetcar Strike. The images come from the St. Louis Streetcar Strike of 1900 Scrapbook, SHSMO.

Chapter 2: Men of “Radical and Socialistic Tendencies”

“It is indeed a pity that in our city the only group prepared to speak for eight hundred exploited negro workers were members of the Communist Party.” - Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman¹

Introduction

In 1933, hundreds of Black women organized strikes at a number of nut shelling factories owned by the Funsten Nut Company throughout St. Louis. Facing several pay cuts and horrid working conditions, Black workers Carrie Smith and Cora Lewis, with the help of several white communists, organized a strike.² The introductory quote given by the St. Louis leftist radical Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman refers to the absence of middle class Black support for the several hundred African American workers on strike. Although the Funsten Nut Strike was the first large-scale, integrated St. Louis strike in years, Black organizers failed to gain any support from Black middle class organizations like the Urban League and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who sought to form alliances with white corporate elites rather than support working class activism.³ Further South, sociologist Monroe Work describes the renowned Tuskegee Institute where he worked as being “sensitive” to the needs of

¹ Melissa Ford, *A Brick and a Bible: Black Women's Activism in the Midwest during the Great Depression*, 81.

² Keona Ervin, *Gateway to Equality: Black Women and the Struggle for Economic Justice in St. Louis* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 24, 61; Melissa Ford, *A Brick and a Bible: Black Women's Activism in the Midwest during the Great Depression* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2021), 67; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “500 Negro Women Go on Strike Here ‘For Living Wage’,” May 15, 1933.

³ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 20-21.

poor Black farmers in the area, but “rejected unionization as a strategy for change.”⁴ In St. Louis, the Black women on strike criticized these organizations who “never paid any attention to this indescribably miserable slavery of Negro women in the city of St. Louis.”⁵ Despite the Funsten strike closing down eleven factories across four different companies, with almost two thousand strikers involved, a 1934 report by the St. Louis Industrial Bureau commented that there had been “no major strikes or walk-outs of a general nature in industry” in the last ten years.⁶ Because the Funsten Nut Strike failed to gain the support of the St. Louis Black elites, it looked elsewhere for assistance, and was backed by local white communist radicals. This is one of the first examples in which a grassroots strike, organized by African Americans, gained the support of white communists in St. Louis.

At the beginning of the 1930s, the Communist International actively began to work towards organizing Black workers in the United States in an effort to expand class consciousness and mobilize the American workforce. Because of this shift in international communist theory, Black workers in the U.S. gained a strong ally with the Communist Party at the beginning of the 1930s.⁷ I seek to document the struggles of Black workers during the Great Migration, arguing that the ability of Black workers to organize themselves in this period forced the Communist International to view them as a potent force in their international labor struggle. Prior to, and during the early stages of the New Deal, the vast majority of labor organizations throughout the

⁴ Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 51-52.

⁵ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 42.

⁶ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 42; Ira De Reid, “Industrial Status of Negroes in St. Louis.” Report from the Department of Research, National Urban League, 1934, 18-19.

⁷ “The 1928 and 1930 Comintern Resolutions on the Black National Question in the United States,” *Marx2Mao*, accessed December 13, 2008, <http://www.marx2mao.com/Other/CR75.html>.

United States consisted entirely of white members. Several integrated and entirely Black unions found success in organizing, despite efforts from leading labor organizations like the AFL which sought to oppose them. In 1920, there were twenty two international and national labor organizations, eight of which were in the AFL, that excluded Black workers by a constitutional provision. Even more unions enforced segregation without any specific race clause in their constitutions.⁸ Even with scarce allies, Black labor organizations demonstrated the potential for change: If white labor unions in the United States began integrating, the largely unorganized Black working class could be unionized and eventually radicalized. Communists argued that this class unification could overwhelm the racial barriers that were created in order to maintain a capitalist society. While the AFL never actively integrated unions, Black leaders still slowly desegregated unions in the Federation throughout the 1920s until the 1960s. While this interracial class unification never formed in the United States, I argue that Black organizers joining forces with white radicals in this chapter are what eventually forced the Federal Government to become more outwardly in support of labor organizations during the New Deal administration. Instead of creating a nationwide, integrated working class revolution as sought by the communists, the majority of working class whites prior to the New Deal fought to maintain their long-held socioeconomic advantages.

⁸ Herman Feldman and Bruno Lasker, *Racial Factors in American Industry*, (Harper & Brothers 1931), 27

World War I and the Great Migration

With the outbreak of World War I in Europe, labor relationships and economies shifted worldwide. European countries began drafting conscription-aged Europeans into armies across the continent, who could no longer travel to the United States in search of work and other opportunities. The safety of traveling was reduced, and Europeans had more incentive to stay in their own country. By 1915, the number of immigrants in the United States had dropped from 1.2 million to 327,000. Large numbers of European immigrants also left the United States to return to their homeland during the war. European countries now had a diminished labor force and the need for foreign products grew.⁹ With a heavily reduced number of immigrants in the US, a large vacuum of labor opened up in American cities. Cities like St. Louis, which was built largely by German immigrants, needed to look elsewhere for labor. Railroad companies would send out men who would recruit African Americans in the South to come work in northern cities. In St. Louis, brickyards advertised for southern Black labor, promising \$2.35 a day, an amount that could more than double what some workers earned in the South.¹⁰

When the United States formally entered World War I in 1917, the demand for labor in the US grew even further. Not only did the United States involvement in the war create more job opportunities in manufacturing, but large amounts of the workforce also were sent to Europe to fight. As a result, Black support and labor were crucial to both military and civilian war efforts. President Woodrow Wilson, who had built a reputation as a racist and staunch anti-Black

⁹ Judson MacLaury, "The Federal Government and Negro Workers Under President Woodrow Wilson," (Paper, Annual Meeting of the Society for History in the Federal Government, Washington, D.C., March 16, 2000).

¹⁰ Emmett Jay Scott, *Negro Migration During the War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1920), 96.

President, sought to mend damaged relationships with prominent Black leaders. Willing to overlook Wilson's tolerance of Jim Crow in order to foster better opportunities for African Americans, Black moderates became more involved in the federal government's attempts to maintain Black workers' morale and promote better race relations. As part of the effort, Wilson created the Division of Negro Economics in the War Labor Administration. Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson created a position titled "Director of Negro Economics," whose task was to advise the Secretary "in all matters affecting Negroes." George Haynes, the educational secretary of the Urban League, was chosen to fill the position.¹¹

In an effort by the United States government to further secure production during World War I, the government pressured unions into 'no strike' agreements. The government also reformed the United States Employment Service (USES), a program originally created in 1907 to help immigrant labor fill job openings.¹² In 1917, the modified USES (no longer exclusive to immigrants) began recruiting and mobilizing the workforce in coordination with war industries. Post offices around the U.S. displayed advertising notices informing workers of a new hiring plan. Workers were encouraged to submit job applications through the post office which would be sent to distribution branches. There, applicants would be matched with employers and, if

¹¹ MacLaury, "The Federal Government and Negro Workers Under President Woodrow Wilson."

¹² The second of the United States Employment Service's key tasks was also data collection. The USES would gather information that was relevant and useful to them in order to better fulfill their task of using immigrant labor to fill in job openings. Social Security Administration, *The History and Functioning of the United States Employment Service*, Gladys L. Palmer, November, 1934, <https://www.ssa.gov/history/reports/ces/cesvolfive.html> (December 12, 2022).

necessary, help arrange a one-way railroad ticket for the worker.¹³ In 1918, the War Labor Policies Board proposed that all employment in war related contracts must be organized through the USES, in an effort to centralize war labor even more. President Wilson followed this proposal with a presidential proclamation declaring that “a central agency must have a sole direction of all recruiting of civilian workers in war work,” though not directly referring to the USES.¹⁴

Openings for many industrial jobs, and the creation of many more, provided an opportunity for mass migration from the largely industrialized southern United States. Many African Americans left the south to escape the violence of Jim Crow and to search for better job opportunities, facilitated through programs like the USES. Leroy Bundy, a leading Black politician of East St. Louis, believed that the pull for southern migrants was largely due to the two dollars a day wage in the north, double what Black workers received in the south. Higher wages, coupled with the uncertain employment and anti-Black violence of the south, provided compelling enough reasons for many migrants to travel north.¹⁵ Black author and anthropologist E. Franklin Frazier refers to the mass movement of African Americans to northern industrial centers as the “second emancipation of the race.”¹⁶ The ability of African Americans to seize the

¹³ Jessie Kindig, “Labor Radicalism and World War I”, Accessed December 12, 2022, University of Washington, 2008, [https://depts.washington.edu/antiwar/pnw/wwi.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/antiwar/pnw/wwi/wwi.shtml); MacLaury, “The Federal Government and Negro Workers Under President Woodrow Wilson.”

¹⁴ Social Security Administration, *The History and Functioning of the United States Employment Service*.

¹⁵ Charles L. Lumpkins, “Black East St. Louis: Politics and Economy in a Border City, 1860-1945” (Thesis Dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 2006), 120, https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final_submissions/1032.

¹⁶ E. Franklin Frazier, “The Changing Status of the Negro Family,” in *Black Scholars on the Line: Race, Social Science, and American Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jonathan Holloway and Ben Keppel (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 153.

opportunity of World War I and the economic power they gained as a result of the war, ultimately resulted in the mass mobilization of southern African Americans in the Great Migration with an estimated three million African Americans moving from the South to the North and West during the interwar years.¹⁷

World War I created a scarcity of labor throughout the United States, yet competition for jobs remained, as exemplified in East St. Louis, Illinois. An industrial center for unskilled labor, East St. Louis attracted many migrating Black laborers from the South during World War I. These large migrations of African Americans were typically not well received by whites, especially lower class whites who were competing for the same jobs. The racial tension as a result of job competition was not helped by the practice of industrialists hiring southern African Americans as strikebreakers for white strikes. For example, in 1913, African Americans were used as strikebreakers in the St. Louis Hotel Waiters strike, and again in 1916 when 4,500 white men went on strike in the packing plants of East St. Louis.¹⁸ Following strikes, factory bosses occasionally kept the Black workers to replace the white strikers. In other instances, primarily in the steel industry, for every white worker employed, a Black worker was hired in the same position so that a strike could not entirely cripple the industry.¹⁹ Although the strike-breaking likely detracted from the general labor movement, it is important to keep in mind that whites

¹⁷ Joe William Trotter, *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), 78.

¹⁸ W. E. B. DuBois, "The Massacre of East St. Louis," *The Crisis*, September 6, 1917, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/civil-rights/crisis/0900-crisis-v14n05-w083.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2022); Reid, "Industrial Status of Negroes in St. Louis," 37; Scott, *Negro Migration During the War*.

¹⁹ Ira De A. Reid, "A Study of the Industrial Status of Negroes in St. Louis, 1934," 97, box 9, series 8-13, UL Papers, SC/WU.

typically provided no room for any Black economic advancement through any organized labor structures like the AFL.

African Americans were also restricted by various industries in St. Louis. The city had over twenty breweries and a large shoemaking industry, but white management in these factories refused to employ Black workers.²⁰ However, during the war, some segregated industries were forced to integrate, due to a combination of lack of labor, the ability of employers to pay Black workers less, and as a way to maintain order in the industry. Ultimately, whites were preferred over Black labor the vast majority of the time, due to the racist belief that white workers were more capable. The Great Migration provided an opportunity for Black workers to escape the violence Jim Crow south through programs like the USES. However, the mass migration of Southern Black workers into northern cities which still harbored racist ideas and practices did not always provide fruitful economic and social opportunities for Black workers.

The July Massacre

Although strikebreakers, or scabs, are typically looked down upon, whites involved in the 1916 East St. Louis strike were particularly angered when many of the African Americans who were called in as strikebreakers maintained their jobs in the packing plants even after the strike had ended. During the postwar strikes in 1918 and 1919, employers across the country brought

²⁰ Scott, *Negro Migration During the War*, 97.

thousands of Black workers from the South to use as scab labor.²¹ To combat this new wave of cheap Black labor, citizens of East St. Louis argued that the Black workers and strikebreakers coming into the city were increasing crime rates. This was the key argument advanced by the ever growing anti-Black coalition, yet the rate of crime growth in East St. Louis was proportional to the general population rise of the city during the Great Migration, and mirrored the increased crime rates of similar cities that received an influx of migrants during the migration era.²² Whites claimed that Black criminals were responsible for 800 holdups, 27 murders, and 7 rapes between nine months in 1916 and 1917.²³

The industries in East St. Louis also actively fueled racial tensions in order to further divide Black and white workers. White workers at the East St. Louis and Suburban Transportation Company demanded a 2½ cent raise from 17½ to 20 cents an hour in the spring of 1916. The spokesmen for the workers were fired by the company and the workers went on strike. The walkout lasted several weeks and then men, affiliated with the AFL, won the right to collective bargaining and the raise. However, the company got the final word and deliberately embarrassed the union by hiring unorganized labor, some of whom were Black, at a wage of 22½ cents an hour.²⁴ As racial tensions grew, Edward F. Mason, the white secretary of the local Central Trades and Labor Union (CTLU), issued a letter on May 23, 1917, calling upon the entire body of delegates to deal with the “growing menace” of “undesirable Negroes” which

²¹ Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: 20 Years of the CIO* (New York: Pathfinder Pr, 1982), 271.

²² Lumpkins, “Black East St. Louis,” 140-145.

²³ Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 228.

²⁴ Elliott Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St. Louis, July 2, 1917*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 144.

“have poured in and are being used to the detriment of our white citizens.”²⁵ Over six hundred white men marched to City Hall to appeal to the East St. Louis authorities, demanding that they prevent the arrival of any more African Americans.²⁶

While it was the CTLU that originally called the march on city hall, it was several uninvited speakers who took control of the meeting. While anti-Blackness was the founding basis of the march on city hall, the approach of the CTLU had been entirely non-violent, revolving around the city preventing the immigration of more African Americans. However, the meeting stirred up into a frenzy, and many began viewing violent action as the only solution to the “Black problem.” This original CTLU meeting created a small riot that culminated in members of the CTLU and white East St. Louis residents beating dozens of Black East St. Louis residents the following night. Less than a month later, on June 15, 1917, the East St. Louis Daily Journal called for another “race riot” to bring an end to the so-called Black crime wave.²⁷ Just over two weeks later, their call to action was answered.²⁸ Following the massacre, W. E. B. DuBois wrote that: “On the 2nd of July, 1917, the city of East St. Louis in Illinois added a foul and revolting page to the history of all the massacres of the world.”²⁹ Hell broke loose in a chaotic, yet organized pogrom. A mob of white men, women, and even children tortured, beat, burned, hung, mutilated, and slaughtered innocent African Americans in East St. Louis. The

²⁵ DuBois, “The Massacre of East St. Louis”; Reid, “Industrial Status of Negroes in St. Louis,” 37.

²⁶ DuBois, “The Massacre of East St. Louis”; Reid, “Industrial Status of Negroes in St. Louis,” 37.

²⁷ Lumpkins, “Black East St. Louis,” 163.

²⁸ Although the July massacre was not a direct result of the East St. Louis Daily Journal’s request for a race riot to end the Black crime wave, it is still part of a larger movement in East St. Louis to rid the city of African Americans.

²⁹ DuBois, “The Massacre of East St. Louis.”

rioters killed between one to two hundred innocents, and destroyed over \$400,000 worth of property, belonging to both white and Black residents, with rioters burning and shooting into Black homes indiscriminately. They drove more than 6,000 African Americans out of their homes who were forced to seek refuge across the river in St. Louis, Missouri.³⁰

One account of the riot recalls an instance where a Black resident of East St. Louis, “his head laid open by a great stone-cut, had been dragged to the mouth of the alley on Fourth street and a small rope was being put about his neck.”³¹ Meanwhile, onlooking spectators joked about the feebleness of the rope they used to hang the man. Another account recalls a man “covered with blood and half conscious, raise himself on his elbow, and look feebly about, when a young man, standing directly behind him, lifted a flat stone in both hands and hurled it upon his neck.”³² Black resident Josy Nixon witnessed a scene of white men shooting off a Black woman’s tongue and killing her son before entering a house and murdering a mother and her newborn baby. Other survivors told Howard University Red Cross official Hallie Queen that some women had killed their victims “with hatpins, sometimes picking out their eyes with them before they were quite dead.”³³ One spectator commented that “no amount of suffering awakened pity in the heads of the rioters.”³⁴ As cruel and evil as the massacre and torture of the

³⁰ Reid, “Industrial Status of Negroes in St. Louis,” 37; Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America*, 235.

³¹ *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “Several Hundred Negroes Brought Across the River,” July 3, 1917.

³² *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “Several Hundred Negroes Brought Across the River”.

³³ Lumpkins, “Black East St. Louis,” 181.

³⁴ DuBois, “The Massacre of East St. Louis.”

Black East St. Louisans was, it was still only, as DuBois describes, one of many instances of the massacres and lynchings against Black Americans.³⁵

The white rioters were not met with resistance, outside of the East St. Louisans defending themselves. The local police force “did nothing to check the mob’s violence,” and even encouraged the mobs to brutalize the Black citizens. The National Guard, called up from neighboring towns to maintain order, was also present, yet remained mere bystanders to the massacre. Adjutant-General Dickson, who was in charge of the troops and arrived after the massacre had taken place, stated that the guard was only to maintain order without the use of bullets or bayonets. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* questioned why there was “not a bullet or bayonet used against the mob which freely used torch, club and bullet against negroes, regardless of age or sex or character” and that “the failure of the soldiers sent to sustain law and order and to use force for that purpose did not prevent bloodshed.”³⁶ After the mob had satisfied itself with the massacre, the armed guardsmen finally “took control” of an already settled situation, and escorted Black East St. Louis residents across the river to St. Louis where temporary care and housing had been set up in municipal lodging homes. In a sick twist, a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* column describing the transportation of survivors to St. Louis ends with an advertisement for funeral services.³⁷

³⁵ DuBois, “The Massacre of East St. Louis.”

³⁶ *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “The East St. Louis Murders”, July 3, 1917; Malcolm McLaughlin, “Women in the Crowd: Gender and the East St. Louis Race Riot of 1917,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 40, no. 2 (2007): https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=connc_main&id=GALE|A183991927&v=2.1&it=r (accessed December 13, 2022), 49.

³⁷ *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “Several Hundred Negroes Brought Across the River,” July 3, 1917.

Some historians and many contemporaries of the massacre argued that this was an attack by the Central Trades and Labor Union on behalf of labor unions and out of desperation of the white workers competing for jobs and housing. Following the July Massacre, W. E. B. DuBois attributes the pogrom to [Samuel] “Gompers and his Trade Unions.”³⁸ Like many other Black intellectual elites of his time, DuBois believed that the violence towards African Americans during the Great Migration was simply a challenge and testing, and the industrialization and mobilization of African Americans was largely beneficial in the long run. That “East St. Louis, Chester and Youngstown are simply the pools of blood through which we must march, but march we will” and that, despite the violence against Black workers, “the demand for Negro labor continues and will continue.”³⁹

A more contemporary study of the July Massacre, conducted by Charles L. Lumpkins, argues that the race riot did not occur out of concern for jobs nor housing, but rather the rioters were furthering the political agenda of machine boss politicians who wanted to rid the city of Black people.⁴⁰ With the mass migration of southern African Americans came the mobilization of millions of previously unorganized and disenfranchised U.S. citizens. The north not only provided an escape from the harsh Jim Crow violence in the south for many African Americans, but also an opportunity of political and economic realization. In East St. Louis, as many Black

³⁸ DuBois, W. E. B.. “The World Last Month.” *The Crisis*. September 6, 1917, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/civil-rights/crisis/0900-crisis-v14n05-w083.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2022).

³⁹ DuBois, “The World Last Month.” <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/civil-rights/crisis/0900-crisis-v14n05-w083.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2022).

⁴⁰ Charles L. Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008), 110-111.

migrants entered the city, the balance of political power shifted dramatically. White political machines which operated on the appeasement of white citizens to remain in power came under threat by the large wave of Black voters. White political elites feared that Black migrants now had the power to usurp their political machines and install their own Black political organizations.⁴¹ Indeed, during the July Massacre, white ringleaders who participated in the massacre, allowed a select few African Americans who were not perceived as a threat to their political machines to flee the city unmolested in order to maintain their voter base. For example, Mose Lockett, a Black East St. Louis resident who “enjoyed cordial relations with boss politicians”, was allowed to leave the city unharmed.⁴²

Whether the participants of the July Massacre orchestrated the pogrom as a result of white labor hatred, or simply as a way of upholding the East St. Louis political machines, or both, the outcome was the same. The overarching cause of the July Massacre was an attempt by white residents to maintain the status-quo of race relations in East St. Louis. The pogrom symbolized a white reaction to Black competition for jobs, housing, and access to resources as they immigrated from the south during the Great Migration.⁴³ Yet out of the fires of the July Massacre, the Urban League of St. Louis was born. In their own words, the “Urban League of St. Louis was organized in June of 1918, in response to the East St. Louis race riots of 1917.”⁴⁴ Even the founding of the Urban League drew notice from the government who sent a spy to investigate the members who would eventually form the Urban League. The spy reported that

⁴¹ Lumpkins, “Black East St. Louis”, 166.

⁴² *Ibid*, 185

⁴³ *Ibid*, 168

⁴⁴ Urban League of St. Louis Records, Washington University in St. Louis, Series 4, Box 11.

“secret meetings have been held urging the negro servants to demand that they be addressed as Mr. and Mrs. and to make other demands that would indicate that the propagandists were heading towards social equality,” incited by men of “radical and socialistic tendencies.”⁴⁵ Shockingly little was done by the government to solve the very issues that caused the July Massacre and demanded the need of African Americans to form the Urban League as a form of protection that the government would not provide.

The July Massacre demonstrates another example throughout American history of white violence against African Americans attempting to better their lives through economic opportunities. The white rioters even had the assistance of the local police force and the tolerance of federal troops. In order to maintain the status quo even after the July Massacre, segregation was upheld in East St. Louis through threats of violence and fear, where Black residents were forced to stay in the same Black majority neighborhoods. Whites would only sell real estate to whites, and fire insurance agents canceled coverage on property occupied by African Americans in white or integrated areas in order to further pressure Black residents to relocate.⁴⁶ The July Massacre is just one chapter of the bloody period immediately following the end of World War I, but a chapter that embodies the rest of the story: one of white reactionary violence to Black social and economic empowerment following the war.

⁴⁵ RG165 War Department: General and Special Staffs-Military Intelligence Division, Military Intelligence Division, Series 10218, Folder 001360-019-0577

⁴⁶ Lumpkins, “Black East St. Louis”, 218.

The Wobblies

Originally formed in 1905 at an Industrial Union Congress in Chicago, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), better known as the Wobblies, was an influential organization in the United States labor movement during the first half of the twentieth century.⁴⁷ Though a prominent organization, the IWW rarely had membership of more than 100,000 members at one time, but because the turnover rate among members was so large, as many as a million workers held IWW cards at one point in their lives.⁴⁸ The notoriety of the Wobblies was, in part, due to their reputation as an incredibly vocal minority; in addition, they were also the only real labor organization that was accepting Black workers during the time.⁴⁹ The Wobblies formed largely out of inadequacies of the larger labor movement as a whole, criticizing the practices of the AFL. William “Big Bill” Hayward opened the first annual convention of the IWW claiming the AFL was “not a working-class movement” and that craft unions create an “aloofness” among skilled workers: the “aristocrats of labor.”⁵⁰ The rivalry between the Wobblies and the AFL grew as the AFL occasionally provided strikebreakers in Wobbly strikes.⁵¹ As there were practically no integrated unions and the vast majority of African Americans were not organized in Black

⁴⁷ The legend behind the origin of the nickname “The Wobblies” says that, during a strike in Canada early on in the history of the I.W.W., an Asian-Canadian immigrant was unable to pronounce the “I.W.W.” and pronounced it the “I Wobble Wobble”, and the name stuck. Deborah Shaffer and Stewart Bird, “The Wobblies,” *YouTube*, 1979.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkJncBY0EUI>; Paul Brissenden, *The Launching of the Industrial Workers of the World*, (New York: Haskell House, 1971), 3.

⁴⁸ Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies: The Story of the IWW and Syndicalism in the United States* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), 22.

⁴⁹ Deborah Shaffer and Stewart Bird, “The Wobblies.”

⁵⁰ Brissenden, *The Launching of the Industrial Workers of the World*, 1, 22-23.

⁵¹ Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America*, (New York: Viking Press, 1931), 162.

unions, the IWW had reached a sort of “untapped” workforce. Their racially unified workforce is what led the Wobblies to not only great prominence, but also their downfall. The threat of a unified working class following the rise of the left and communism during World War I led to the Wobblies being mercilessly targeted and stamped out by the U.S. government.

Prior to World War I, capitalists had been fighting back against Wobbly strikes and reforms since their inception. Unfortunately for the Wobblies, their opposition had the power of both local and federal governments on their side. Free speech laws were voided as businessmen persuaded city leaders to pass ordinances that banned IWW organizers from speaking in the streets. They also recruited the help of local police forces to forcefully quell any dissent. In one example in 1910, Frank Little, an IWW member, was organizing fruit workers in San Joaquin Valley, located in Fresno, California. A local contractor was unable to hire fruit workers to build an irrigation dam as his offered wages were too low for any worker to accept, and he refused to increase his wages. The contractor told the Fresno chief of police that the labor shortage was deliberately caused by the Wobblies, and so the police force started breaking up any local IWW meetings and arresting members on vagrancy charges. Frank Little was one of the first to be sentenced and requested help from the IWW headquarters in Chicago. Members from all over the country traveled to help fill the jails in Fresno, including over a hundred unemployed workers from East St. Louis. The cells were overflowing with militant Wobblies, lecturing guards on their class struggle and singing their now-famous songs about class conflict. The prison governor, fearing a mutiny, gathered the fire department who sprayed the prisoners with high powered hoses. The prisoners resisted and protected themselves with their mattresses from the freezing water, but ultimately relented and agreed to a truce when the water rose knee deep

throughout the entire cell block.⁵² During their peak, it seemed that nothing could quell the revolutionary spirit and class solidarity of the Wobblies, and that is what made them so dangerous to the U.S. government.

Following the 1917 Russian Revolution, America closed its borders to communists, socialists, and immigrants from undesired countries, and any form of radicalism was no longer tolerated (to whatever extent it had been prior).⁵³ In this “First Red Scare,” the American people and government sought to stamp out any form of radicalism, which included the socialist-dominated Wobblies. The local socialist party branch in St. Louis, which had respectable membership prior to 1917, rapidly diminished during the 1920s and almost completely vanished during the 1930s.⁵⁴ Those who remained, following the Russian Revolution, were largely pacified by the wave of anti-radicalism that had swept over the United States. Consequently, the majority of those still involved in the local St. Louis branch were not even interested in socialist

⁵² Renshaw, *The Wobblies*, 119-121.

⁵³ Although prior immigration acts had no qualms about explicitly excluding immigrants from a certain country, the Immigration Act of 1917 sought to ban Asian immigrants, while maintaining positive relationships with many of the countries. In order to not name nations or infringe on any treaties, Congress created a geographic zone based on latitude and longitude coordinates where immigrants were disallowed, known as the “Asiatic Barred Zone.” This targeted Asian immigrants, but some American senators wanted to extend the zone to cover African immigrants as well. Lon Kurashige, “Rising Tide of Fear: White and Yellow Perils, 1904-1919,” in *Two Faces of Exclusion: The Untold History of Anti-Asian Racism in the United States*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 108-109.

⁵⁴ David Burbank, interviewed by Noel Dark, November 29, 1972, transcript, Socialist Party Project, Oral History T-0217, State Historical Society of Missouri, St. Louis, Missouri, 1. In 1919, the St. Louis Socialist Party averaged around 30-40 members at their meetings, but by 1935, they did not even have 30 members in their entire organization and only averaged around five to ten members per meeting. Socialist Party of Missouri Collection, 1909-1966, State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis, Box 1, 4.

movements, but instead were only interested in discussing which candidates were running for office.⁵⁵

The U.S. government had methods other than anti-immigration laws that they used to suppress the IWW; from 1917 to 1918, over a hundred leading Wobblies were convicted of sabotage and subversion with up to twenty years in jail and \$30,000 in fines.⁵⁶ Due to their large number of members pushing socialist ideologies, it is no surprise that the government targeted the IWW. In contrast though, the US government left the Socialist Party of America (SPUSA) relatively untouched. Like the Wobblies, the SPUSA had opposed World War I verbally, but unlike the IWW, was not prosecuted for anti-war conspiracy.⁵⁷ This is largely due to the fact that the SPUSA was not a revolutionary organization during this time, while the IWW was considered much more radical and revolutionary.⁵⁸ The U.S. government knew that the Socialist Party did not have either the influence nor the desire to push a more radical anti-war movement, while the IWW had the capacity, and an increased likelihood of doing so. Though the government still sought to shut down any “radical” philosophies. In St. Louis, the postmaster confiscated and refused to deliver individual issues of the St. Louis Labor and Arbeiter-Zeitung, which German-Communist Gottlieb A. Hoehn was the editor of both.⁵⁹ The government also placed charges against heads of radical organizations like the IWW, allowing the government to eliminate many of the key Wobbly leaders, and limit their anti-war propaganda. The government

⁵⁵ Burbank, interview, 13.

⁵⁶ Renshaw, *The Wobblies*, 23.

⁵⁷ Renshaw, *The Wobblies*, 206.

⁵⁸ Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes. *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself*, (New York: Twayne, 1992), 13.

⁵⁹ DeWitt, Petra. “Keeping the Cause Alive: Gottlieb A. Hoehn and the Socialist Party of St. Louis.” *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 50 (n.d.): 86-87.

also maintained their strategy of violence against the Wobblies' strikes throughout the war period. Combined with the imprisonment of many Wobbly leaders, and the anti-radicalism that followed the 1917 Russian Revolution, the IWW lost a large amount of support throughout the end of the war and the years following.

Several years after World War I ended, several outspoken anti-war Wobbly members, socialists, and other radicals who were imprisoned under the Espionage Act and the 1918 Sedition Act were still in jail. Even five years after the war had ended, there were still 51 political prisoners serving sentences for violating the Espionage Act. On June 21, 1923, as President Harding traveled to St. Louis, residents of the city signed a petition that "urged the liberation... of the 51 political prisoners, who, convicted for offenses under the espionage act during wartime, are still serving sentences."⁶⁰ The harshness against the IWW and other radical organizations was not only through violence and the Sedition Act. One case in Washington involved a strike where every arrested Wobbly was given no option to plead innocent to their vagrancy charges, but instead was offered a sentence of thirty days confinement on a bread and water diet or the option to leave the town within one hour.⁶¹ The main reason for the collapse of the Wobblies was due to the violence and prejudice against the organization by the U.S. and Canadian governments. Canada would eventually outlaw the Wobblies from their territories, which limited the regions that they could operate in, though the organization was already on the decline. The period of radicalism that the Wobblies were founded in also had ended with the Russian Revolution, cutting off a large section of their ideological support and resulting in a

⁶⁰ "Many St. Louis People Appealing for Amnesty," *Industrial Worker*, June 27, 1923.

⁶¹ H. G., "Court Says, 'The Deputies Are Ordered to Break Your Heads; You Have No Rights'." *Industrial Worker*. March 7, 1923.

schism throughout the Wobblies and socialism as a whole. Despite this, the Wobblies still carried on for several years after World War I.

Though highly criticized during their heyday as an overly radical organization that did not create any institutional change, the Wobblies still paved the way for other integrated labor organizations. The AFL had bans on interracial and Black unions from joining, but the limited success of the Wobblies demonstrated a capacity for worker solidarity. The example of the Wobblies typified that of other radical labor organizations during the time, one that created limited opportunities for change in the face of violent opposition from a unified front of large business and government forces. In spite of that, the Wobblies still demonstrated the desire of workers to form a racially unified class that sought for universal worker rights.

I Am Not Hungry Yet

An entirely Black organization, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) was formed on August 25, 1925 in a New York City mass meeting at Elks Hall in Harlem, with their founder Asa Philip Randolph as their first president.⁶² Their predecessor was the Railroad Men's Benevolent Industrial Association, an organization of Black workers in various railway occupations, including in Pullman cars.⁶³ Sleeping car porters throughout the United States were

⁶² Brailsford R. Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters: Its Origin and Development* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 16.

⁶³ Charles Nagel Papers, Special Collections at Yale University Library.

almost exclusively African American, largely due to the role of servitude that white employers believed African Americans were predestined for, thus defining the porter occupation as a “black job.” The Pullman company notably ignored the rights of their Black workers, despite the fact they employed over nine thousand Black workers at their peak in the early 1920s.⁶⁴ Theodore McNeal, member of the BSCP, and a car porter from 1929 to 1937, stated that any white Pullman employee, whether they were a conductor or brakeman, could easily have a Black porter fired just off their complaint alone.⁶⁵ Any suspected members of the BSCP were fired from the Pullman Company as soon as they were associated with the union until it was recognized in 1937.⁶⁶ As a result, membership lists were carefully guarded and members were not permitted to speak at public meetings in order to protect their identities.⁶⁷

The BSCP fought for the rights of their workers through wages and employment benefits, notably criticizing the Pullman pension program. In the pension program, employees only qualified after working for twenty years consecutively. However, they were not eligible for the program until they had reached 70 years of age. The few workers that did qualify for the program were only given \$18 a month, a wage that would not afford retired workers a fair standard of living.⁶⁸ As one of the few Black unions organized in the United States prior to the 1930s, the BSCP received shockingly little support. Theodore McNeal recalls that only two papers in the nation supported the St. Louis branch of the Brotherhood: *The St. Louis American* and *The*

⁶⁴ Trotter, *Workers on Arrival*, 90.

⁶⁵ Theodore McNeal, interviewed by Richard Resh and Franklin Rother, July 22, 1970, transcript, Black Community Leaders Project, State Historical Society of Missouri, St. Louis, Missouri, 2.

⁶⁶ McNeal, interview, 2.

⁶⁷ Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*, 28.

⁶⁸ Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*, 29.

Kansas City Call.⁶⁹ Most criticism stemmed from the Black middle class who were critical not only of the union's more "radical" methods of dealing with labor issues, but also their belief that an all-Black union upheld Jim Crow. Middle class African-Americans believed that in forming their own "segregated" union, the Brotherhood was upholding Jim Crow segregation. *The St. Louis Argus*, the most prominent Black newspaper in St. Louis, openly attacked the Brotherhood. Copies of *The Argus* and other newspapers critical of the Brotherhood were distributed by the company to the porters, and every porter was required to take a paper before they received their paycheck.⁷⁰ *The Argus* also listed advertisements for the Pullman Company in many of their issues and ran planted articles from the Pullman Company that opposed the Brotherhood.⁷¹

Despite their public opposition, the Brotherhood stayed resolute. The Pullman Company tried whatever they could to get A. Philip Randolph, the head of the Brotherhood, to leave the BSCP and get the organization to dissolve. Pullman offered a group of BSCP leaders in Chicago one million dollars to drop their fight. A few months later Pullman offered Randolph a blank check in return for him betraying the porters, but he famously turned down the offer responding "I am not hungry yet."⁷²

After failing to recruit Randolph, the Pullman Company attempted to pay off members of the BSCP to turn on Randolph, but they also refused. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and A. Philip Randolph also helped organize other Black unions: Black dining car workers,

⁶⁹ McNeal, interview, 3-4.

⁷⁰ McNeal, interview, 3-4; Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*, 54.

⁷¹ McNeal, interview, 3-4.

⁷² Andrew Edmund Kersten and Clarence Lang, eds., *Reframing Randolph: Labor, Black Freedom, and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 6; Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 4, Box 11.

Black firemen, and Black switch men.⁷³ Though strong as an independent union, the Brotherhood stayed largely independent from any form of support through its entire first decade of existence. The Black middle class rejected the Brotherhood as an organization upholding Jim Crow, and the AFL refused to recognize them as a union. Even the Socialist Party in the first years of the Brotherhood's existence ignored them. Two years after the founding of the United States Socialist Party, president Eugene V. Debs declared in 1903 that socialists "have nothing special to offer the negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all the races. The Socialist party is the party of the working class, regardless of color."⁷⁴ It would take over two decades for the socialist party to start making a case to African Americans.

It was not until the 1928 Communist International (Comintern) Congress that communists and socialists began debating the "Negro Question." The 1928 Comintern resolutions declared the mission of the Communist Party of America (CPUSA) to "fight for the full rights of the oppressed Negroes and for their right to self-determination and against all forms of chauvinism, especially among the workers of the oppressing nationality."⁷⁵ As part of the "Third Period", a term adopted by the Comintern, American communists welcomed a new era of communist philosophy that centralized around a more militant approach to communism. It was the transition into the Third Period that caused the Comintern to "discover" the potential of African Americans as another tool to the revolutionary struggle of the American proletariat. As most unions in the United States refused to admit African Americans, and the AFL was actively

⁷³ McNeal, interview, 2.

⁷⁴ Kersten and Lang, *Reframing Randolph*, 57.

⁷⁵ "The 1928 and 1930 Comintern Resolutions on the Black National Question in the United States."

preventing integrated unions from forming, American communists faced little competition in their endeavor to recruit Black workers.⁷⁶ Organizations like the Brotherhood were particularly interesting to the Comintern as they represented the possibilities of reaching a largely unorganized section of the American population. Not only were African Americans generally uninterested in joining unions in the first few decades in the twentieth century, but also a very small percentage of colored workers were eligible for membership in white-dominated labor unions.⁷⁷ Even up until the admission of the BSCP into the AFL in 1937, over three quarters of unions in the AFL at the time had race restrictions in their constitutions.⁷⁸

Despite the general opposition to Black labor organization, the Comintern still viewed unorganized African Americans as a gold mine of proletariat workers they could recruit to their cause. At the 1930 Congress, the Comintern doubled down on their 1928 resolutions. Instead of asking for equal rights for African Americans, they clarified that they did not just mean equal rights to the white laborer, but that Black workers receive the same rights as all workers globally, even the rights that had not yet been achieved by the Comintern.⁷⁹ The CPUSA believed it was only when they could “win over to our side these millions of Negroes as active fellow fighters in the struggle for the overthrow of bourgeois power throughout America” that would enable them to “get rid of the bourgeois white chauvinism which is polluting the ranks of the white workers of America.”⁸⁰ The Comintern also took note to criticize several examples of white workers in

⁷⁶ “The 1928 and 1930 Comintern Resolutions.”

⁷⁷ William Crossland, *Industrial Conditions Among Negroes in St. Louis*. (St. Louis, Missouri: Washington University, 1914), 100.

⁷⁸ McNeal, interview, 2.

⁷⁹ “The 1928 and 1930 Comintern Resolutions.”

⁸⁰ “The 1928 and 1930 Comintern Resolutions.”

America treating their Black comrades as “others,” with their race as their defining characteristic, rather than shared class. By 1932, the Socialist Party Campaign Handbook in the United States demanded the “enforcement of Constitutional guarantees of economic political and legal equality for the Negro” and “the enactment and enforcement of drastic anti-lynching laws.”⁸¹ In the resolutions of the Comintern they noted that it was the preference of the American people to use race as the sole or primary identifier: a practice that they sought to eliminate.

The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was a Black union, independent from both outside tampering and outside aid. As a Black organization, they were rejected by middle class members of their own race, and as a union, they were rejected by the white labor structure of the US. The Brotherhood provides a prominent example of the fortitude and resilience of organized, working class African Americans. Many early forms of Black organizing during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were formed by Black elites, and in some cases also white elites, for the benefit of working class African Americans. However, the Brotherhood was a Black working class organization, formed by the Black working class, for the Black working class.⁸² The strength of the Brotherhood demonstrates the potential of an entirely organized Black working class that the Comintern sought to tap into. In the following years, the support of primarily white, radical organizations, provided assistance to Black organizations and Black grassroots movements.

⁸¹ Paul William Preisler Papers, State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis.

⁸² Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*, 16.

Black Nut Pickers and White Communists

Despite their effective organizing, the most famous strike in all of St. Louis was not led by the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Rather, it was mobilized almost entirely by working class Black women, creating the first major integrated strike in St. Louis in nearly fifty years. In an economy like St. Louis that revolved heavily around women for manufacturing production compared to other cities, it is not necessarily a surprise that it would be women to organize the strike. In Eugene Funsten's multiple nut shelling factories in St. Louis and East St. Louis, the working conditions were horrid and inhumane. Workers were segregated, and Black women, who made up around 85-90% of the labor force in Funsten's factories, were given the worst jobs and the least pay in the worst conditions.⁸³ The median wages of Black women in Missouri was \$6.65 lower than white women per week, the largest difference in the country.⁸⁴ Bathroom facilities were primitive and unsanitary, and despite the fact that Funsten's nut shelling factories were part of the food industry, there were no health standards imposed on the factories nor on the workers.⁸⁵ Many of the female strikers had large, open sores on their hands and arms, as the poor working conditions made injury inevitable. But, as there were no enforced health requirements at the Funsten factories, the Urban League simply "wasn't interested in furthering their cause."⁸⁶

Over the course of 1931-1933, Funsten nut pickers received five wage cuts. Carrie Smith, a veteran nut picker of eighteen years, was only one of many workers to have her wage dramatically cut. The largest amount she earned for a week's worth was \$18 in 1918. She never

⁸³ Myrna Fichtenbaum, "The Funsten Nut Strike May, 1933," (University of Missouri- St. Louis, 1974), 20.

⁸⁴ Feldman, *Racial Factors in American Industry*, 41.

⁸⁵ Fichtenbaum, "The Funsten Nut Strike," 22.

⁸⁶ Fichtenbaum, "The Funsten Nut Strike," 44.

earned more than \$4 in a single week in 1933.⁸⁷ After several meetings with members of the Communist Party, the most prominent leader, William Sentner, agreed to help support a potential strike. After they received their backing from the Communist Party, the two leaders of the strike, Carrie Smith and Cora Lewis, organized hundreds of Black women to walk out on strike on May 15, 1933.⁸⁸ Eugene Funsten responded to the strike saying that he could not agree to the wage increase demanded by women and Communists as he hasn't made profit within the past two years.⁸⁹ Historian Maya Fichtenbaum claims that, as the nut industry produces low-value and low cost items, the Great Depression had very little impact on Funsten's labor and product cost. Therefore, Fichtenbaum estimates that Funsten was, during the time of the Great Depression and the Funsten Nut Strike, still making around \$250,000 in profit annually across all his plants.⁹⁰

Despite the wage cuts to all Funsten workers, it was the Black women alone who went on strike on the first day of the Funsten Nut Strike. Part of this is due to the segregated nature of the factories, meaning the hardships faced by the African American workers at Funsten factories did not apply to the white workers at Funsten. Not only were the white women who worked at the main Funsten plant not only physically distant from the other Funsten factories where most Black women worked, but the working conditions at the main Funsten plant was far superior to the other plants. Even at factories with both Black and white women, the working conditions and pay were better for white women.⁹¹ One white woman was interviewed as to why she didn't strike, and she responded that the strike simply didn't affect her. However, many of the Black

⁸⁷ Ford, *A Brick and a Bible*, 67.

⁸⁸ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 24.

⁸⁹ "500 Negro Women Go on Strike Here 'For Living Wage'," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

⁹⁰ Fichtenbaum, "The Funsten Nut Strike," 32.

⁹¹ Ford, *A Brick and a Bible*, 66-67.

women who did strike on the first day and subsequent days were joined by their husbands in solidarity with the strike.⁹² The strike also gained support from “the white girls [who] stayed inside” on the following days. While beneficial in terms of the total number of workers on strike and completely shutting down any production from the original workers in Funsten’s factories, the recruitment of white strikers also plays an important role in creating an interracial strike, one that is less likely to receive violent treatment from strikebreakers and local police forces.⁹³

The following day, the white women walked out with the Black strikers and the Funsten factories remained silent throughout the day. Before the day had even ended, Funsten had folded on his original stance to offer a 33.3% raise to workers, which signified a weakness that the workers would capitalize on.⁹⁴ This raise also still did not make up for their previous five wage cuts, and the strikers rejected the proposition from Funsten. Two days later, on May 18, 1933, the strikers sent a delegation of three Black women and two white women, along with William Sentner, to the mayor’s office to ask him to arbitrate the dispute. However, the mayor had business elsewhere and the striking delegation was forced to meet with the Associate City Councilor instead.⁹⁵ Eugene Funsten said that if the mayor wanted to deal with the case through arbitration, he would be more than willing to comply. He also expressed that the current state of the wages (and his recently rejected offer) was due to the ongoing Depression. That “when times

⁹² Ford, *A Brick and a Bible*, 78.

⁹³ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 34.

⁹⁴ Reports for the actual wage increase vary, some reports claim that there was a 33 ⅓ percent wage increase proposal, other reports only mention a 30 percent wage increase. The overall difference isn’t significant in terms of monetary change and in the sense that the proposal was rejected. *St. Louis Star*, “500 Negro Women Offered Pay Rise, Continue Strike,” May 16, 1933; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “500 Negro Women Go on Strike Here ‘For Living Wage’.”

⁹⁵ “Nut Pickers Ask Mayor to Act as Arbiter in Strike”, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 18, 1933.

were good” Funsten “passed a larger share of the earnings along to the workers: now that they are not we [Funsten] have had to reduce their pay.”⁹⁶

The following day, Mayor Dickman, the mayor of St. Louis, appointed a committee to investigate the strike and report directly to him. The committee consisted of Rabbi Isserman of the Temple of Israel, the executive secretary of the Urban League John T. Clark, and several other prominent Black figures of St. Louis.⁹⁷ Carrie Smith met with Mayor Dickman and said that the purpose of the strike went beyond low wages and racial and gender hierarchies, insisting that industrial work fulfill its obligation to be a desirable alternative to domestic and agricultural work. No doubt, the irony that they were unable to feed their families while working in industrial agriculture was not lost on the strikers, and they made sure that Mayor Dickman was equally aware.⁹⁸

One of the council members, Rabbi Isserman, had been very involved since the origin of the Funsten Nut Strike. A radical, Isserman was a very active member of the St. Louis community, regularly involved in strikes and any form of activism. Temple Israel House had been housing Funsten nut pickers and sympathizers since the dawn of the strike. Isserman also criticized a lack of public support for the Funsten nut pickers. Although there was some community support towards the strikers (local businesses in particular helped aid the strike; local bakers would donate the strikers their day-old bread), middle class African Americans did not

⁹⁶ “Mayor to Act as Arbiter”, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

⁹⁷ “Mayor Orders Inquiry”, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 19, 1933.

⁹⁸ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 38.

support the Funsten strikers, including the St. Louis Urban League, which was against strikes as a general rule.

The middle class Black activism that existed throughout the United States, including St. Louis, preferred to make deals with white elites like Eugene Funsten in order to placate both sides. The Urban League was against strikes as they believed it damaged any relationship between Black and white that could be negotiated with peacefully, and would eventually lead to violence. This lack of action and support from the Urban League and other middle class African Americans led Isserman to claim that the Communists were the only ones who really cared about the nut pickers.⁹⁹ Isserman argued that the “nutpickers’ strike was not inspired by Communists but it was led by Communists”, and that it was still a grassroots movement from its inception, but directed by the Communists. Despite this, the strike itself was still at its roots a Black women’s working class strike, not a Communist strike.¹⁰⁰ However, the idea that the Funsten strike was orchestrated by, and really began with the Communists, did serve to benefit the Black women running and taking part of the strike. African Americans were largely considered ‘victims’ who were misled by the Communists, and even repeat offenders arrested during the strike often had their charges against them dropped. Whites arrested during the strike were considered the organizers and therefore convicted much more frequently.¹⁰¹

On May 20, 1933, Funsten proposed his final offer to the Funsten strikers. He would not discuss the rates offered but said “on the basis of the figures used by the workers they could

⁹⁹ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 43.

¹⁰⁰ Fichtenbaum, “The Funsten Nut Strike,” 49.

¹⁰¹ Ford, *A Brick and a Bible*, 59.

double their earnings under the new scale.”¹⁰² Several days later, after only eight total days of work stoppage, the strikers return and accept Funsten’s offer.¹⁰³ The apparent success of the Funsten strikers quickly inspired a second strike, also in St. Louis. Bosses frequently fired Black women as an alternative to increasing wages or equalizing their pay, and in protest, a group of female activists sent a list of demands to a Pecan Shelling Company hearing. Their list included a twelve-dollar minimum weekly wage for all workers, the creation of an unemployment fund managed by an employee board of trustees, and unemployment insurance. Unlike the Funsten Nut Strike, this strike was unable to achieve the same levels of participation from the Nut Pickers’ Union, nor did they receive any help from allied white workers. Not only were the demands of the strikers not met, but the retaliation mirrored that of many other strikes during this time, with police violence and repression. On the first day of the strike, police indiscriminately arrested Black female demonstrators on charges of disturbing the peace, a common practice of the era.¹⁰⁴

Unfortunately, the long-term success of the Funsten strike was about as successful as the Pecan Shelling strike. In October of the same year, Funsten laid off 191 workers, and the workers discovered the true effects of the newly agreed upon increased wage rates. While the rates per box had doubled, potentially doubling the payout, Funsten also doubled the size of the packaging boxes. Instead of doubling their wages, they were receiving the same amount of pay for the same amount of work; nothing had changed from the start of the strike.¹⁰⁵ Eugene

¹⁰² “Nut Pickers on Strike,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 20, 1933.

¹⁰³ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 24.

¹⁰⁴ Ford, *A Brick and a Bible*, 82.

¹⁰⁵ Ford, *A Brick and a Bible*, 82.

Funsten also began closing several of his St. Louis factories, and by 1934 most of his factories were permanently shut down as part of his plan to move his plants further south for cheaper labor.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

The significance of early twentieth century labor politics prior to the New Deal is not of the widespread success that occurred, but rather the lack of any significant institutional change. What organizations like the IWW demonstrate is a capacity for more—a capacity for permanent change. The Wobblies were unprecedented in terms of the scale and success they had in multiracial labor organizing. Yet, the Wobblies in modern historiography are frequently defined as a “failure”, due to their inability to establish any real legacy. What the Wobblies did accomplish was their ability to demonstrate potential. Integrated labor could be very successful as long as class remained more important than race. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters demonstrates an ability of Black leaders to organize a successful entirely Black labor union, without any recognition or aid from white labor, primarily the AFL. The radicalization of Communists following the 1928 Comintern Moscow Congress showed an intent by leftists to mobilize African Americans. The combination of a now fully realized Black economic empowerment movement, as demonstrated by the Brotherhood, combined with white leftist radicals, creates this element of fear, this new integrated entity capable of organizing the entirety

¹⁰⁶ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 46.

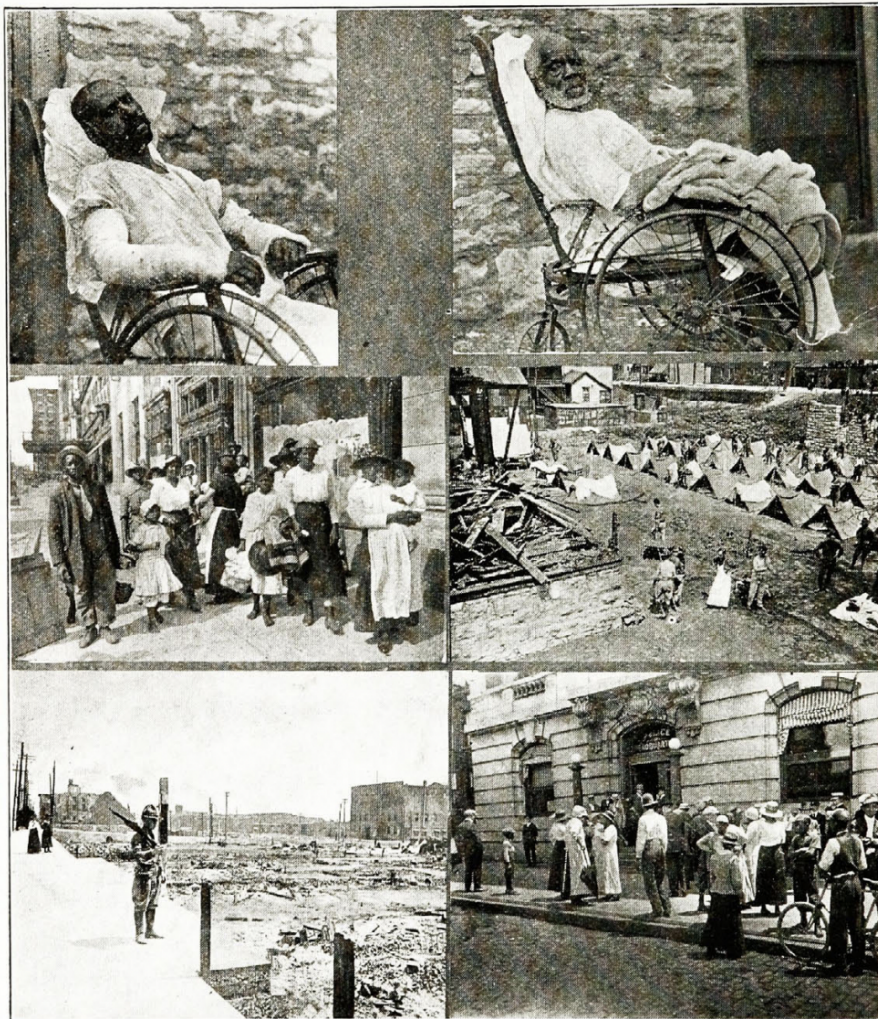
of the American working class. Southern Black labor leader Hosea Hudson believed that the northern white communists gave poor Black folks a sense of dignity that even the Black middle class denied them.¹⁰⁷

The work done by pre-New Deal organizations, whether deemed successful or not, still played an integral role in forming the institutions that could thrive during the New Deal era. The significance is not that there were movements that failed for the first three decades of the twentieth century, but that there were movements at all. When President Roosevelt took office in 1933, all of his legislation was oriented as a “pro labor” collection of laws as part of his New Deal program, while the ultimate goal of the New Deal was to reestablish and maintain capitalism. However, in attempting to appear as a pro labor president, Roosevelt unintentionally created an environment where labor movements and anti-capitalist movements can exist. Of course, the movements discussed change tactics as they were ushered into the 1930s by the New Deal, but it is the new atmosphere created by the state during the New Deal that allows them to advance as labor organizations.

¹⁰⁷ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 113.

Appendix B

The following pictures show the events and aftermath of the East St. Louis Pogrom in July 1917. The images are from the W. E. B. DuBois' article in *The Crisis* on "The Massacre of East St. Louis," published on September 6, 1917. The images are found, as listed, on pages 230, 229, and 227.



FRANK SMITH, BURNED.
THE REFUGEES.
AFTER THE FIRE.

AMOS DAVIS, AGE 84, SHOT.
CAMP OF TROOP D, 1ST ILL. CAVALRY FROM
SPRINGFIELD.
POLICE HEADQUARTERS, ST. LOUIS, MO.



COLORED MAN, IN FRONT OF CAR, BEING MOBBED. MILITIA LOOKING ON. *International Film Service.*



LOOKING FOR BODIES OF VICTIMS. SIX WERE FOUND HERE.

St. Louis Star.

Chapter 3: A New Deal for Labor

“We cannot afford to become complacent much remains to be done. Freedom from chattel slavery is a mockery as long as we are subjected to a vicious economic slavery. Forward onward and upward.”¹ - Theodore McNeal

Introduction

Following the Funsten Nut Strike, Communists in St. Louis had gained a large amount of respect from labor organizers and the Black community.² Not only did local Communists lead other strikes, but they also organized workers that had been excluded from white AFL unions, including the ragpickers, laundry workers, longshoremen, metal workers, and steel workers of St. Louis.³ Throughout President Roosevelt’s New Deal era, the AFL as an organization did little to advance the labor movement. More than content to sit on their laurels following the passage of pro-labor laws like §7a of the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933, as well as the Wagner Act of 1935, the majority of change from the AFL stemmed from individual groups rather than the organization’s leadership. Further, the myth of the “pro labor” legislation during the New Deal only aided American capitalists and sought to restore the American economy. While labor laws like §7a and the Wagner Act had little to no means of enforcement, their symbolic passage gave confidence for many unorganized workers to join unions.

¹ Urban League of St. Louis Records, Washington University in St. Louis, Series 7, Box 1.

² Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 7, Box 1.

³ Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 40.

The majority of change during the 1930s stemmed from three key groups: Black labor leaders, Communists, and the CIO. With African Americans being written out of many New Deal programs, Black leaders were forced to organize their own welfare and employment programs around the United States. They were aided by socialists and Communists whose mission was to aid the working class, regardless of race. Both Black leaders and Communists found sanctuary within the CIO after its formation, following the split of the AFL. This chapter argues that early New Deal programs were passed in order to save capitalism at the expense of Black workers. Federal relief and employment programs were targeted towards employing whites, and other recovery programs were similarly oriented. This chapter seeks to show that the AFL placed the values of upholding segregation and the hierarchical standards of craft union organizing over the needs of the labor movement as a whole. The combination of the New Deal and AFL excluding Black workers made the Great Depression even worse for many African Americans. However, the formation of the CIO and the organization of Black workers with the assistance of Communists and Black elites provided an opportunity for Black labor activism during the 1930s when capitalism was at its weakest. The strength developed by these parties is what led to the advances made by the labor movement as a whole, frequently at the expense of Black workers who took the brunt of anti-labor violence.

Early Years of the Great Depression

In the early 1930s, the Great Depression hindered nearly all industries in the United States and brought the economy to its knees. In 1932, wages and salaries were half of what they were in 1925 for many workers. President Hoover organized a conference of employers attended by President of the AFL, William Green. Green pledged to a no-strike policy as long as wages were not cut any further. Many of the employers would cut wages even further, but the AFL still did not strike. Unions during the Hoover administration lost considerable membership. By 1933 the AFL had shrunk from their previous total of 4,029,000 members to around 2,127,000 members.⁴ In 1932, the entire U.S. federal revenues had been halved compared to the average revenues in 1926-1929.⁵ Government programs which had been pushing the state into debt now existed under an even larger deficit. Congress passed the Revenue Act of 1932 to balance the federal budget and maintain the national credit under the Hoover Administration.⁶ The act increased taxes on corporations, individuals, sales taxes, estate taxes, and postal rates in order to further government revenue. Hoover recommended a reduction of \$370,000,000 in expenditures to cut government spending.⁷ Businesses began making significantly less and reducing wages on large scales at the beginning of the Depression. Smaller companies with less capital could be overwhelmed by several more powerful unions as they did not have enough surplus to withstand

⁴ Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: 20 Years of the CIO* (New York: Pathfinder Pr, 1982), 8.

⁵ United States Department of the Treasury. "Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of the Finances for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1932", *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of the Finances* (Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1932), 22.

⁶ Roy Blakey and Gladys Blakey, "The Revenue Act of 1932," *The American economic review* 22, no. 4 (1932), 620.

⁷ United States Department of the Treasury, *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of the Finances*, 19, 21.

a strike. This forced smaller companies to negotiate with unions in order to reduce wages. In 1932 the St. Louis Newspaper Publishers' Association asked the local No. 8 Typographical Union for a 20% wage cut, despite the city having the lowest wages for job printers in the country among cities of similar sizes.⁸ This proposal was rejected and the Union countered with a proposed 7% wage cut, not enough for the Publishers' Association to survive.⁹ However, the success of the printing companies directly impacted the employment of union workers. As companies struggled to employ workers, unions struggled to stay afloat.

In July of the same year, Arthur J. Ammon, the chairman of Schuster Printing Co. in St. Louis sent a letter requesting aid to Local No. 8. Ammon claimed that non-union enterprises were actively trying to bankrupt smaller printing companies by taking tariff work "at a figure at which no one can do it in a legitimate manner; and in view of the fact that if they are successful in their efforts to divert all of the tariff work of the St. Louis into non-union shops it will mean the closing of a union shop which has for many years employed from 50 to 100 members of No. 8."¹⁰ Unless No. 8 took wage cuts, many of their workers could be out of jobs as smaller companies went under. Only one month earlier, the *St. Louis Times* was absorbed by the *St. Louis Star*, costing over two hundred jobs.¹¹ In these situations, union leaders were caught between two sides: attempting to keep their members' wages as high as possible in order to stay in office, while also making sure that their workers had jobs to go to. The Publishers'

⁸ St. Louis Typographical Union No. 8 Records, State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis, folder 289.

⁹ St. Louis Typographical Union No. 8 Records, folder 295-296.

¹⁰ St. Louis Typographical Union No. 8 Records, folder 295.

¹¹ *Ibid*, folder 295.

Association would reject the 7% wage cut counter proposal, and No. 8 would eventually agree to a 10% wage cut.¹²

Before any real relief programs were passed during the New Deal, it was up to unions to provide support for their workers as unemployment skyrocketed. Near the beginning of the depression in June 1930, No. 8 only had eight members on their unemployment welfare program, spending \$70.74 per month. By June 1932, No. 8 had over six hundred members on welfare, spending \$5,537.50 per month: around \$121,000 in today's currency [Appendix C].¹³ In anticipation of the growing depression, the Typographical Union set aside \$20,000 for strikes in a sinking fund in February 1931, which they eventually had to transfer to their unemployment program.¹⁴ The lack of government assistance or successful intervention during the Depression is largely what helped get President Roosevelt elected and gained him overwhelming support from labor in all of his elections.

Saving Capitalism at the Expense of Black Workers

In the years before Roosevelt was elected, smaller companies faced extreme economic hardships, like most Americans. Roosevelt's New Deal promised salvation for the American people and is largely what got him elected. However, the election of FDR and the

¹² The union leaders of No. 8. were strongly opposed to arbitration as a similar union arbitration case in New York prior to this incident settled at a 12% wage cut. *Ibid, folder 295.*

¹³ *Ibid, folder 295.*

¹⁴ *Ibid, folder 287.*

implementation of the ill-prepared New Deal program only sought to strengthen larger companies. In 1933 Roosevelt passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) which sought to increase the value of farm products by paying farmers to grow less food. Not only did larger farms have more acreage to gain AAA benefit payments from, but these payments were paid out to landowners who legally had the obligation to compensate the tenant farmers and sharecroppers living on their land. This expectation was never enforced and therefore never practiced, resulting in an amassing of capital among large farms refusing to distribute AAA payments.¹⁵ This meant that less labor was required on farms to harvest grown crops, and many sharecroppers in the South were evicted from their land.¹⁶ In St. Louis, evicted sharecroppers were either homeless or living in destitute conditions: in some cases evicted families of ten or twelve huddled together in two room cabins without bathrooms, running water, or electric lighting.¹⁷ Not only did the AAA disproportionately attack Black sharecroppers, but it also provided less benefit for Black farmers who had less acreage.¹⁸ Black farmers on average had 63 acres compared to the average of 145 acres for white owned farms, and their average acreage was worth 20% less.¹⁹ In 1936 the AAA was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court decision stating that “the regulation of the farmer’s activities under the statute, though in form subject to his own will, is, in fact, coercion through economic pressure; his right of choice is

¹⁵ “Agricultural Adjustment Administration.” North Carolina History Project. <https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/agricultural-adjustment-administration/>.

¹⁶ Lewis, E. E. ““Black Cotton Farmers and the AAA””. Newspaper article, March, 1935. From Teaching American History, 82.

¹⁷ Stepenoff, Bonnie. “St. Louis and the Sharecroppers: Urban Connections to a Rural Protest.” *Agricultural history* 82, no. 1 (2008): 87.

¹⁸ “Agricultural Adjustment Administration.” North Carolina History Project. <https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/agricultural-adjustment-administration/>.

¹⁹ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: an Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 30.

illusory.”²⁰ Despite the Supreme Court’s decision, the program was successful during its operating years at increasing the price of crops. However, this came at a cost. New Deal programs which sought to restart the American economy by increasing the price of goods ignored the rock bottom wages around the country. One man commented that his family was forced to rely on their thirteen and fifteen year old boys to work because neither he, nor his wife, could find employment: saying: “all we know about the New Deal is that flour costs us \$1.18 now as against 69¢ before this happened.”²¹

When Roosevelt took office on March 4, 1933, unemployment was at an all time high. Congress passed the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) which appropriated \$500 million dollars to be given as federal grants in aid to states in order to finance their relief programs. Three months after the passage of the FERA, and six months after he took office, only \$139 million had been given out as grants. This lack of spending is largely because the approach of the federal government was to “make capitalism work,” rather than to focus on the needs of the unemployed. Political elites, especially in the South, were worried that giving handouts would make the populace lazy.²²

Instead of financing relief programs, Roosevelt focused on developing several employment programs throughout the duration of the depression in order to deal with the astronomical unemployment rates across the country. FDR enacted several labor programs, most notably the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Civil Works Administration (CWA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The PWA

²⁰ *United States v. Butler*, 297 U.S. 1, 1936.

²¹ “The Butcher Stands By”, *New York Labor News Company*, 1933, p9.

²² *New International*, September 1939, 272-273.

was founded with a massive \$3.3 billion dollar program as part of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 (NIRA) and was oriented towards recruiting workers in industrial jobs.²³ The PWA provided employment and housing for low income families, though housing was incredibly segregated and unequal as the tenant selection process favored high income groups who qualified.²⁴ The CWA was a broader program designed to put Americans to work for various jobs outside of specific industries. When the CWA program was first initiated, “it was found that no Negro nurses, painters, clerks, cement workers, or any skilled persons, for that matter, were receiving CWA employment. It was found that all Negroes who were registered at the Federal Employment Bureau were classified either as domestic workers or common laborers.”²⁵ This cut out Black workers from many of the jobs offered by the CWA, and those who could find employment through the program were frequently paid less. In St. Louis, some Black workers employed by the Citizen Free Employment Bureau (CFEB) under the CWP were paid the minimum wage of 45 cents an hour, while white workers given the same job made 65 cents an hour.²⁶

Formed in November 1933, the CWA had four million American men working on CWA financed projects by January 1934. This employment did not come cheap and cost around \$400 million of the PWA funds being used for the CWA. This high cost of running the program, combined with the fact that “many employers objected that the new wages paid by the government were attracting men from private industry,” resulted in President Roosevelt

²³ *New International*, September 1939, 272-273.

²⁴ Joe William Trotter, *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), 122.

²⁵ Ira De Reid, “Industrial Status of Negroes in St. Louis,” Report from the Department of Research, National Urban League, 1934, 54.

²⁶ Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 4, Box 11.

announcing the immediate liquidation of the CWA after only a few months.²⁷ In its place, Roosevelt created the WPA to create jobs through the \$4 billion program in the spring of 1935. The program flaunted the fact that it achieved its goal of filling 3.5 million jobs, despite the fact that they only reached that number twice, averaging around 2 million jobs from 1935-1939.²⁸

The WPA was different from the CWA in several ways. Though the working conditions and pay of workers under the CWA were by no means good, they were far superior to the conditions of the WPA. The WPA paid and treated workers horribly, providing employment that was no different from how privately owned companies would have treated them.²⁹ Workers frequently organized wildcat strikes and walkouts on WPA projects in order to fight for better wages.³⁰ The WPA also provided relief to Black families; in St. Louis, 40% of Black families gained relief and 30% were given WPA assignments. However, these numbers are slightly below their expected totals as 40% of the State Federal Employment Bureau (SFEB) applicants were Black, and around half of the unemployed in the city were also Black.³¹ The employment disparity is partially explained by the fact that the Missouri State Federal Employment Service, the pivotal point in local assignment of all jobs created by Federal and State funds, had no Black staff members from the beginning of 1935 until September of that year in more than fifty of their services. Similarly, there were no employed Black men in the offices of the Civilian Conservation Corps for Negro Boys in Missouri.³² For every Black man who did apply for

²⁷ *New International*, September 1939, 273.

²⁸ *New International*, September 1939, 274.

²⁹ Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 153-154.

³⁰ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 156.

³¹ Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 4, Box 11.

³² Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 4, Box 11.

employment through the SFEB, three Black women applied for work; yet, for every Black man placed on a job, 4-5 Black women also were given employment.³³ This is most likely due to the fact that Black men were competing for many of the similar jobs as white workers, and were therefore less likely to receive employment. Black women tended to dominate the domestic service industry and faced less competition from white women. While employment and relief programs of the New Deal did provide assistance to many African Americans, they were also disproportionately impacted by the Depression and yet still received less benefits than whites. With federal support lacking, Black workers had to look for assistance from Black elites, white radicals, and labor organizations for aid.

Satisfying Labor

In order to further stimulate the American economy, President Roosevelt passed the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 (NIRA). The NIRA attempted to promote cartelization: the practice of setting wages and prices in various industries to eliminate lesser companies and reduce competition through concentration of capital.³⁴ Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, said that it "rested on the idea of suspending the effect of the anti-trust laws in return for voluntary agreements by industries for fair competition, minimum wage levels and maximum hours."³⁵ Socialist Olive M. Johnson described the NIRA as "the means and

³³ Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 4, Box 11.

³⁴ Charles Post, "The New Deal and the Popular Front | International Socialist Review." <https://isreview.org/issue/108/new-deal-and-popular-front/index.html>; National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, Pub. L. 73-67.

³⁵ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 14.

method by which President Roosevelt and his lieutenants propose to save capitalism,” as was the goal of many other New Deal programs.³⁶ In order to pass the NIRA, Roosevelt needed the support of labor, particularly the support of the AFL. To gain their backing, Roosevelt added section §7a to the NIRA. Though a mere afterthought, labor leaders praised §7a as the coming of a new era of labor activism. Under the NIRA, §7a granted:

(1) That employees shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and shall be free from the interference, restraint, or coercion of employers of labor, or their agents, in the designation of such representatives or in self-organization or in other concerted activities for the purposes of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection; (2) that no employee and no one seeking employment shall be required as a condition of employment to join any company union or to refrain from joining, organizing, or assisting a labor organization of his own choosing; and (3) that employers shall comply with the maximum hours of labor, minimum rates of pay, and other conditions of employment, approved or prescribed by the President.

Roosevelt would receive a large amount of credit for the passage of §7a, despite being generally apathetic towards its inclusion. However, the myth of Roosevelt as a pro-labor President largely originated from the passage of §7a. Though the right to organize was credited to Roosevelt, it was previously fully sanctioned by the Norris-LaGuardia Anti-Injunction Act of 1932, passed under the Hoover administration a year before. The Norris-LaGuardia Act restricted the power of the courts to issue injunctions or restraining orders against strikers unless they were violent. Congress declared that US workers were free to join unions and collectively bargain during the Hoover administration. The act also outlawed yellow-dog contracts: agreements that workers would make with companies declaring that they would abstain from

³⁶ Olive M. Johnson was a European immigrant involved in the socialist party and was the first woman nominated for mayor of New York City. “Socialist Labor Nominee Led Enright by 646”, *The New York Times*, November 7, 1929; “The Butcher Stands By”, *New York Labor News Company*, 1933, p9; Matthew Cahn, *Environmental Deceptions: the Tension Between Liberalism and Environmental Policymaking in the United States*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 13.

joining a union as a condition for employment. While §7a is credited with the right to organize, it merely affirmed the rights of the workers who were previously organized under the Norris-LaGuardia Act and prior.³⁷

However, the NIRA did signal to many unorganized workers that the government would be on their side in labor disputes, encouraging many workers to join unions. Though the government itself did nothing to actively organize workers, within a month of its passage, 2,132 new workers were organized in St. Louis. Between July and September of 1933, the AFL issued 31 charters to directly affiliated local or federal unions in St. Louis alone.³⁸ Additionally, in the six months after the passage of the NIRA, strikes doubled that of the entire 1932 year, and nearly quadrupled the number of strikers involved.³⁹ The NIRA also created the National Labor Board (NLB) to deal with labor disputes between workers and employers. Though the NLB could side with the workers on cases of arbitration and order employers to cease violations of the NIRA, they had no ability to enforce their demands. Employers could, and regularly would, ignore the demands of the NLB. Many employers formed “company unions” to avoid dealing with independent trade unions as demanded by §7a. These company unions were company controlled, meaning that the employers who collectively bargained with them faced little opposition. Independent unions despised company unions, and although flawed, thousands of workers joined company unions.⁴⁰

³⁷ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 12; Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932, 29 U.S.C. ch. 6.

³⁸ Edwin Forsythe, “The St. Louis Central Trades and Labor Union, 1887-1945,” Dissertation Thesis, University of Missouri Columbia: Columbia, MO. 1956, 215-216.

³⁹ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 16.

⁴⁰ Louis Stark, *Labor and the New Deal*, (Washington, D.C: [Public affairs committee], 1936), 7.

Labor leaders cried that the main grievance of the NIRA was the lack of a means to enforce the right to collectively organize, as ensured by section §7a. In 1934 President William Green of the AFL began calling for Roosevelt to provide means for enforcing the act.⁴¹ Any attempt for workers to organize into a union and petition for a company to recognize them as the sole negotiator could simply be ignored. Of course, workers reserved the right to strike in protest, but this is no different prior to the passage of §7a. The NIRA also contained no note on racial discrimination, allowing Black workers to easily be replaced by white workers without any legal recourse; employers would regularly defend this practice by claiming they have the right to determine who they shall employ.⁴² As the NIRA code requirements mandated a minimum wage for all workers, this provided fewer incentives for companies to hire black workers, who they had historically employed on significantly lower wages. In St. Louis, Con-Ferra Paint and Varnish Company unloaded many Black workers after the passage of the NIRA, saying that if they could not pay Black workers less, then they would not employ them.⁴³ For many African Americans, the NIRA did very little, and in the case of Black workers at Con-Ferra Paint, it resulted in their termination.

Labor demanded Roosevelt pass a law with the ability to enforce their rights as unions. In 1934, Roosevelt replaced the inept NLB with the new National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). When the Supreme Court invalidated the NRA in May 1935, Congress was forced to replace it

⁴¹ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 61; Forsythe, "The St. Louis Central Trades and Labor Union," 220.

⁴² Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 4, Box 11.

⁴³ Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 4, Box 11.

with the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) in July 1935.⁴⁴ The NLRA, or the Wagner Act, encouraged collective bargaining subject to federal control, prohibited employers from interfering with union activities, and forced company recognition of union delegates who were representatives of the majority of workers. The Wagner Act also defined unfair labor practices on the part of employers, in addition to establishing a defined goal and purpose of the NLRB: to make sure that employers were respecting the rights of workers.⁴⁵ Wagner also prevented employers from providing financial assistance to unions, or attempting to control them, which severely damaged company unions.⁴⁶ Despite these apparently pro-labor elements, the purpose of the act was to encourage collective bargaining in order to discourage strikes. While the AFL were overwhelmingly in support of the Wagner Act, the radicals in the Communist Party vehemently opposed it, and opinions in the Socialist Party were split. The AFL heralded the act as the “Magna Charta [sic] of Labor,” while the Communists called it the “strike-breaking Wagner Bill.”⁴⁷

Despite the promises of the government to enforce union recognition, the Wagner Act contained no means of enforcing the rights guaranteed in both Wagner and section §7a. Francis Perkins wrote that Wagner, like §7a, “did not particularly appeal to him [Roosevelt].”⁴⁸ As declared in the bill, Wagner was supposed to ensure union recognition and enforcement through the NLRB, yet hundreds of strikes in the following years were for simple union recognition,

⁴⁴ Stark, *Labor and the New Deal*, 13; John Walsh, *C.I.O.; Industrial Unionism in Action*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1937), 188.

⁴⁵ Geffs, Jacob, and Hepburn, William M., “The Wagner Labor Act Cases.” *MINNESOTA LAW REVIEW*, Journal of the State Bar Association, 22, no. 1 (December 1937), 2-3.

⁴⁶ Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, 54.

⁴⁷ *New International*, vol. 2, no. 6, October 1935, 185.

⁴⁸ Preis, *Labor’s Giant Step*, 63.

despite the passage of the Wagner Act. The NLRB mainly served to help organize and run union elections for collective bargaining rights, which they did for both the AFL and the CIO, but did little to enforce Wagner.⁴⁹ In the years following Wagner, the popularity of sit-down strikes grew as an effective means of mobilizing workers, given that police could not break up these strikes without clearly being the aggressors. While violence against strikers still occurred, out of the thousand sit down strikes reported by the press in 1936 and 1937, only twenty five were broken up by police. More than 50% of these strikes were for union recognition, despite the guarantees of Wagner, and an overwhelming majority of sit-downs ended with at least partial or complete victories on the side of labor. However, following the sit-down strike wave, the NLRB made them illegal. The NLRB's argument was that it restricted strikebreakers from replacing workers in industry, though they were most likely banned due to their effectiveness.⁵⁰ The institution that President Roosevelt had set up to neutrally arbitrate labor disputes, and what the AFL and CIO thought should be favorable towards their needs, frequently ended up siding with the employers and capitalism, as was its design.

While §7a and Wagner might have encouraged workers that the government was on the side of labor, there was no shift in anti-labor strikebreaking tactics. In a 1940 strike by workers

⁴⁹ Walsh, *C.I.O.*, 186.

⁵⁰ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 63. Walsh, *C.I.O.*, 174.

Process of the NLRB. 1) A worker who feels his rights are violated can appeal to the NLRB who determines its jurisdiction in the matter and can hold a hearing. The jurisdiction of the Board only applies to "businesses in which labor disturbances will constitute a burden on interstate or foreign commerce. The Act does not confer on the federal government any general authority over all businesses". 2) Takes testimonies and evidence of the case, if they side with employer nothing happens, if they side with the employee, they can issue a "cease and desist" order 3) NLRB as of 1937 has no power itself to enforce the cease and desist order should the employer refuse to comply, but they can encourage the circuit court to enforce it.

against St. Louis Century Electric, over a thousand workers requested arbitration from the federal government. However, as the company refused to accept arbitration, the strikers received no federal assistance. The company hired strikebreakers and thugs to break through the picket lines and strikers. Local police began taking union members from their homes in “midnight arrests” and being held without charge and often without being booked. Police also aided the strikebreakers in forcibly breaking up picket lines and protecting armed strikebreakers and scabs: escorting them in groups. When the striker Oscar Buckley was killed by a strikebreaker, no legal action was taken.⁵¹

In 1937 during the “Little Steel Strike” five corporations in the steel industry resisted collective bargaining and sought to destroy the steel workers’ union. Recruiting local police, armed thugs, and strikebreakers, the steel companies barricaded the walls of their factories from provisions of the Wagner Act, refusing to deal with the workers’ union. During the strike, eighteen steel workers were either shot to death or had their brains clubbed in by the police and the armed strikebreakers of the steel companies. In Chicago, the police killed ten strikers, shooting eight of them in the back as they ran from the fury of the police. One hundred and sixty strikers were maimed and injured, hundreds more were arrested. John L. Lewis, president of the UMW, described the massacre by saying “no one had to die except the workers who were standing for the right guaranteed them by the Congress and written in law.”⁵²

⁵¹ William Sentner Papers, Washington University in St. Louis, Box 2, Folder 9.

⁵² Lewis, John L. 1937. “Labor and the Nation.” Washington, D.C., September 3, 1937. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/johnlewisrightsoflabor.htm>

Black Empowerment During the New Deal

As the promised rights of the workers and their enforcement by the federal government turned out to be nothing more than appeasement, and the New Deal economic recovery plans largely ignored African-Americans, Black organizations were forced to become the only support program for the majority of African-Americans during the Great Depression. The main exception during the first years of the Depression were socialist and communist radicals who organized many programs for Black workers around the United States. In St. Louis, Communists established at least six centers for the purpose of marshaling workers and providing places for recreation, education, and meals. Socialists established Unemployed Citizens Leagues (UCL) in three centers which distributed meals, garments, and other forms of relief. One of these UCL locations produced around two thousand garments during the first six months of the operation. Additionally, these organizations were active in making sure that workers actually gained what they were owed through state and federal relief programs, protesting inadequate relief funding, low wages, and unsatisfactory work conditions. While these organizations did not operate exclusively for African-Americans, many similar relief programs only served white workers and refused to provide relief for an integrated population.⁵³

Like many other cities, the St. Louis Urban League became relatively radicalized during the 1930s as their methods for supporting the Black community shifted. The St. Louis Urban League was largely inspired by the success of Black organizing during the Funsten Nut strike, despite opposing the strike when it started. Following the strike, the Urban League Executive Committee thanked the Communists who led the Funsten strike because “they brought forcibly

⁵³ Reid, “Industrial Status of Negroes in St. Louis,” 67.

to the public's attention the worst type of industrial exploitation" and claimed that "The League was active in each of the strikes in helping to set up wages and conditions which were acceptable to these workers. The Communists came out of these strikes with a prestige tremendously increased among the workers."⁵⁴ Despite this claim, for many workers it might have been the Urban League who they gained respect for, as following the strike the Urban League became much more involved in local strikes: something that the Communist Party had been doing for years in St. Louis. Middle class and elite Black organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Urban League had for decades been focused on forming relations with prominent white business leaders and local politicians in an effort to better the lives of lower class African Americans. This frustrated many Black workers as they viewed the heads of these organizations as elites who had the means to help their struggle, yet refused to do so.

While the NAACP and Urban League had many of the same goals and interests as poor African Americans, their methods differed. One southern Black communist commented that "the NAACP didn't change much, not much. They didn't do anything. They still didn't want to rock the boat, make they good friends mad. The leadership was still trying to make deals."⁵⁵ The complaints of Black workers about the NAACP frequently mirrored their complaints about the AFL. To many Black workers, both were relatively conservative organizations who refused to get dirt under their nails.

⁵⁴ Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 7, Box 1.

⁵⁵ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 181.

While the NAACP remained more static during the 1930s, the Urban League began creating their own programs that resembled Communist and Socialist initiatives. During the Depression, many domestic and personal service workers were only paid with room and board, a growing practice as many middle class white Americans would have otherwise struggled to pay for domestic workers.⁵⁶ Following Funsten in 1933, the St. Louis Urban League helped create a new standard for wages and work standards for many Black workers. While many employees would have worked for less than these standards, the vast majority of employers adhered to the Urban League's suggested standards, also helping reduce the practice of paying domestic workers with only room and board.⁵⁷ After Funsten, the Urban League became a key organization for Black labor in St. Louis. Easily their most successful program was the Urban League Employment Program, a program that placed Black workers in available job openings in St. Louis. During the Depression, 90% of the job placements as part of the Urban League program were in the domestic or personal service field.⁵⁸ In 1927 there were only 3,643 requests for employment through the Urban League program with numbers jumping following the beginning of the Depression and peaking at 64,000 requests in 1933. Many of these requests were from the same people, as there were only 9,341 unique applicants for work during 1933 with only 2,058 job placements.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Keona Ervin, *Gateway to Equality: Black Women and the Struggle for Economic Justice in St. Louis, Civil Rights and the Struggle for Black Equality in the Twentieth Century*, (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 56.

⁵⁷ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 67-68.

⁵⁸ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 60-61.

⁵⁹ Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 7, Box 1.

The Urban League also began assisting small, local strikes in St. Louis, and initiated several organizations in 1935 to assist them in gaining an international charter of the AFL. While not in support of the AFL, the Urban League was not opposed to the organization as a whole, though they did oppose the various local and international unions that excluded Black workers.⁶⁰ However, the Urban League was still not a perfect vehicle for supporting the needs and interests of Black workers, and were hesitant to become involved in every minor dispute. In one instance, six Black hotel maids walked off their job when their request for Sundays off was denied. Their request to the Urban League for support was denied, stating that “sometimes Negro employees themselves make unreasonable and unfair demands.”⁶¹

One St. Louis organization that did attempt to become involved in the needs of Black workers very closely was the Colored Clerks Circle. First formed in 1938, the Circle was an organization of young people who applied economic pressure on merchants and businesses in the Black areas of St. Louis in order to force them to hire Black help.⁶² While only existing from 1938 to the end of 1940, the Circle integrated over three hundred jobs and installed many picket lines. The Circle notably integrated the Kroger stores in Black neighborhoods in 1938 [Appendix C], and fought on the side of an already integrated union against the St. Louis Enterprise Cleaners in order to forcibly integrate their workforce (1939-1940). The Circle also provided assistance to Charles Hamilton Houston in the incredibly influential 1938 Supreme Court Case *Gaines v. Canada* which delivered the first blow against the “separate but equal” doctrine in

⁶⁰ Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 7, Box 1.

⁶¹ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 70.

⁶² Theodore McNeal, interviewed by Richard Resh and Franklin Rother, July 22, 1970, transcript, Black Community Leaders Project, State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis, 4.

education.⁶³ The Circle consisted entirely of young African Americans, with a restriction forcing all members to be between the ages of 18 and 25, also mandating members to have at least a high school education. Though the Circle only lasted for three years, their tactics of aggressively forcing integration into the St. Louis workforce by eliminating all income for the guilty businesses proved effective. Some of the Circle were equally as involved in the Urban League, and continued to stay involved in the League well after the Circle ceased to exist.⁶⁴

The Punch Heard 'Round the World

While organizations like the Urban League and Communist Party grew frustrated with the ineptitude of the New Deal's provisions towards labor, the AFL remained largely content with the passage of §7a and Wagner. However, an ever growing rift in the AFL began splitting the Federation into two camps. Throughout its existence, the AFL had only organized craft unions: a type of union that organizes based on the specific craft or trade they work in, upholding a hierarchical structure; this is contrasted with the industrial union which organizes all workers in an industry into the same union, ignoring whether they were or were not a skilled laborer. One side of the AFL supported the ongoing practices of only organizing and accepting craft unions, while the other side believed the AFL should be attempting to organize as many workers as possible, regardless of craft or industrial union. Many members of this second camp also took

⁶³ Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada, 305 U.S. 337; Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 4, Box 11.

⁶⁴ Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 4, Box 11.

issue with the AFL's disregard towards Black workers, as at the start of 1935 there were still no Black unions officially recognized by the AFL.⁶⁵

In cities like St. Louis, African Americans tended to be separated into local labor unions or federal labor unions when national union rules prohibited their membership. Many unionists in St. Louis supported the organization of black unions because non-union African Americans frequently supplied the pool of possible strikebreakers for white union strikes.⁶⁶ The Black Motion Picture Operators formed the "Sub-Local No. 143" in St. Louis under the white Motion Picture Operators local in 1935, though this did not provide Black workers with the same benefits. The majority of sub-locals were still required to pay union dues and meet the same expectations and standards of the white locals, while being denied the right to vote on union matters. This practice of generating Black sub-locals was a practice that existed during the WWI era and continued into the 1930s.⁶⁷ In 1935, A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) were the first Black union to be given a charter by the AFL, officially recognizing them as a national union. Black unions had historically been given "federal local" status by the AFL. These federal charters were usually given to small locals in which the majority of union dues were given directly to the AFL, and these locals were denied the right to vote at AFL conventions.⁶⁸ Only three years prior, Randolph criticized federal unions at the 1932

⁶⁵ Note that the AFL did not exclusively have craft unions as some unions like the UMW were already organized as industrial unions. However, the conservative branch of the AFL preferred craft unions and most of the contention comes from how to organize the currently unorganized workers. Harry Von Romer Autobiography, State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis.

⁶⁶ Forsythe, "The St. Louis Central Trades and Labor Union," 162.

⁶⁷ Forsythe, "The St. Louis Central Trades and Labor Union," 252.

⁶⁸ Harry Von Romer Autobiography, 5.

AFL convention, arguing that Black workers had the ability to organize much more efficiently, and with larger numbers, in international unions where they had better representation. Isolated groups of federal locals limited Black workers from organizing en masse and denied them from accumulating bargaining power, both with their employers and the AFL. Federal unions were also required to pay a per capita tax of 55 cents per month, while unions with a national charter paid less per capita.⁶⁹ While accepting the first charter offered to a Black union by the AFL was a momentous step for Black labor as a whole, it was not without criticism. Many Black intellectuals believed that, by accepting the charter, Randolph was furthering segregation within the labor movement and that African Americans had no place within the AFL.⁷⁰

Even outside of the BSCP earning a charter, 1935 was arguably the most influential year in the history of labor, with much of its controversy centering around the annual AFL convention. Held in Atlantic City, the 55th annual convention settled many of the issues with the AFL in one fell swoop. Only four months after the BSCP was granted a charter, and three months after the passage of the Wagner Act, the (majority) conservative wing of the AFL was content with the state of labor affairs. Despite this, the progressive wing raised many issues still ongoing within the labor movement in the United States. The disparity in wealth between AFL union officials and the workers they were representing was especially evident during the Depression; parallels could surely be drawn between members of Congress and their constituents

⁶⁹ Brailsford Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters: Its Origin and Development* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 140-142.

⁷⁰ Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*, 138.

as well. Even in the early years of the AFL, union offices could provide lucrative opportunities, as many “union officials sported diamonds and silk shirts and drove automobiles.”⁷¹

The passage of Wagner provided political satisfaction for many unions, and the integration of the BSCP also allowed many of the same unions to ignore the racist practices of the AFL. The year before, the AFL special committee submitted a report on the issues of race in the Federation that needed to be dealt with, and during the 1935 convention, President William Green ignored the report. This upset United Mine Workers of America (UMW) leader John Brophy enough that he resigned in protest saying that it was a “face-saving device... rather than an honest attempt to find a solution to the Negro problem in the American labor movement.”⁷² This consistent lack of action and general conservatism of the AFL angered the progressive wing of the Federation, embodied by the most influential vote in the history of the AFL at the 1935 convention.

At the 55th annual convention, the AFL would vote on whether or not to accept industrial unions, or to remain only as a Federation of craft unions. In his famous speech prior to the vote, John L. Lewis said that by only offering craft unions, the AFL was struggling to mobilize the true working class. He critiqued the practice of exclusive organizing saying:

For twenty-five years or more the American Federation of Labor has been following this precise policy, and surely in the absence of any other understanding of the question, a record of twenty-five years of constant, unbroken failure should be convincing to those who actually have a desire

⁷¹ Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America*, (New York: Viking Press, 1931), 92.

⁷² Kersten, Andrew Edmund, and Clarence Lang, eds. *Reframing Randolph: Labor, Black Freedom, and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 135.

to increase the prestige of our great labor movement by expanding its membership to permit it to occupy its natural place in the sun.⁷³

It was following this speech that the President of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC), William Hutchenson called John L. Lewis a rude name, and was roughly knocked with the “punch heard round the world”.⁷⁴ The ensuing vote secured the fate of the AFL and the eventual split, with incidents like the punch firmly encapsulating the hatred between the two sides.⁷⁵ The conservative wing of the AFL supporting exclusively craft union organizing won with a convincing 18,024 votes compared to only 10,933 votes in favor of industrial unionism.⁷⁶ The minority wing of the AFL that supported further industrial unionism organized a split from the AFL and formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) the following month.

The founding of the CIO itself was incredibly controversial; not only was the largest collection of labor unions in the history of the United States split in two, but they began the practice of dual unionism. While the CIO argued that they were organizing a separate union structure which meant they were not committing the ultimate sin of dual unionism, there was still notable overlap between CIO and AFL unions. The CIO also became a home of refuge for not only African Americans excluded from AFL unions, but also for Communists. President of the CIO, John L. Lewis, had long been opposed to the Communists while President of the UMW and

⁷³ Lewis, John L, 1935, “Speech at the Fifty-Fifty Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” October 16, 1935, 2-3.

⁷⁴ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 41-42.

⁷⁵ John L. Lewis in particular was known for being exceptionally stubborn and would never relinquish a grudge, so being elected as President of the soon-to-be-formed C.I.O. offered no opportunity for mending relations with the A.F.L..

⁷⁶ *Monthly Labor Review*, January 1936, p6.

dominated a union political machine “renowned for its brutal intolerance”.⁷⁷ Despite their prior differences, Lewis reached out his hand to many Communist organizers to lead various CIO campaigns, and in return, the Communist Central Committee proved their loyalty by abolishing Communist local shop units and newspapers.⁷⁸ Additionally, Communists in the CIO buried their party affiliation in an effort to maintain the credibility of the organization and to further the needs of the organization.⁷⁹ Several years before the founding of the CIO, Lewis had “condemned and ousted certain Communistic leaders” from the UMW, but now the same men were serving as his lieutenants. Representative Frank Hook from Michigan, a Democrat, criticized Lewis saying that the “ranks of labor will be disrupted... unless these persons are ejected again.”⁸⁰

Working together, the Communists and CIO provided an opportunity for Black and white workers to work together on a scale that had largely been unprecedented in organized labor. However, in the southern part of the country, racial integration in unions was viewed as a threat to white workers, fearing that integrated unions could be used by Black workers to fight for social and economic mobility. To discredit integrated and organized labor, southern media would regularly correlate the Communist Party with any strikes, whether they were involved or not.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself*, (New York: Twayne, 1992), 46.

⁷⁸ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 139.

⁷⁹ Despite the efforts of the Communists to prove allies to the CIO, and their successes in doing so, three years after the forming of the CIO, John L. Lewis’ UMW passed a constitution which excluded members of the KKK, IWW, and Communist Party of the USA. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 190.

⁸⁰ “Public Tired of Both Sides in Strike, Roosevelt Feels; Blasts Shut Cambria Plant,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 1937, p1-2.

⁸¹ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 71, 143.

Many labor leaders were also more opposed to communism than they were in support of furthering the labor movement; in one instance, southern labor leaders “added the stipulation that they would support anti-Communist legislation if assured that such laws would not be unjustly used against labor.”⁸² In another, the Alabama State Federation of Labor (ASFL) stated that “Organized Labor in Alabama will not tolerate social equality between whites and the blacks advocated by the Communists... It will be the ruination of Organized Labor.”⁸³ Contrarily, several CIO leaders in the south were also extremely racist, but still organized labor out of need rather than ideology.⁸⁴ John L. Lewis later said that “out of the agony and travail of economic America, the Committee for Industrial Organization was born.”⁸⁵ The formation of the CIO was incredibly influential as it unlocked further opportunities for integrated labor organizing, while also providing a more mainstream method for Communists to become involved in the labor movement. For some African Americans, the CIO became the first alternative to the Communist Party for integrated organizing. For others, the radicalized CIO formed to be what some African Americans wanted the Communist Party to be.⁸⁶

⁸² Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 128.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 141.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 142.

⁸⁵ Lewis, John L. 1937. “Labor and the Nation.” Washington, D.C., September 3, 1937.

<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/johnlewisrightsoflabor.htm>

⁸⁶ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 151.

The Mobilization of Labor During the New Deal

In St. Louis, labor activities had been heavily suppressed compared to the rest of the country. In the industrial sector, the industrial bureau of St. Louis reported that 95% of its factory labor was open shop in 1934.⁸⁷ St. Louis labor leader Harry Von Romer commented that “trade unions were strongly in the hands of bureaucracies, as they were around the country. Organizing the vast unemployed workers was a ‘no no.’” The majority of the workers that were organized were craft workers to boot.⁸⁸ Most attempts to organize could quickly be shut down by bosses, even in the 1930s. In 1935 Von Romer recalled that the St. Louis General Motors plant superintendent instructed the guards at the gate to not allow any workers wearing a union button into the plant. In response, “some of the guys pinned them to their underclothes until they got through the gate.”⁸⁹ Picket lines could regularly be broken by companies who could get injunctions against known union members, physically stopping them from standing within a certain number of feet of the plant. When violence between scabs and picketers inevitably occurred, companies brought in their lawyers and usually could get murder and other violent charges against their strikebreakers dropped.⁹⁰ Due to the political dominance of businesses in St. Louis, the trade unions in the city were dormant for decades. Most labor contracts were known as “sweetheart contracts”, or contracts with the boss’ blessing, further solidifying their control.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Reid, “Industrial Status of Negroes in St. Louis,” 18.

⁸⁸ Harry Von Romer Autobiography, 3.

⁸⁹ Zachary Palitzsch, “ST. LOUIS LABOR RETROSPECTIVE: Button Collection Shows Union Pride,” *The Labor Tribune*, August 8, 2022, 1.

⁹⁰ Harry Von Romer Autobiography, 7-8.

⁹¹ Harry Von Romer Autobiography, 4.

The passage of §7a and Wagner did little to improve the situation in St. Louis from a legal standpoint. During 1933, William Sentner, a Communist and one of the key leaders in the Funsten Nut Strike, helped organize other strikes and resulted in NRA federal authorities ordering his arrest and holding him for several days.⁹² The St. Louis Citizens Committee on Relief and Employment (CCRE) also spent less per capita than any other city of the same size, and the amount given to the poor was 38% less than other similar cities.⁹³ To improve the conditions of workers, labor leaders in the city formed the St. Louis City's Central Committee of American Workers Union (AWU) in order to improve worker welfare benefits which had been inadequate until then.⁹⁴ The already existing St. Louis Relief Administration refused to provide relief to strikers who needed financial assistance, directly supporting the efforts of company strikebreaking. Though this policy would be overturned in the late 1930s, prior strikes found difficulties in maintaining their longevity.⁹⁵

The passage of the New Deal legislation that was allegedly pro-labor had little actual impact in St. Louis and around the country. In 1937, electrical workers across several plants organized and struck after recognition by the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), a CIO union.⁹⁶ Two of the largest plants in St. Louis, Emerson Electric and

⁹² Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest*, 38.

⁹³ Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest*, 32.

⁹⁴ Palitzsch, "Button Collection Shows Union Pride," *The Labor Tribune*, 1.

⁹⁵ "Electrical Union Mass Meeting," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 21, 1937, p.12.

⁹⁶ The workers of Emerson, Wagner, and Century were all unionized in 1937, prior to, but the same year as the strike. Robert Logsdon, interviewed by Dennis Brunn, January 22, 1974, transcript, Black Community Leaders Project, State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis, 3.

Wagner Electric, were both founded in 1890.⁹⁷ UE workers in St. Louis called a strike on all three of these plants, in addition to a fourth, Baldor Electric Company. On noon of March 8, 1937, UE workers in the four plants initiated their sit-down strike, demanding union recognition as a bargaining agency with the company, as well as higher wages.⁹⁸ Some workers were making as little as 28 cents an hour and were seeking what they called a “living wage”, demanding a minimum of 50 cents an hour for every worker.⁹⁹ In the Emerson plant, 1,800 of their 2,000 workers went on strike and formed picket lines.¹⁰⁰ UE workers across the plants sat down on the job, refusing to leave the plant. Cots were set up for sleeping inside, and meals were brought in by the union. Work stopped for up to 53 days in some plants before a settlement was reached.¹⁰¹ The first two companies to yield to the demands of the strikers were Baldor and Century Electric who signed agreements recognizing the union and ending their strikes in the same week. Both the Wagner and Emerson strikes would last for a longer amount of time, though UE would eventually emerge victorious. The Emerson settlement would add up to more than \$160,000 per year to the company's payroll and a minimum of \$85 more per year than previously earned for every worker.¹⁰²

Though the strike was successful, and aided the movement for the St. Louis Relief Administration to begin providing relief to strikers, there were still unorganized sections of St. Louis. In 1938, Sentner sent a letter to the Urban League stating that only 100 of the 400 eligible

⁹⁷ St. Louis Electrical Board. *A Century Plus of Electrical Progress: History of the Electrical Industry in Metro St. Louis*, (St. Louis Electrical Board, 1983), 12-13; Logsdon interview, 3.

⁹⁸ “Emerson Sitters Name Leaders to Withstand Strike,” *St. Louis Star and Times*, March 9, 1937, p1.

⁹⁹ “Emerson strikers appeal to mayor,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 16, 1937, p19.

¹⁰⁰ “Sit-Down strikes spread in country”, *The New York Times*, March 9, 1937.

¹⁰¹ St. Louis Electrical Board, *A Century Plus of Electrical Progress*, 8.

¹⁰² William Sentner Papers, Box 2, Folder 1.

Black workers in St. Louis were members of the St. Louis UE. Additionally, the CIO itself had very few black delegates, disproportionately representing white workers' interests. Robert Logsdon, a Black leader in St. Louis and member of the CIO, commented that there was "just a sprinkling" of Black delegates in the organization.¹⁰³

Conclusion

In 1938, the St. Louis newspapers reported that African Americans in the city were planning on creating a black union collection in St. Louis, named the Negro Trade Union League which would consist of AFL locals. However, this coalition was never formed because it would create dual unionism in the city, dividing the labor movement, and would encourage other races and religions to form their own, isolated, labor union collection.¹⁰⁴ Though white unions in St. Louis were inadequate to Black needs, local Black labor leaders put the needs of the entire labor movement ahead of the needs of their race. A noble decision, especially considering that this favor was almost never reciprocated. Throughout the 1930s, organizations like the AFL put the needs of maintaining segregation and white interests over Black needs, and the needs of the labor movement as a whole. Part of the reason the CIO was formed was out of desire to put the needs of the labor movement first, ahead of segregation. While the CIO still had their share of racists, they still valued the role Black workers could play in organizing.¹⁰⁵ However, unlike the Black

¹⁰³ Logsdon interview, 4, 10.

¹⁰⁴ Forsythe, "The St. Louis Central Trades and Labor Union," 253.

¹⁰⁵ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 142.

labor unions of St. Louis, the CIO did organize many of their own unions, violating the rule of dual unionism and challenging many pre-existing AFL unions. Perhaps dual unionism was something that only the primarily white leaders of the CIO could afford to do, while the Black unions did not have the same privilege or luxury.

As individuals, African Americans also received significantly less from the New Deal programs compared to white workers. Some of the most influential New Deal programs, like the Social Security Act, were not offered to domestic and agricultural workers, eliminating 65% of African Americans in the nation from the program.¹⁰⁶ The National Housing Act of 1934 facilitated segregation and provided white potential homeowners with significantly lower mortgage rates than African Americans. Many of the labor programs that sought to put Americans back to work, like the WPA and CCC targeted white men as their key demographic, employing a disproportionately high number of white workers. Worker programs like the CCC frequently had quotas on the percentage of Black and other nonwhite workers who could be employed under the program in order to secure passage from Southern votes.¹⁰⁷ Though New Deal employment programs employed a higher percentage of Black workers during the early years of World War II, this is largely due to the fact that white workers received higher paying jobs in private industries, marked by the mobilization of the U.S. war economy in the early 1940s.

While the employment opportunities for white workers were higher throughout the majority of the New Deal, during peacetime the entire program had essentially failed. During

¹⁰⁶ Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, 43.

¹⁰⁷ Post, "The New Deal and the Popular Front."

1940 the total number of unemployed workers in the United States was approximately 10 million, roughly the same as it was back in 1935.¹⁰⁸ Despite the fact that many of the employment programs offered short term jobs, thousands of Black workers, through organizations like the WPA, received some introduction to union organizations and union philosophies, forming connections and helping organize many Black workers.¹⁰⁹ For leaders like John L. Lewis, Roosevelt's lack of success with his New Deal program, and his indifference towards labor, caused Lewis to demand his removal from office during the 1940 presidential election. During his first term, Roosevelt passed §7a and the Wagner Act, and while they did not change much for labor, they still allowed him to claim to be on the side of labor. However, labor disputes like the 1938 Supreme Court case *Labor Board v. Mackay Radio & Telegraph Co.*, which reinforced the right of companies to use strikebreakers, pushed labor a step back in some spaces.¹¹⁰ On October 25, 1940, 25-30 million Americans listened in to John L. Lewis who called for Americans to vote for Wendell Willkie: Roosevelt's opponent for the 1940 election.¹¹¹ Lewis argued that the unemployment rate was still around nine million unemployed, and that

¹⁰⁸ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 73.

¹⁰⁹ Horace R. Cayton, "Cayton on Labor," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 18, 1941.

¹¹⁰ The opinion stated that "it was not an unfair labor practice for the company to replace its striking employees with others in an effort to carry on the business; nor was the company bound later to discharge such others in order to reinstate the strikers." This upheld the right of companies to use strikebreakers freely, and ensure more power in their hands during and following strikes. It also discouraged many non-unionized workers from joining strikes without a guarantee of employment after. Though that guarantee was never there prior, like the passage of §7a and Wagner, it was a very symbolic ruling.

Roosevelt also passed the influential Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 which established a minimum wage, forty hour work week, and abolished child labor; an influential piece of legislation that benefited labor, included in this footnote in an effort to not exclude some of the work that he did during his second term for labor unions.

NLRB v. Mackay Radio & Telegraph Co., 304 U.S. 333; Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, 29 U.S.C. 201.

¹¹¹ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 80.

labor has no significant power in the “democratic administration of power, except for casual and occasional interviews which are granted to individual leaders.” Lewis cites the “unrestrained baiting and defaming of labor by the Democratic majority” who are “never subject to rebuke by the titular or actual leaders of the party.”¹¹² In a statement to the Black workers of America, Lewis asks them to reflect on their situation:

“To the members of the Negro race in our Northern States, I say, your income is a group is the lowest. Your living conditions are the poorest. Your unemployment is the highest. Discrimination against you is the worst. Surely you have no cause to believe President Roosevelt is an indispensable man. And surely you believe Wendell Wilke will do more for you than he has in the last 7 years. As a proven friend of the Negro race, I urge you to vote for Wilke”.¹¹³

In an absolute ultimatum, Lewis declared that if Roosevelt were re-elected, then he would accept it as a vote of no confidence in him and he would step down as president of the CIO. Of course, Roosevelt would go on to win the election convincingly, though it would be closer than his previous two elections, he would win with overwhelming support from labor unions. True to his word, Lewis stepped down as president of the CIO though he remained president of the UMW.¹¹⁴ While losing their courageous leader who embodied the spirit of the CIO, the organization would continue to fight for workers’ rights in the following years. Lewis continued his career as president of the UMW leading one of the largest strikes in United States history soon after stepping down from the CIO. In the coming years, Roosevelt would take a much

¹¹² Lewis, John L. 1940. Untitled Speech. October 25, 1940.
<https://randsesotericotr.podbean.com/e/john-l-lewis-speech-october-25-1940/>.

¹¹³ Lewis, John L. 1940. Untitled Speech. October 25, 1940.
<https://randsesotericotr.podbean.com/e/john-l-lewis-speech-october-25-1940/>.

¹¹⁴ Lewis, John L. 1940. Untitled Speech. October 25, 1940.
<https://randsesotericotr.podbean.com/e/john-l-lewis-speech-october-25-1940/>.

firmer stance and violent approach in shutting down labor unions and strikes during the 1940s as he no longer felt the need to secure labor votes. As the US became involved in World War II, the economy mobilized, presenting new opportunities for workers and unions alike. With the focus of the nation on the war industry and fighting inequality abroad, World War II provided the perfect opportunity for African Americans to secure economic, social, and political gains.

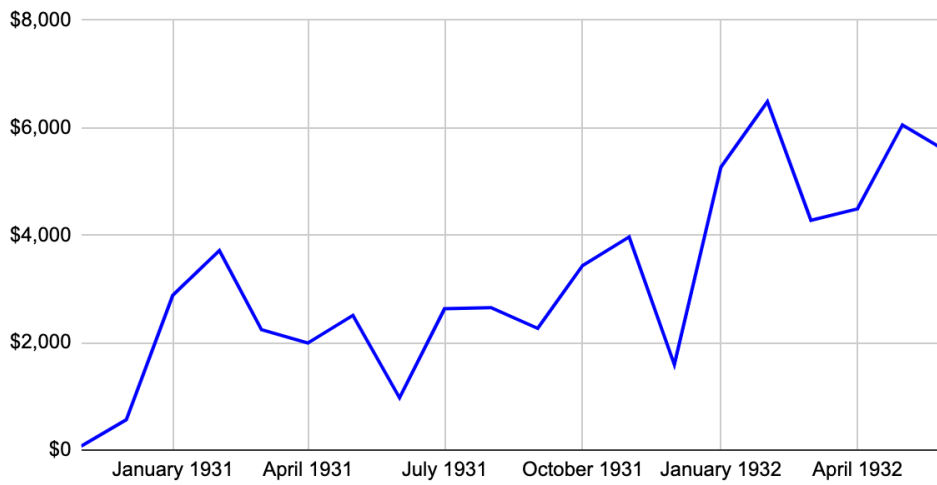
Appendix C

The Number of Applicants and Total Job Placements at the St. Louis Urban League's Unemployment Branch.

Year	Number of Applicants	Number of Job Placements
1933	64,000	2,058
1934	45,000	1,800
1935	30,000	1,814
1936	-	-
1937	23,575	2,243
1938	-	-
1939	31,373	2,586
1940	31,118	3,087

The data comes from the Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 4, Box 11, reports of the Executive Committee.

Total Amount Spent on Unemployment by St. Louis Typographical Union #8



St. Louis Typographical Union No. 8 Records, SHSMO.



The above picture is taken during the Emerson Sit Down Strike in 1937. Image credits are from: "Frank Abfall Collection," Possession of Prof. Rosemary Feurer, Northern Illinois University.



The above picture shows the St. Louis Colored Clerks Circle picketing the Kroger Store (1938) in St. Louis. The Colored Clerk Circle began the local “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” movement to desegregate the workforce in all-white stores located in Black neighborhoods in St. Louis. Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 4, Box 11, the Colored Clerks Circle papers.



The above picture is taken during a series of 1933-1934 labor and farm strikes. This incident is from July 9th, 1934 at Seabrook Farms, near Bridgeton, New Jersey. The picture is from the American Civil Liberties Union pamphlet published in January 1935, but taken at the State Historical Society of Missouri.

Chapter 4: The Equality of Sacrifice

“Law comes in many ways. Law is not only that which is on the statute books, as I am sure you well know. You have custom and usage. That probably is the most difficult law to break. That has grown up in the mores and in the norms of the community.” - David Grant, member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and St. Louis March on Washington Movement, 1944.¹

Introduction

During World War II, unions were larger and more heavily integrated than ever before across the United States. In August 1942, there were only around 500,000 Black workers in all labor unions in the AFL, CIO, and unaffiliated railroad brotherhoods.² By the end of World War II, there were 1,600,000 Black workers involved in unions, primarily in the steel, coal, automobile, and meat packing industries. One-third of the delegates sent to the CIO’s United Packinghouse Workers convention were Black, and hundreds of thousands of militant Black workers bolstered the picket lines throughout the war.³ Half a million Black workers joined unions affiliated with the CIO alone.⁴ Black workers not only dramatically expanded in unions, but the number of Black workers in higher paying skilled positions doubled, and the gains in

¹ Theodore D. McNeal Scrapbook, State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis, microfilm roll 2.

² George Rawick Papers, State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis.

³ Art Preis, *Labor’s Giant Step: 20 Years of the CIO* (New York: Pathfinder Pr, 1982), 271-272.

⁴ Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement.” *The Journal of American history (Bloomington, Ind.)* 75, no. 3 (1988), 787.

semi-skilled labor were even greater.⁵ While the war years provided an opportunity for African Americans to organize in unprecedented numbers, the Black freedom struggle was pushed to the foreground of American politics. The March on Washington Movement (MOWM) was the driving force behind this political shift, and forced the government into passing Executive Order 8802 and the Fair Employment Practices Committee, both efforts to fight discrimination in war industries. This chapter follows the March on Washington Movement and their efforts to desegregate war industries and lunch counters in St. Louis, documenting the key shift in the war years that ultimately led to the Civil Rights Movement. Organizations like the March on Washington Movement and labor unions were placed in a difficult position during the war years as any form of protest that disrupted defense production was seen as unpatriotic. Throughout this chapter, the March on Washington Movement juggles this issue while simultaneously making Black civil rights a national issue and tearing down many of the discriminatory labor practices so prominent in the decades prior.

During much of the 1930s, the Roosevelt administration avoided direct intervention in strikes, while local and state leaders used the federally financed National Guard against strikers to regulate and crush labor. This allowed Roosevelt to keep himself clear of many violent attacks on strikers, staying as a neutral mediator. However, following the 1940 election, Roosevelt no longer kept up the pretense of neutrality by pressuring strike leaders and urging hostility against strikers during the war years.⁶ In several unprecedented cases, Roosevelt ordered privately

⁵ Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75*, (Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 68.

⁶ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 113.

employed strikers back to work in an effort to maintain defense production.⁷ While Executive Order 8802 and the Fair Employment Practices Committee were both positive to labor and African Americans, they had little means of enforcement. In a decade so opposed to strikes and labor, the World War II years provided little benefit for labor; but for Black workers who were forced to fight for their “piece of the pie” in the bountiful economic opportunities during World War II, the 1940s provided the landscape to fight for economic, social, and political advances.

The March on Washington Movement

Founded as the brainchild of A. Philip Randolph in January of 1941, the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) was an all-Black organization which sought to desegregate war industries. It also protested against the United States Employment Service (USES) and the segregated armed forces. The MOWM called for all African Americans to march against Washington D.C. on July 1, 1941, to force the federal government into taking action against discrimination in war industries.⁸ As the head of the MOWM, Randolph strongly opposed Communists, and by restricting whites from joining MOWM, it effectively banned the white communists whom he blamed for the downfall of the National Negro Congress (NNC), an organization Randolph was a part of shortly before the founding of MOWM.⁹ These Communists, Randolph argued, had their primary interest in furthering Soviet Russia and were willing to “sacrifice labor, the Negro, or America.” By contrast, Randolph and MOWM sought to work with mainstream American labor unions who they believe could assist them in desegregating war industries. They called on the AFL and CIO to abolish discrimination and

⁷ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 114-115.

⁸ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 1; Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 45.

⁹ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 49.

segregation not only in industries, but also in their own unions.¹⁰ Not only did MOWM oppose white Communists, but the white Communists opposed MOWM. They argued that by attempting to join war industries, Randolph was supporting a war that was started by, and for the benefit of, white people.¹¹ Communist opposition to the MOWM proved beneficial for the organization as it distanced them from white radicals the federal government was incredibly wary of. When the March was originally called by Randolph, director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, began investigating the MOWM organization. The FBI originally believed that the MOWM was being controlled by, or at least supported by, white Communists. A temporary ally to the organization, and executive secretary of the NAACP, Walter White gave J. Edgar Hoover a collection of communist and socialist newspaper clippings attacking the MOWM. Walter White argued that published communist opposition to the MOWM meant that there was no collaboration between communists and the MOWM. Hoover and the FBI accepted the logic behind this argument and no longer associated the two organizations. While the FBI maintained a watchful eye on the MOWM, their main focus remained on communists.¹²

Black organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League did support the MOWM. In St. Louis, the local branch of the MOWM consisted of many members of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), the black union that Randolph also headed. When the BSCP was first founded in the 1920s, local Black newspapers like the *St. Louis Argus* opposed the Brotherhood. However, in the 1930s the *Argus* began supporting the BSCP, and following the

¹⁰ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 1.

¹¹ David Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy: the March on Washington Movement, 1941-1946*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 43.

¹² Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 43.

founding of the MOWM, the *Argus* began supporting them as well. Theodore McNeal, head of the St. Louis MOWM branch, and good friend of A. Philip Randolph, wrote a statement in the *Argus* emphasizing the significance of the movement.¹³ This helped organize more working class African Americans who were really the target of the MOWM. While the support of the NAACP was useful for publicity and funding, the MOWM needed the masses in order to threaten President Roosevelt with sheer numbers.

Randolph, Walter White, and President Roosevelt had several meetings where they discussed the goals of the MOWM and potential solutions to discrimination in war industries. Though they had no exact count on the number of demonstrators, Randolph and White claimed that there would be at least one hundred thousand people marching on Washington.¹⁴ Just days before the march was scheduled, on June 25, Roosevelt was pressured into the signing of Executive Order 8802. Executive Order 8802 established the Fair Employment Practices Committee and prohibited racial discrimination in defense industries.¹⁵ Randolph subsequently called off the MOWM as the signing of EO 8802 accomplished what the march wanted. However, Randolph faced heavy criticism from working class and elite Black organizations for calling off the march. In St. Louis, a group of young African Americans were so upset that Randolph called off the march that they demanded, and were granted, refunds for the MOWM buttons they purchased.¹⁶ While the official march had been called off, the MOWM still provided a structural framework to organize protests across the country. With local offices under

¹³ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 45, 47; McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 1.

¹⁴ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 36.

¹⁵ Executive Order 8802, Prohibition of Discrimination in the Defense Industry, 1941.

¹⁶ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 46.

Randolph and the BSCP, the MOWM developed into a national working class movement dedicated towards fighting for integration in the workplace and armed forces.¹⁷

Unions and the Equality of Sacrifice

The United States became involved in World War II well before the bombing of Pearl Harbor and their formal declaration of war in December 1941. The US had been supplying their allies for well over a year, establishing a significant war industry. In March 1941, Roosevelt established the National Defense Mediation Board as part of Executive Order 8716. The Defense Mediation Board served primarily as an arbitrator between workers and defense employers to avoid strikes, stoppages, or lockouts which would interrupt production.¹⁸ Several months later, Roosevelt created the Fair Employment Practices Commission in Executive Order 8802 in response to the March on Washington Movement.¹⁹ While these two executive orders partially convey the belief of the government that labor needed to be suppressed in order to maintain defense production, the federal government took several more severe stances following the formal entrance of the United States into World War II.

One month and one day after the US declared war on Germany, President Roosevelt created Executive Order 9017, establishing the National War Labor Board (NWLB), designed to

¹⁷ Joe William Trotter, *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), 134-135.

¹⁸ Executive Order 8716, Establishing the National Defense Mediation Board, 1941.

¹⁹ Executive Order 8802, Prohibition of Discrimination in the Defense Industry, 1941.

mediate labor disputes and stabilize wages.²⁰ Four days later on January 16, 1942, Roosevelt created the War Production Board to manage what was being produced and to help control the labor behind it. When the US joined the war, the government froze jobs so that workers could not go to competing firms with higher pay, maintaining lower wages. Labor leaders were forced to accept the ‘no strike’ policy which was labeled the “Equality of Sacrifice” in order to ensure workers did not strike and limit war production. Because employers could not raise wages in order to attract workers, employers offered insurance plans and health care packages to lure workers from other companies. This practice did not exist prior to World War II and became a standardized practice in America following the war.²¹ Donald Nelson, the head of the War Production Board, also forced unions to surrender premium pay agreements for weekends and holidays which did not fall on the sixth and seventh consecutive days of work. Nelson gave the top AFL and CIO officials thirty days to agree to his demands and threatened the passage of a law which would require them to accept this law if they still refused. The union leaders immediately yielded to his demands.²²

In July 1942, the NWLB implemented what was referred to as the “Little Steel formula” named after a collection of labor disputes and subsequent agreements in the steel industry. The Little Steel formula limited wage increases to 15% above their January 1941 levels, but price controls would not come into effect for another year. Workers struggled to afford anything as

²⁰ Executive Order 9017, Establishing the National War Labor Board, 1942; James Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 163.

²¹ Preis, *Labor’s Giant Step*, 148.

²² Preis, *Labor’s Giant Step*, 147-148, 152.

prices grew sharply.²³ On October 3, 1942, Roosevelt passed Executive Order 9250 which established the Office of Economic Stabilization to aid in the process of freezing wages and prices.²⁴ However, Roosevelt appointed South Carolina senator James F. Byrnes as director of the Office of Economic Stabilization, a notoriously anti-labor and anti-Black politician.²⁵ However, the Office of Economic Stabilization was effectively under the thumb of the NWLB as all wage agreements and wage freezing needed approval of the NWLB.²⁶ The following year, the United Mine Workers (UMW) led by John L. Lewis organized the largest strike ever seen in the country.²⁷ As wages were frozen, the cost of living increased substantially. From January 1941 to January 1943, the United Auto Workers executive board estimated a 30% increase in the cost of living, a substantial increase when considering the 15% Little Steel formula wage increase limit.²⁸ The following year the United Auto Workers executive board claimed a 43.5% increased cost of living from 1941 to 1944, with a discrepancy of 28.5% between the rise in living costs and wage adjustments.²⁹ The wages of the United Mine Workers had been frozen far below any other war related industry. Polls indicate that the majority of Americans believed that the UMW deserved increased wages. However, as the UMW violated their ‘no strike’ agreement and shut down every union-run coal mine in the country, the same poll noted that John L. Lewis was the most hated man in America, despite the fact that the same respondents believed it was a justified strike.³⁰ The idea of maintaining production without striking as part of the “Equality of

²³ Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 162.

²⁴ Executive Order 9250, Establishing the Office of Economic Stabilization, 1942.

²⁵ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 146.

²⁶ Executive Order 9250, Establishing the Office of Economic Stabilization, 1942.

²⁷ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 177.

²⁸ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 175.

²⁹ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 215.

³⁰ Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 94.

Sacrifice” resonated with the majority of Americans, even if it furthered inequality. While employees had their wages limited, there was no limit to the amount that employers could make. In 1942 Roosevelt proposed a salary cap of \$25,000 for all Americans, but in a shocking twist none could have predicted, the wealthy senators of Congress never passed any form of maximum wage law.³¹

In a further effort to shut down strikes and uphold defense production, the Federal Government took a zero tolerance approach towards strikes and work absenteeism during the war years. During the 1943 UMW strike, Congress passed the Smith-Connally Act, also known as the War Labor Disputes Act, over President Roosevelt’s veto. The act allowed the Government to seize and control defense industries under strike in order to resume war production. The act also banned unions from contributing any money in federal elections to help remove them from politics.³² While Smith-Connally was passed during, and in response to, the 1943 UMW Coal Strike, it was not used until a 1944 strike in Philadelphia. When the FEPC ordered the Philadelphia Transport Company to hire Black workers as motormen, thousands of white union members struck in protest. Roosevelt ordered martial law and brought in federal troops to crush the strike, ordering the strikers back to work.³³ Roosevelt similarly ordered the privately employed strikers of the UAW-CIO Local 248 at the Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company plant in Wisconsin to return to their jobs back in 1941. He did this again to the North American Aviation strikers in the same year and, when they refused, sent federal troops to smash

³¹ “Message to Congress on an Economic Stabilization Program. | The American Presidency Project.” <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/message-congress-economic-stabilization-program>.

³² War Labor Disputes Act, 50 U.S.C. App. 1501 et seq.

³³ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 40.

their strike. Professional soldiers of the 15th infantry brought machine guns, anti-tank guns, trench mortars, and automatic rifles to clear a mile wide area around the plant and establish martial law.³⁴

Arguably the most extreme method employed by the government during World War II to control labor were the “Work or Fight” bills. There were several proposed bills that would force certain people to join wartime industries or be drafted into the military.³⁵ One of the first examples of these bills proposed was the Austin-Wadsworth Bill, though this faced strong opposition. The Roosevelt administration then switched to the Brewster-Bailey bill, also known as the “Work or Fight” bill which received more support, yet was also never passed. However, Roosevelt would enact a forced labor policy in 1944 which could make workers subject to draft. Both the Stalinists and Nazis approved of the bill. Radio Berlin announced on January 11, 1944 that “Roosevelt once more tries to imitate a National Socialist (Nazi) Measure which has proven itself for more than ten years in the Reich.”³⁶ While “Work or Fight” bills were never actively implemented in the United States, the proposals of these bills still signified to labor that their rights would willingly be sacrificed for the greater good. Like with the 1943 UMW strike, even though most Americans believed that they deserved higher wages, it was their duty to the “equality of sacrifice” to not strike. However, the “equality of sacrifice” was incredibly unequal. Frozen salaries only helped employers make more during World War II, while the substantially increased standard of living cost harmed war industry workers. Black workers who were still paid less than white workers in many cases exemplified how the “equality of sacrifice” had a

³⁴ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 114-118.

³⁵ Albert Blum, “Work or Fight: The Use of the Draft as a Manpower Sanction During the Second World War.” *Industrial & labor relations review* 16, no. 3 (1963), 376.

³⁶ Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 206.

varying degree of severity. The social climate shifting against labor unions and strikes in preference of maintaining war production made it difficult for workers to gain support and funding if they did strike. However, Black organizations like the NAACP, Urban League, and March on Washington Movement still managed to gain considerable success not only in enforcing government labor policies like Executive Order 8802, but also in furthering civil rights.

Discrimination as an American Issue

Following the passage of Executive Order 8802, the March on Washington Movement began to shift from a national movement to several local operations. MOWM began holding mass meetings in early 1942 to recruit interest and funding towards the movement, with thousands in regular attendance. In St. Louis, over thirty thousand arrived to listen to the heads of the local MOWM.³⁷ While the MOWM succeeded in getting 8802 passed, the FEPC and Executive Order, like many New Deal labor provisions, had no real enforcement. While clauses prohibiting discrimination were put in every defense contract following 8802, the FEPC lacked subpoena power and was heavily underfinanced, overworked, and understaffed. FEPC in particular received almost no federal funding and was constantly understaffed, overworked, and stretched thin.³⁸ The War Department actively used its immense influence to ensure that the

³⁷ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 48.

³⁸ Trotter, *Workers on Arrival*, 136; Theodore McNeal, interviewed by Richard Resh and Franklin Rother, July 22, 1970, transcript, Black Community Leaders Project, State Historical

FEPC did not have the authority to directly cancel any defense contract that violated 8802.³⁹ In November 1942 the NWLB adopted Order 16 which mandated equal pay for men and women, and in June 1943 they ruled again saying that Black and white workers deserve equal pay. However, very few companies voluntarily increased wages for women or minority groups as there was almost no enforcement of either of these two orders.⁴⁰ Because the FEPC could do little, local units of the MOWM fought to enforce 8802 by reaching out to defense employers and attempting to get their work forces integrated. If they were not integrated, the local MOWM units would organize pickets and marches against companies, much like labor unions. In many cases in St. Louis, marchers were protected by police and troops from the local Jefferson Barracks, deterring any violence against the protesters. The MOWM was incredibly effective at integrating defense industries around St. Louis through these tactics.⁴¹

The MOWM was able to successfully make discrimination an American issue and not a Black issue by centering discrimination around the hypocrisy of fighting injustice abroad while upholding injustice domestically. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, a prominent Black newspaper, coined the term “Double V Campaign” in 1942. The Double V Campaign stood for victory abroad and victory at home.⁴² While fighting the war abroad was important, Black leaders believed World War II provided the perfect opportunity to achieve victory at home by striking down elements of racism and segregation. The Double V Campaign was a clever strategy to fight against racism

Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis, 5; Korstad, “Opportunities Found and Lost,” 787; Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 45.

³⁹ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 37.

⁴⁰ Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 164.

⁴¹ McNeal interview, 5-6.

⁴² Trotter, *Workers on Arrival*, 135.

while maintaining a positive public perception. If African Americans could be framed by conservative whites as unpatriotic, like John L. Lewis during the UMW strike, no matter how justified their actions were, they could never achieve change.

By convincing the government that fighting discrimination was in the interest of the war, Black workers could receive federal support in desegregating industries. Before 1941 and the United States' involvement in World War II, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) did little for enforcing federal labor standards and protecting unions. While the NLRB certified elections for bargaining agents, they did little else and forced unions to fight for the rights granted to them by the government that the NLRB was supposed to be protecting. Similarly, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, heralded as a monumental labor law passed during the New Deal was not vigorously enforced in the first few years. It was only until the US economy became industrialized during the war years and the government needed to ensure production. The implementation of the "third shift" also meant that the government needed to keep companies accountable with overtime hours and overtime pay as maximizing production became a necessity for maintaining production.⁴³

A similar strategy employed by the MOWM was by appealing to the federal government about an untapped workforce that was capable of aiding defense industries. In testimony to the House of Representatives Committee on Labor in 1944, David M. Grant, a prominent leader in the St. Louis MOWM, argued that the existence of white and Black jobs was directly harming defense production. Grant declared that during the New Deal era "a pattern began to take shape to the exclusion of the Negro as a factor in the labor field, in any capacity other than the meanest

⁴³ Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 162.

work at the lowest pay.”⁴⁴ White workers, employers believed, were more efficient and talented workers, while Black workers were less efficient and incapable of certain jobs. White lives were also valued more, so dangerous jobs were given to Black workers. In the midst of the Great Depression, one white worker said “some jobs white folk will not do; so they have to take n****rs in, particularly in duco work, spraying paint on car bodies. This soon kills a white man.” Upon being asked if this job ever killed Black workers he replied “oh, yes,” ... “It shortens their lives, it cuts them down, but they’re just n****rs.”⁴⁵ In the railroad industry, firemen prior to 1920 had historically been “a Negro’s job.” Following the 1920 Transportation Act and the gradual improvement of technology and safety, more white workers were hired to replace Black firemen.⁴⁶ However, the overvaluation of white lives and labor was not exclusively a belief held by private employers. Federal and local governments upheld the same racial labor hierarchy. In St. Louis, the United States Employment Service had two segregated offices that put white workers into skilled and semiskilled work, while the Black office referred Black workers to low skilled or unskilled work.⁴⁷ In government jobs and government funded projects, white workers frequently overrepresented their population while Black workers were rarely employed.⁴⁸

In his testimony, Grant points out this employment discrepancy. It was not enough, he argued, for the government to force employment of Black workers into defense industries as they were still excluded from the higher paying skilled or managerial positions. Grant noted that there

⁴⁴ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

⁴⁵ Herman Feldman and Bruno Lasker, *Racial Factors in American Industry*, (Harper & Brothers 1931), 43.

⁴⁶ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 1.

⁴⁷ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 46.

⁴⁸ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 74.

were over two hundred war industries located in St. Louis. Black workers were generally hired only as material handlers, laborers, or floormen, which represented “generally janitorial capacities.”⁴⁹ Not only were Black workers restricted to lower paying jobs, but in many cases, Black workers were not even considered for jobs, even when some companies had completely vacant positions. Grant revealed to the Committee on Labor that there was a pool of 25,000 Black women in St. Louis who were screened and approved by the War Manpower Commission and the United States Employment Service, yet were not employed purely based on race, despite the fact that several St. Louis defense companies: McDonnell Aircraft, Carter Carburetor Company, and American Torpedo Company all need workers but refuse to hire Black women.⁵⁰ By painting wartime inequality as an issue harmful to wartime production, the MOWM was able to gain federal, and in some cases, public support, in upholding Executive Order 8802.

US Cartridge and Small Arms Plant

The United States and Small Arms Plant was one of the largest employers in defense industries, which the MOWM fought to desegregate. In 1940, the St. Louis Curtiss-Wright aircraft plant received a \$16 million contract for training and construction of cargo planes, while the \$14 million facility of Atlas Powder Company became the largest maker of TNT in the US. The American Car and St. Louis Car companies both received hefty contracts for the construction of tanks. In the early 1940s, St. Louis was rapidly transforming into one of the

⁴⁹ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

⁵⁰ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

largest war industries in the country.⁵¹ The following year, the United States Cartridge Small Arms Ordnance Plant became the largest plant of its kind in the world. US Cartridge dwarfed the previous defense contracts in the city with a massive \$200 million contract, employing over twenty thousand workers in the city.⁵² Though lucrative opportunities for the city, employers, and their workers, most defense plants in St. Louis were not open to Black workers. In 1941, 80% of all laborers on the St. Louis Works Projects Administration (WPA) were African American. During the depression years, Black workers were fighting for opportunities of employment through the WPA. However, all the white workers previously employed by the WPA were now working at the much higher paying war industry jobs.⁵³ African Americans were so actively excluded from higher paying and “skilled” jobs that 75% of the St. Louis war defense plants had no Black workers employees.⁵⁴ The most famous case of the MOWM fighting for wartime integration occurred at US Cartridge in St. Louis where the MOWM began forcing employers to comply with the FEPC. St. Louis was the largest and most active center for the MOWM to enforce federal policy during World War II.⁵⁵

Only six months after the bombing at Pearl Harbor, US Cartridge Company had 23,500 workers in the St. Louis plant, but only three hundred Black workers were employed. All the Black workers were janitors, material handlers, and floor men. Out of the eight thousand women employed by US Cartridge, there were no Black women employed.⁵⁶ In May 1942, US Cartridge

⁵¹ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 44-45.

⁵² Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 48; McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

⁵³ (UL Executive Committee Annual Reports Series 7 Box 1)

⁵⁴ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 49.

⁵⁵ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 73.

⁵⁶ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

dismissed over a hundred Black workers while hiring hundreds of new workers every week. MOWM organized around five to six hundred protesters to picket the factory.⁵⁷ They carried signs with slogans like “Is this democracy?” and “Fight the Axis, don’t fight us.”⁵⁸ Theodore McNeal of the MOWM told US Cartridge that they would keep picketing the plant until they hired more Black workers. The company promised that they would hire a hundred Black women and, within four days, slightly less than one hundred Black women were hired by US Cartridge to serve as matrons to clean up after production workers or serve as janitors.⁵⁹ However, the MOWM eventually convinced US Cartridge to employ an entirely Black segregated unit in Building 202. Though they would have preferred Black workers to be integrated into previously entirely white work units, this provided a perfect opportunity for Black workers to show they were not only equal to white workers, but could perform at a noticeably higher rate. Building 202 had 20% less tardiness and absenteeism compared to the next best building, and produced 12% more than any other unit in operation, and 6% more A Grade ammunition than any other unit in operation during the time. David Grant claimed this was because Black workers were frequently denied opportunities to show their worth and sought to perform to the best of their abilities.⁶⁰

In May 1943, US Cartridge transferred a group of white workers from the entirely white Building 103 and replaced them with fifty Black workers from Building 202 to service machines. Two hundred white women organized a sit down strike on May 10 in protest of, not only the integration of Building 103, but the replacement of white workers with Black workers. The

⁵⁷ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 118.

⁵⁸ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

⁵⁹ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 120.

⁶⁰ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

following day, US Cartridge apologized to the white workers and the Black workers were removed, ending the hate strike. Ironically, the strike resulted in even more Black workers being hired at Building 202.⁶¹ The following month, 3600 Black workers from US Cartridge walked out when the company hired a white foreman to supervise their Black unit. Described by the *Chicago Defender* as a “Man Bites Dog” case, white workers had been striking very frequently during the war years when the FEPC started forcing companies to have Black supervisors or Black workers in skilled jobs.⁶² The Black workers at US Cartridge justified this by saying that the company promised to employ more Black supervisors in July 1942, nearly a year before. While many of the workers were members of the UE Local 825, they did not receive support from either UE nor from the MOWM citing that the strike was ill-timed and hasty. This wildcat strike was hastily ended within 18 hours when Theodore McNeal, David Grant, the strikers, and US Cartridge all agreed to arbitration. Additionally, US Cartridge would offer training courses for Black foremen, and within weeks almost three dozen Black foremen were employed in Building 202.⁶³ This inspired a new wave of Black strikes in St. Louis during 1944 as there were several instances of Black sit-down strikes that lasted until their white foreman was replaced. In other cases, Black workers similarly protested when white workers were placed in their own Black divisions, arguably further upholding segregation. In 1944, the Black metropolitan residents of St. Louis lost around half a million in wages from the sheer number of strikes.⁶⁴ After three years of racism and wildcat strikes from white and Black workers, US Cartridge and

⁶¹ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 55-56; Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 112-113.

⁶² *Chicago Defender*, June 12, 1943; McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

⁶³ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 124-125.

⁶⁴ Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 7, Box 1.

UE Local 825 organized the St. Louis Plan which agreed to segregated facilities and Black foremen for Black units. At its height, Building 202 had five thousand Black workers who ate in segregated but “reportedly decent” dining facilities.⁶⁵

The St. Louis MOWM managed to get thousands of Black workers employed in defense industries during the war years. They also fought to increase wages, increase the hiring of Black women, and increased enough complaints to the FEPC that they forced the government to establish a regional office for the purpose of handling Black grievances in the St. Louis area.⁶⁶ In July 1942, Black workers in St. Louis only made up 5.8% of the total war production employees, and while this number increased to 7.3% by July 1943, African Americans still consisted of roughly 10% of the population of St. Louis.⁶⁷ Yet most of the Black workers in defense were still employed in the lowest paying jobs. In 1942, African Americans only made up 1.8% of federal employees above entry level or custodial jobs.⁶⁸ Many of the major St. Louis defense contracts during the war had no Black workers in any form of skilled production.⁶⁹

Like the MOWM, the St. Louis Urban League also played a vital role in mobilizing the Black working class during World War II. In many cases, the Urban League worked with both the AFL and the CIO to organize several strikes during the war years.⁷⁰ The UL helped lobby for Black workers to be integrated into nurseries and dental offices, while also supporting the development and growth of the incredibly influential all-Black Homer G. Phillips Hospital in St.

⁶⁵ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 126.

⁶⁶ Trotter, *Workers on Arrival*, 136; McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

⁶⁷ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 1.

⁶⁸ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 74.

⁶⁹ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 195-196.

⁷⁰ Urban League of St. Louis Records, Series 7, Box 1.

Louis.⁷¹ With a job surplus, the Urban League's job placing services were not as necessary. During the war years, the total percentage of Black women in industry dramatically increased to 18% from a paltry 6.5% as Black women found higher paying alternatives to domestic work in war industries.⁷² Despite the organization of African Americans through the MOWM and Urban League, many Black workers still felt frustrated with mainstream labor organizations like the AFL and CIO, despite their cooperation with the UL and MOWM. In 1944, over three hundred Black workers walked off their jobs at Monsanto Chemical Company to call attention to racial segregation at the company because the CIO and AFL were "dragging their feet" on issues of segregation and discrimination.⁷³ In the same year, Black and white workers struck in solidarity of abusive treatment of a white foreman in Granite City, Illinois, part of the Greater St. Louis area. Led by the CIO Local 1022 of the United Steel Workers of America, the white workers quickly voted to return to work while the Black workers unanimously voted to stay out on strike.⁷⁴ Though the CIO actively banned and opposed discrimination, their discriminatory practices varied among their individual unions. The CIO still provided, in most cases, a superior alternative to the AFL who, in 1944, still had 19 unions with bans on Black members.⁷⁵

The March on Washington Movement: Labor Union or Civil Rights Organization?

⁷¹ Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 81.

⁷² Keona Ervin, *Gateway to Equality: Black Women and the Struggle for Economic Justice in St. Louis. Civil Rights and the Struggle for Black Equality in the Twentieth Century*, (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 72.

⁷³ Trotter, *Workers on Arrival*, 139.

⁷⁴ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

⁷⁵ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

The first sit-ins to desegregate restaurants happened in St. Louis during the summer of 1944. Pearl Maddox, chair of a NAACP committee, reached out to three department stores in St. Louis about desegregation and their lack of hiring Black workers. The three stores, Famous-Barr, Stix, and Scruggs, all ignored communications from Pearl Maddox.⁷⁶ Maddox formed the Citizens Civil Rights Committee (CCRC) and on May 15 they began an interracial sit-in at the Stix lunch counter where they sat until closing. Throughout May, June, and July, black and white members of the CCRC sat in at the three department stores. The waitresses there declined to serve them, and there was almost no media coverage of the sit-in protests.⁷⁷ Maddox was a widow and owned several pieces of property in the Black area with mortgages on them. During their sit-in protests, her bank told her to desist the sit-ins or they would foreclose on her mortgages. Maddox and other members of the CCRC approached Theodore McNeal of the MOWM to take the public lead on the sit-ins to avoid the backlash. While the MOWM received the credit for the sit-ins, McNeal admitted that he “merely carried out plans that these women had made.”⁷⁸ The MOWM helped fund the CCRC and their desegregation campaign, supplying signs and handbills for demonstrators during the sit-ins.⁷⁹ Mayor Kaufman of St. Louis convinced the CCRC to put a pause on the sit-ins and encouraged them to negotiate integrating with the stores.⁸⁰ The department stores brought in a publicist named Ed Bernays from New York, a figure significant only for his relation as Sigmund Freud’s nephew. At first, the representatives from the department stores offered African Americans the opportunity to eat in

⁷⁶ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 65.

⁷⁷ McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2; Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 66.

⁷⁸ McNeal interview, 6-7.

⁷⁹ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 66.

⁸⁰ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 67.

their basement cafeterias, but this “separate but equal” practice was outright rejected by members of the CCRC. The stores then transitioned to attempting to buy out the protesters with \$100,000, but the protesters rejected this proposal and withdrew from negotiations.⁸¹

The MOWM did not start the lunch counter sit-ins in St. Louis, nor did they begin the fight for Black civil rights. However, the MOWM made Black civil rights the most important national issue, something that had not been done since the Civil War. When the MOWM eventually collapsed due to a lack of funding, the NAACP reaped many of the benefits of the mass organizing of the MOWM.⁸² From the beginning of the MOWM, the NAACP had only 50,000 members nationwide. After the fall of the MOWM, the NAACP jumped up to 450,000 members, most of which were organized as part of the MOWM or inspired by their activism during the war years.⁸³ In an effort to shut down the efforts of McNeal desegregating not only defense industries with the MOWM, but also in order to maintain segregation in general stores and restaurants, the mayor of St. Louis, Mayor Becker, told Theodore McNeal that he would “personally see that [McNeal] would be drafted into the army despite the fact that [McNeal] met every qualification for exemption, including age.”⁸⁴ The head of the local FBI branch also put pressure on the St. Louis draft board and eventually got McNeal reclassified as eligible and

⁸¹ McNeal interview, 6-7.

⁸² The NAACP initially supported the MOWM, but eventually withdrew both its funding and support. While MOWM and the NAACP shared many similar ideas, that is precisely the reason the NAACP withdrew support. They claimed that the MOWM was essentially copying their plans, but unlike the NAACP, the MOWM did not require membership dues. By essentially payrolling the MOWM, they were directly funding a very similar organization, and feared that they would lose membership and become obsolete.

Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy*, 54, 61-66, 183.

⁸³ Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*, 68.

⁸⁴ McNeal interview, 8

ordered him to report to the local barracks. McNeal was essentially saved when Mayor Becker died in a glider accident shortly after McNeal was ordered to Jefferson Barracks.⁸⁵

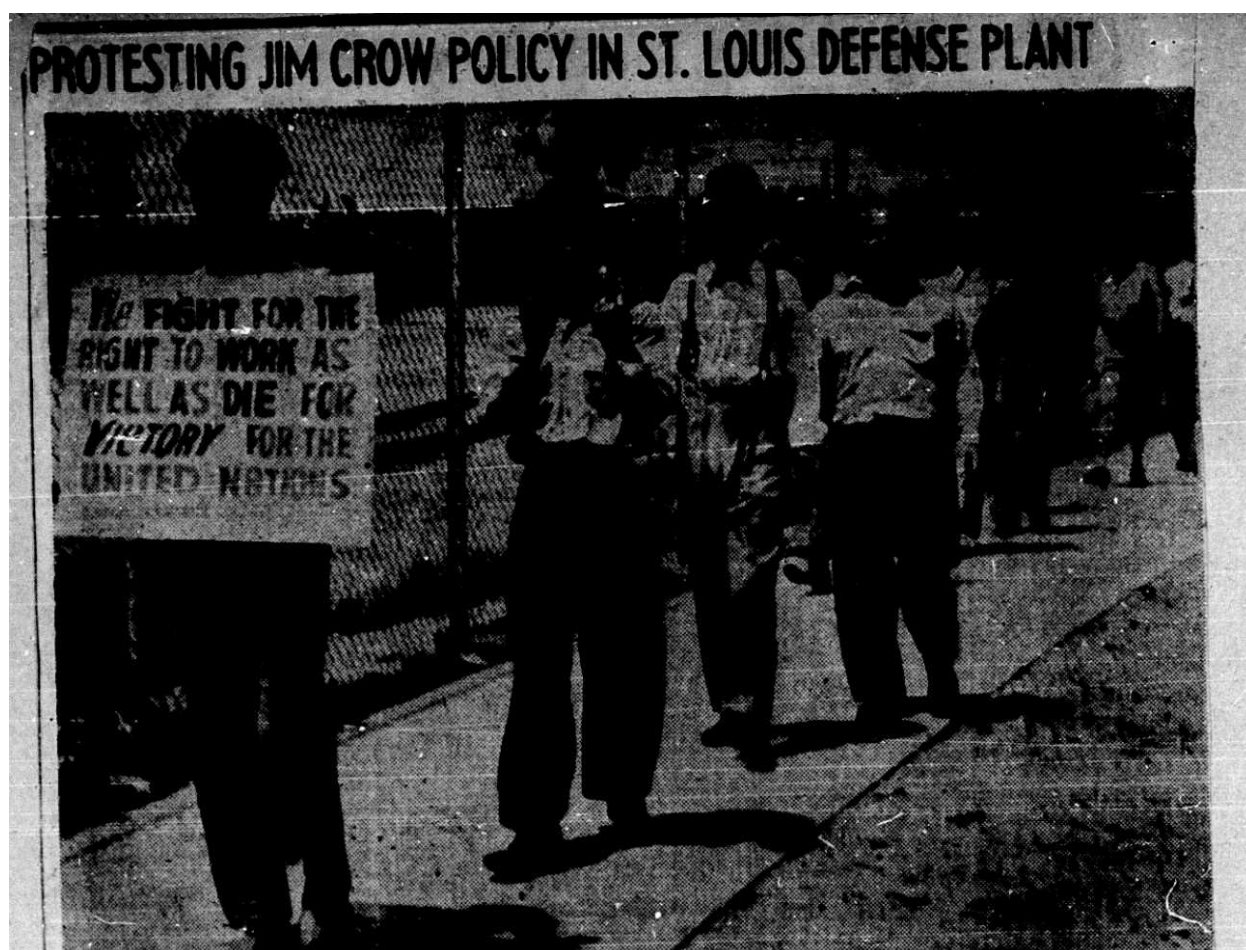
By viewing the March on Washington Movement as a central part of the labor movement and the beginning of the civil rights movement, it allows us to also view the legal struggles during the war years as part of the Black Freedom Struggle. Key court cases like *Tunstall v Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen* (1944) which mandated that even all white segregated unions must negotiate with the employers in good faith on the behalf of Black workers for whom they still represent through collective bargaining.⁸⁶ Though not part of the labor history of the 1940s, the historic decision of *Smith v Allwright* (1944) enfranchised between 700,000 and 800,000 Black voters in the South by 1948.⁸⁷ By the end of World War II, many African Americans were involved not only in the legal battle for desegregation, but also taking charge of many labor and local grassroots movements involved in the same fight.

⁸⁵ McNeal interview 9; McNeal Collection, microfilm roll 2.

⁸⁶ *Tunstall v. Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen*, 323 U.S. 210, 1944.

⁸⁷ *Smith v. Allwright*, 321 U.S. 649, 1944.

Appendix D



The above picture shows March on Washington Movement protesters picketing an unnamed St. Louis Defense Plant. The picture is from the Theodore McNeal Collection at the State Historical Society of Missouri, microfilm roll 1.

Conclusion

“The dissolution of the American Federation of Labor would insure to the benefits of the labor movement in this country and the international labor movement in general. It is organized upon unsound principles. It holds that there can be a partnership between labor and capital... The present American Federation of Labor is the most wicked machine for the propagation of race prejudice in the country.”¹ - A. Philip Randolph, 1919

Following World War II, the mass removal of workers from wartime industries after the surrender of Japan resulted in the largest strike wave ever seen in American history from 1945 to 1946. In St. Louis alone there were 182 strikes (102 AFL strikes, 54 CIO strikes, and 11 independent strikes) during 1945. 100,459 independent strikers were involved, and 16,853 of them were Black.² On May 29, 1947, Congress passed the joint Taft-Hartley Act in opposition to the strength of unions and strikes. President Truman vetoed the bill, but within a matter of hours, Congress overrode the veto. Truman had historically been anti-labor but by vetoing Taft-Hartley with the two-thirds majority needed to override his veto having already been confirmed, it allowed him to appear as a friend to labor, useful in his upcoming election, despite his frequent usage and enforcement of Taft-Hartley.³ The Taft-Hartley Act completely neutered labor unions and most of the gains that they had made during the New Deal era and World War II. The act

¹ Brailsford Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters: Its Origin and Development* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 126-127.

² Urban League of St. Louis Records, Washington University in St. Louis, Series 4, Box 11.

³ Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: 20 Years of the CIO* (New York: Pathfinder Pr, 1982), 316.

outlawed closed shops and union shops in general (unless there were severe limitations involved), as well as restricting forms of strikes, and set further limitations on what Congress believed were unfair union practices (e.g. featherbedding and charging excessive membership dues).⁴ By limiting the power of unions, the government was actively shutting down not only the labor movement but the Black Freedom Struggle of the 1940s. The elimination of unions restricted an important vehicle Black activists had used during the war years to further civil rights movements. With leftist radicals rejected during the Cold War Red Scare and the crushing of unions following Taft-Hartley, the 1940s Civil Rights Movement appeared to have faded out of existence.

Meanwhile, a new narrative of Civil Rights was fostered by liberal whites and their Black middle class allies. With the crushing of the labor-led Civil Rights movement of the 40s, the Black Freedom Struggle shifted to a battle entrenched in the legal system of the United States. The very meaning of Civil Rights evolved into a moral conflict over individual rights instead of a more radical labor-oriented struggle. Even the NAACP itself grew more conservative following the end of World War II as it grappled with the changing Black Freedom Struggle and the crackdown on Labor and the Left.⁵ In 1946, President Truman created the temporary Committee on Civil Rights to study and advise him on matters of civil rights in the United States. The committee urged the passage of Executive Orders 9980 and 9981 in July of 1948, desegregating the federal workforce and the military.⁶ However, these Executive Orders were not necessarily

⁴ Labor Management Relations Act of 1947, Pub. L. 80–101

⁵ Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: the United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁶ Executive Order 9980, Regulations Governing Fair Employment Practices Within The Federal Establishment, 1948; Executive Order 9981, Desegregation of the Armed Forces, 1948.

for the advancement of Black civil rights, and were more of a face-saving mechanism designed to show a willingness of America to peacefully and democratically confront racism during the Cold War. The 1940s civil rights movement faded out in part because it was a working class movement and the suppression of unions ultimately removed any means of the Black working class to organize in relation to the Black freedom struggle. The 1960s Civil Rights Movement would similarly be a working class movement, but one which was ultimately rooted in local Black churches and various protest organizations, rather than labor unions.⁷ Without this Labor base, the 1960s Civil Rights Movement consequently struggled to seize the same working class empowerment that was nurtured by the March on Washington Movement during the 1940s.⁸

By studying the American labor movement through the lens of Black workers, this thesis uncovers the radical history that Cold War liberals would historians are able to tie the labor radicalism of the 1930s and 1940s to the Black Freedom Struggle. It shows that attempts to suppress labor, whether during the New Deal era or during the post-war labor crackdown, were simultaneously attempts to suppress civil rights. By recognizing the struggles of Black workers in the labor movement, we recognize the struggles of Black workers in the freedom struggle, and can recognize the general systemic issues against both labor and Black civil rights, which are inherently intertwined. However, the rejection of this history is common in America. Many state legislatures and school boards actively suppress the teaching of Critical Race Theory and African American history in their schools, especially in states like Missouri. This also seeks to uphold the

⁷ Morris, Aldon D. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*. New York: Free Press, 1984.

⁸ Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement." *The Journal of American history (Bloomington, Ind.)* 75, no. 3 (1988), 811.

idea that the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s was a tale of white morality and coming to terms rather than a grassroots movement that fought back against the same systemic racism that plagues America to this day. This thesis attempts to show that the interracial union organizing, and the labor radicalism of the 1930s and 1940s, directly fueled the beginnings of the Black Freedom Struggle. By telling the history of the Freedom Struggle as a Black workers movement, we can embrace the radical pushes of both labor and the Civil Rights Movements as attempts to dismantle the systems of oppression that Black workers found themselves trapped in, and by reflecting upon that past now, we can see how the same systems of oppression are still in place and must be reconciled with.

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