

Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW

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the Rise of the UAW*

AUGUST MEIER AND ELLIOTT RUDWICK
FOREWORD BY JOE W. TROTTER

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**For
Paul and Louise
and
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Foreword to the New Edition

Joe W. Trotter

Under the impact of the modern Civil Rights, Black Power, and new social history movements of the 1960s and 1970s, a variety of scholars helped to revamp our understanding of African American history from the vantage point of black workers and the labor movement. This scholarship included not only historian Herbert Gutman's pioneering essay on the black coal miner Richard L. Davis of Ohio but important biographical and organizational studies by Theodore Rosengarten (1974), William H. Harris (1977), and Nell Irvin Painter (1979). At the same time, a Ph.D. dissertation by Richard Walter Thomas pioneered the treatment of Detroit's black community from the bottom up. These scholars gave careful attention to the "hidden" dimensions of interracial unionism (both within and outside the Communist Party); the careers of numerous grassroots black labor leaders; and the myriad ways in which black workers' lives unfolded within the larger contexts of community, culture, and politics, as well as work and labor relations. Without minimizing the magnitude of pain and feelings of despair that black workers experienced, this scholarship helped to clear the path for a more comprehensive portrait of the power and hope embedded in twentieth-century African American and U.S. labor and working-class history.¹

The publication of August Meier and Elliott Rudwick's *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* reinforced this trend toward a community-based study of black workers and a worker-based study of the black community. But Meier

and Rudwick's journey to black labor and working-class history was by no means straightforward. In 1963, the University of Michigan Press published August Meier's first book, *Negro Thought in America*. Meier illuminated the intersecting dynamics of what he called "an accommodating viewpoint" on the one hand and "the protest tendency in Negro thought" on the other (p. 206). He also acknowledged that his study focused mainly on "the expressed ideas of the articulate, who are ordinarily among the prominent people, and usually of the favored social and economic classes" (p. ix). A year later, Southern Illinois University Press released Elliott Rudwick's *Race Riot in East St. Louis, July 2, 1917*. Unlike Meier, Rudwick offered substantial insight into black migration and the militant African American quest for industrial jobs and full civil rights. According to Rudwick, "A large number of Northern Negroes aggressively and unconditionally claimed equal rights. For many whites it was their first encounter with Negro migrants who competed for jobs and seemed to be making unlimited demands on limited housing, transportation, and recreation facilities" (pp. 3-4). Nonetheless, Rudwick framed his study of East St. Louis as an investigation of interracial accommodation and conflict rather than one of African American labor and community development.

Over the next decade and a half, Meier and Rudwick came under the increasing influence of grassroots black urban social movements and gradually shifted the focus of their research from African American elites to a growing emphasis on black workers and the larger black community. As early as 1971, Meier and Rudwick joined historian John Bracey (then a Ph.D. candidate at Northwestern University) and produced the edited volume, *Black Workers and Organized Labor*, for the Wadsworth Publishing Company's "Explorations in the Black Experience" series. The essays in this collection spanned the period from the first major national labor federation in the United States following the Civil War to the militant black trade unionists' protests against the racial policies of the merged AFL-CIO during the 1950s. Still, Meier and Rudwick set out to write an organizational history of the NAACP, and they only gradually reached the conclusion that the activities of this race advancement organization offered an unusual opportunity to document the twentieth-century transformation of a black community and organized labor in a major industrial city.

Some fifteen years after their seminal studies on African American thought and patterns of interracial conflict and accommodation, Meier and Rudwick published *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*. This book not

only signaled the increasing influence of the new labor and social history movements on their work, it also underscored the rise of black urban America under the impact of industrial capitalism. By the 1970s, after beginning the century as the most rural of Americans, black people had become the most urbanized sector of the U.S. population.

Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW established a conceptual framework for the study of black urban workers during the pivotal years of the two world wars and the Great Depression. It provided a groundbreaking case study of the process by which one city's black community reoriented its primary interracial alliances from white elites to the predominantly white labor movement. Meier and Rudwick offered a detailed analysis of Detroit's black community, its social structure, and its leadership. Their research probed the experiences of black Detroit not only at work and in labor unions but in the neighborhood, housing, institutional, and political life of the city; at the same time, they gave close attention to the precise nature of the changing relationship between African American workers and elites, on the one hand, and white elites and workers (both rank and file and union leaders), on the other.

Until the onset of the Great Depression, Henry Ford occupied a uniquely positive place in the minds of African Americans. The auto industry (particularly Ford's River Rouge facility) represented one of the largest and most liberal employers of black labor in America. Indeed, for many black workers the Ford Motor Company seemed like an oasis in an otherwise hostile urban-industrial environment. But the Great Depression, the rise of the new CIO unions, and the emergence of an increasingly militant black community ended Ford's brand of racial paternalism and ushered in a new relationship between white capital and black labor. During the inter-world war years, the UAW leadership cemented its relationship with black Detroit through firm support for the African American fight against racial discrimination in the workforce, residential segregation, and the intensification of police brutality in the wake of the race riot of 1943.

While this study documented the reorientation of the black community's loyalties from the auto company to the UAW, it also highlighted the limits of such alliances for African American workers at the bottom rungs of the job ladder. By the end of World War II, even as the union supported black workers and the cause of civil rights, "a striking ambiguity" characterized the relationship between black Detroit and the UAW (p. 221). Rank-and-file white workers often hampered the implementation of the union's constitu-

tional provisions against racial discrimination and forced black workers to wage an ongoing fight against the color line in both the work force and the decision-making structures of the union. Black workers found it exceedingly difficult to rise into skilled categories of work and to gain representation on the UAW's International Executive Board and its salaried staff.

Black Workers and the Rise of the UAW contributed not only to the study of urban and labor history but to the realm of policy studies and the role of the state in shaping race and class relations. Meier and Rudwick documented the positive impact of federal bureaucracies in the transformation of the relationship between black and white workers. Although often reluctantly and grudgingly, the Federal Housing Authority and the wartime Manpower Commission, the War Labor Board, and the FEPC all helped to forge an alliance between black workers, the UAW, and the state. Federal agencies opened up jobs previously off limits to black workers; sided with African Americans in their struggle over public housing at the Sojourner Truth Housing Project in 1942; and curbed the incidence of racial violence by taking steps to put down the "hate strike" against black workers at the Packard Company in 1943. An ultimatum from the chairman of the War Labor Board empowered the UAW leadership to order white strikers back to work or "lose their jobs" (p. 170).

Closely intertwined with the original aim of this project, the changing relationship between the NAACP and the organized white labor movement also gained systematic treatment in this study. From the NAACP's inception in 1909 through the end of World War II, Meier and Rudwick convincingly argued that the organization was far less hostile to the labor movement before the rise of the new CIO unions than previous accounts would lead us to believe. According to prevailing interpretations at the time, the NAACP's Walter White played a pivotal role in the 1941 strike against the Ford Motor Company and helped to forge the alliance that emerged between the NAACP and the new industrial unions. On the contrary, Meier and Rudwick demonstrated that the national NAACP had endorsed the CIO as early as 1936 and helped to pave the way for a groundswell of support for industrial unionism among blacks in Detroit.

Following publication of *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, research on the history of African American work and community life flourished. Unlike the first wave of late-twentieth-century research on this subject, however, recent studies examine the southern cultural roots of African American labor migration and accent the role of black women and gender relations.

Although the lion's share of this scholarship focuses on the Great Migration of southern blacks into the urban South, North, and West, an emerging young generation of scholars are giving increasing attention to the changes ushered in by deindustrialization in the years after World War II. These historiographical and conceptual trends reveal the ongoing vitality of African American urban, labor, and working-class history as fields of scholarship—fields that are much richer because Meier and Rudwick produced *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*.

Note

1. See Joe W. Trotter, Earl Lewis, and Tera Hunter, eds., *The African American Urban Experience: Perspectives from the Colonial Period to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Trotter, "African-American Workers: New Directions in U.S. Labor Historiography," *Labor History* 35, no. 4 (fall 1994): 495–523. Also see August Meier, *A White Scholar and the Black Community, 1945–1965* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992); Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915–1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

Preface

This book developed out of the research for our long-range study of the history of the NAACP. Although the Association's principal emphasis was on securing enforcement of the black man's constitutional rights under the 14th and 15th Amendments, during the Depression and the New Deal it developed a significant concern for the economic problems of the black masses. Partly because the organization was subjected over the years to criticism for having ignored this issue and partly because the New Deal era witnessed a major reorientation in the relationship between blacks and the American labor movement, we became interested in examining in depth the development of the NAACP's concern with economic problems in general and with discrimination by organized labor in particular. Others have given a fair amount of attention to the modifications of the NAACP's program during the 1930s.¹ Nevertheless, as yet there has been no comprehensive analysis of the fairly voluminous materials in the NAACP's Archives dealing with

1. Raymond Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression: The Problem of Economic Recovery* (Westport, Conn., 1970), Part III; B. Joyce Ross, *J. E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP 1911-1939* (New York, 1972), chapters 6-8.

the Association's fight since its founding in 1909 against discrimination in the American Federation of Labor craft unions and the new relationships that developed with the Congress of Industrial Organizations in the mass production industries during the 1930's.

Our volume began as a brief case study to illuminate the Association's changing relationship with organized labor during the New Deal period, and originally we had intended to do simply a detailed investigation of the NAACP's role in the 1941 strike of the United Auto Workers against the Ford Motor Company. According to NAACP traditions, this event, when Secretary Walter White personally flew to Detroit to help the UAW persuade black strike-breakers to leave the factory, was considered pivotal in leading to a historic alliance between the NAACP and the new industrial unions. White, in fact, devoted a chapter in his autobiography to the UAW strike at Ford, which he entitled, "Turn to the Left at Detroit."²

Our research, however, revealed that the incident was far less important than NAACP traditions suggest. The Association had actually endorsed industrial unions considerably earlier, and White's involvement in Detroit neither had visible impact upon the outcome of the strike nor much effect on the UAW's actions toward black workers. Yet as our research proceeded, there unfolded a far more important story—an incredibly rich and complex account of the transformation in the relations between a black community and organized labor in a major industrial city. Given the fact that the UAW is generally conceded to have been among the most racially equalitarian of the CIO unions, Detroit is a particularly useful locale for such a study. In tracing the shift of black sentiment from pro-industry to pro-union, we first focused on a detailed analysis of the Detroit black community, its leadership and its cleavages, trying to pinpoint exactly how and when the change occurred. This in turn led us to study the particular nature of the Negroes' role in the auto industry, especially their important position at Ford, and the relationship of black community leaders to that company. At

2. Walter White, *A Man Called White* (New York, 1948), chapter 27.

the same time we found that UAW policies toward blacks were far from static and so we sought to understand the course of their development and their circular interaction with the changes and attitudes among black workers and spokesmen.

With the Ford strike seeming to mark a decisive shift in the thinking of Detroit blacks and in their relationship with the UAW, we tried next to explore how much, over the following couple of years, the union actually lived up to its promise of fighting industrial discrimination and remedying the grievances of the black workers. Here again a highly complex picture emerged, and we found that the UAW was characterized by marked cleavages, ambivalences, and inconsistencies. In the end only partial solution of the blacks' grievances was attained, and indeed it became clear that the important job advances that blacks made in the auto industry during World War II were the product of a complicated interaction involving not only blacks and union leaders but the crucial intervention of the federal bureaucracies as well. Simultaneously we traced the friendship that was growing between black Detroit and the UAW stemming from efforts to remedy the city's racial problems outside the job market. We found that the union's stance at critical junctures on issues ranging from job bias, through housing discrimination, to police brutality during the 1943 riot created an image for the UAW that culminated in a close civic and political alliance with black Detroit.

What began as a relatively simple narrative thus grew into a far more complicated project with ramifications for several broader topics: for labor history, for the black urban experience, and for the way in which federal bureaucracies can create social change. Accordingly, in this volume we have sought to place our findings in the larger context of developments at the national level in the labor movement, in the wartime manpower policies of Roosevelt's Administration, and in the stance of major race advancement organizations. Yet throughout we have consciously focused our attention on Detroit as a local history case study that illuminates much about the larger American society as well.

We are indebted to many individuals for assistance in the course of our research and writing. First we want to acknowledge a special kind of debt to Lloyd H. Bailer for the important contribution made by his unpublished 1943 dissertation at the University of Michigan, "Negro Labor in the Automobile Industry." This manuscript, along with his earlier unpublished chapter in Paul H. Norgren, "Negro Labor and Its Problems," a research memorandum prepared for the Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro in America, 1940, formed in themselves an invaluable primary resource on blacks in the automobile industry.

We appreciate the generosity of a number of people who consented to interviews. Many were gracious enough to talk with us on several occasions. A complete list of the persons interviewed is given in our Bibliographical Essay; but among those who played prominent roles in the events we describe, we wish to express particular appreciation for the extraordinary richness and the usefulness of the information shared with us by Christopher Columbus Alston, Gloster Current, J. Lawrence Duncan, Frank Evans, Louis E. Martin, Oscar Noble, and Shelton Tappes.

It is a singular pleasure to acknowledge the assistance of scholars in the field of labor history who critically read the entire manuscript: Walter Galenson and David Brody; and two younger men, Ray Boryczka and Peter Friedlander, who shared with us their specialized knowledge of the details of UAW history. Raymond Wolters, a specialist on blacks in the New Deal period, also carefully read the manuscript. We found the comments of these five scholars enormously provocative and insightful, even where we did not fully agree with them or were unable to adopt their specific suggestions.

We are appreciative of the help provided by a number of libraries: The Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University; the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress; the Burton Historical Collection of Detroit Public Library; the Ford Archives at Dearborn, Michigan; the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library; the National Archives

and the Regional Federal Records Center in Chicago; the Chicago Historical Society; the libraries of Catholic University and Kent State University and the Bentley Library of the University of Michigan. In particular we want to thank for their unfailing helpfulness Sally Osgood, Linda Burroughs, and Helen Peoples of the Kent State University Library; Joseph B. Howerton of the National Archives; Dione Miles of the Reuther Library; and Joe Sullivan of the Library of Congress.

We are also indebted to the Michigan State Library and to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for the use, on interlibrary loan, of microfilm copies of newspapers and their collections. And we want to thank the following officials of the AFL-CIO for arranging access to portions of the AFL Archives at their headquarters in Washington: Tom Kahn, William Pollard, and Lane Kirkland.

Gloster Current not only sent us a copy of the minutes of the Detroit NAACP Branch during the early 1940's, but kindly supplied detailed annotations and explanations of them for our benefit. David Moulton generously gave us a copy of his paper on "George Addes and the UAW: An Investigative Look at the Forgotten Man of Autoworker History." Nelson Lichtenstein supplied us with copies of relevant materials from the War Labor Board Archives and the Richard Deverall Papers that we had not personally seen. Leon Litwack called our attention to the blues song about blacks and the Ford Company quoted in Chapter I. Dominick D'Ambrosio, president of the Allied Industrial Workers of America AFL-CIO, formerly the United Automobile Workers-AFL, very generously let us have a copy of the relevant sections of the minutes of the Homer Martin faction's 1939 UAW Convention.

We wish to thank Marge Evans, Marvella Pierce, and Norman Farrell for their conscientious and expeditious typing of the final manuscript.

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Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, California. Throughout, we have had the support of the Kent State University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and we particularly wish to express our appreciation to its head, Dean Eugene P. Wenninger, for his unstinting encouragement through the years. Needless to say, none of these agencies is in any way responsible for the interpretations or point of view expressed in this book.

And finally we express our appreciation to Sheldon Meyer, vice-president of Oxford University Press, for his warm support as our plans evolved and this volume took shape.

Kent, Ohio
January 1979

A.M.
E.R.

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