

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.

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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.

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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
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A.M.
E.R.