

TWO

TRUE VERSUS FALSE RELIGION

The Labor–Civil Rights Community and the Struggle to Define a Progressive Faith, 1935–41

True religion puts its faith in the people, believing in power with them, not over them. True religion adopts the ethical standard of Christ: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon them, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and to set at liberty they who are oppressed.”

—CIO, *Labor and Religion* (1944)

Religion, or more specifically the role of churches and clergy, was the subject of increasing dispute throughout the 1930s as Detroit’s labor–civil rights community continued to develop. In the debate over “true” versus “false” visions of Christianity, progressives implicitly followed the lead of theologian Harry F. Ward and his Methodist Federation for Social Action, who expressed an unflagging belief in “the revolutionary tradition of Christianity.”¹ At the same time, the question of the proper relationship between religion and labor was broached by antiunion clergymen of various denominations and most dramatically by Fr. Charles Coughlin, whose increasingly vitriolic sermons warned of the dangers of a communist-dominated CIO.

At the same time, the question “Who owns the Negro church?” con-

tinued to occupy progressive activists, including those Black ministers and priests—Charles Hill, Horace A. White, and Malcolm C. Dade—who openly opposed the powerful alliance between the Ford Motor Company and select members of the established African American clergy.

THE PRIESTLY AND THE PROPHETIC
Hill, Bradby, and the Church-Company Alliance

When Charles Hill left his position at Second Baptist for the pastorate of Hartford in 1920, he also left behind a system of white patronage that was divisive within the Black community and generally troublesome for the labor–civil rights community as a whole. The system was rooted in a cooperative relationship that developed over the years between the Ford Motor Company and well-established Black ministers such as Second Baptist’s Rev. Robert Bradby and illuminates the complex interactions among race, religion, economics, and politics in interwar Detroit. The special relationship between church and company was initiated in 1918 or 1919 when Charles Sorenson, Ford’s production chief, invited Reverend Bradby to lunch with him, Henry Ford, and other company executives with the intention of discussing recent problems with and among Black workers. Over lunch, Ford “personally outlined to Bradby his desire to recruit carefully selected Negro workmen”; Bradby duly promised to recommend “very high type fellows.”²

Operating as a thinly veiled extension of the company’s employment department, Detroit’s leading Black ministers were called upon to supply the “right” type of applicant—reliable, compliant, and decidedly not pro-union—with a letter of recommendation. In a typical letter, dated October 18, 1926, Reverend Bradby asks the employment department to “investigate [a case] and do whatever you can for him.”³

Ministers were also occasionally called upon to mediate disputes between workers in the plant itself. In another letter, this one to the general superintendent of Michigan Copper and Brass—which, like other local companies, used an informal version of this same referral system—Bradby intervened on behalf of “one John Biggs,” a deacon at Second Baptist and “one of the most conscientious men whom I have known.” Biggs was charged with fighting and had been dismissed by the foreman.⁴ In some ways, the alliance between church and company was a practical solution to a pressing problem rather than opportunism on the part of the ministers or antagonism toward Black workers’ interests. Hundreds of Black men were able to obtain gainful employment through this system, and ministers were able to provide valuable assistance.

Ministers routinely performed this sort of service for their congregants. Interspersed in Reverend Bradby's papers with letters to representatives of the Ford Motor Company are other letters vouching for church members who were seeking employment elsewhere (at the city's Welfare Department, for example) and members who had lodged complaints such as a missive protesting the "segregation and mistreatment" of students in a class at Northwestern High School.⁵ Such acts were a normal part of the priestly function. Care for the church as an institution and for congregants as individuals is, arguably, the highest duty of a minister. Further, as one student of the "community-building process" has argued in defense of what he calls the "Ford-Black Minister Entente": "At a time when blacks in Detroit, as elsewhere, had few friends and more than enough enemies, black leaders could not afford the luxury of being too choosy."⁶

It was also a service that congregants expected and appreciated. For example, Fr. Everard W. Daniel of St. Matthew's Episcopal joined the entente in 1923, and by 1925 he had received so many requests for letters of recommendation that he found it necessary to solicit funds from the vestry for a new employment office with a paid investigator and secretary. "Dear Father Daniel," began one letter from October 1929.

My husband got reinstated with the Ford Motor Company on Thursday. . . . We called on the phone to let you know, and though did not get you personally, we felt sure the message was delivered. Words fail to express our deep gratitude and appreciation for your kind help in the matter. But we know you will understand our feelings though we express them so poorly.⁷

Although they were not nearly as successful in placing Black workers as was the employment department of the Detroit Urban League, which, backed by the Detroit Employers Association, found work for thousands of Black men and women, a significant number of workers were hired into the auto industry via these church connections. Many of these workers, the majority of whom were recent migrants drawn from the South by Ford's promise of five dollars a day, were, like the authors of the letter to Father Daniel, grateful for the opportunity.

As Reverend Hill put it, "[S]ome of them [the workers] looked upon Ford as almost being a god."⁸ Indeed, men proudly displaying company badges on the breast pockets of their best suits were a common sight at Black churches on Sunday mornings. The phrase "I work for Henry Ford" became an immense source of pride, even though the company

relegated all but a fortunate few Black workers to the dirtiest, most hazardous jobs. In his 1940 booklet *Henry Ford and the Negro People*, Christopher Alston, a Black auto worker and Communist union organizer who had been radicalized by the 1932 Ford Hunger March, pointed to the fact that 6,457 of the 9,852 Blacks who were employed by Ford in 1937 “worked in the worst and hardest jobs in the company—namely: the foundry, rolling mill and open hearth.” “The remaining 3,386,” he continued, “were to be found in the motor building, the foundry machine shop, the ‘B’ building, the spring and upset building, the pressed steel building, in tool rooms, construction departments, as sweepers and on miscellaneous jobs.” Although the larger of these departments, especially the foundry, would become prime sites of Black influence once the company was unionized, before 1941 thousands of Black men risked their health and their lives in these so-called nigger jobs.⁹ Many—too many—accepted the dangers as a fact of life.

Almost everyone profited from the alliance, however. Workers got an avenue to employment, which benefited them and their families. The city’s emerging Black middle class—the owners of saloons, hotels, funeral homes, drugstores, coal yards, and financial and realty agencies—profited from the wages of the growing workforce. Black ministers benefited, too, for some of the same reasons. In return for their services, clergymen gained not only congregants able to tithe the customary 10 percent of their income but also donations to church funds and building committees and nonmonetary gifts such as concert tickets, coal, and building materials. The alliance also increased the ministers’ social status and capital. Father Daniel was a particular favorite. A native of the Virgin Islands, tall and handsome, and a graduate of both New York University and the Union Theological Seminary, the Episcopal Daniel was deemed a suitable companion for the top Ford executives with whom he lunched on a fairly regular basis. Moreover, his church was favored by a yearly Sunday visit from Henry Ford himself, who was also Episcopalian.¹⁰

Not everyone, however, viewed the situation as ideal. Although he presumably could have joined the alliance through his connection to Bradby, Reverend Hill doggedly resisted. From his first years at Hartford, Hill struggled to maintain his and his church’s independence, refusing offers of “assistance” at every turn. The propriety of the church-company alliance was something on which Hill and Reverend Bradby, his mentor, could not agree. “Reverend Hill had grown up under Reverend Bradby even as I grew up under Reverend Hill,” recalled Charles G. Adams, the current pastor of Hartford. “Reverend Hill agreed with Bradby that the

church should be relevant to the social position and social struggles of the people. But whereas Reverend Bradby wanted to accommodate them to certain strictures upon which they were dependent, such as the Ford Motor Company, Reverend Hill came in on the side of the labor movement.”¹¹ Although it became clear only in hindsight, there was also a downside to the alliance, which Hill perhaps sensed.

In return for reliable workers, the company secured a fair amount of social control over not only workers but also prominent ministers. This control was asserted most dramatically through men such as Donald J. Marshall and Harry Bennett. Marshall, a Black policeman who was a member of St. Matthew’s, was hired by the Ford Service Department in 1923; within a few months he had achieved supervisory and hiring authority over Black personnel, reporting directly to Charles Sorenson (the architect of the church-company alliance) and Bennett, the head of Ford’s notorious Service Department. Marshall, whose official title was special investigator, became increasingly cynical and arbitrary as his power grew. He may well have been influenced in this respect by his boss, Bennett, who oversaw a department, in reality a private army, of ex-convicts, ex-boxers (like Bennett himself, who boxed in the navy), gangsters, and assorted sociopaths.¹²

Bennett’s department was well organized and heavily armed. While such control organs also existed in other industries, Ford’s was the largest in the nation, employing over three thousand men. Initiated at the express direction of Henry Ford, its primary purpose was to suppress unionization and other sources of “trouble” through espionage, intimidation, and force. Branches of the main department, located in Ford’s Dearborn headquarters, were a fixture in every Ford plant across the country. Bennett’s Service Department was also responsible for the policing of Black workers, a task generally delegated to Marshall and Willis Ward, a former University of Michigan football star hired as part of Marshall’s personal staff in 1935. Both Marshall and Ward attacked their overseeing duties enthusiastically; by the mid-1930s it was exceedingly difficult to obtain a position at the Rouge plant without a letter from a minister or other prominent members of the Black elite.

Hill was hardly alone in sensing the potential dangers of the church-company alliance. His actions are probably best seen in light of a growing restlessness among more militant activists, a trend that would encompass the critiques of the Black elite launched in the 1920s by groups such as the Good Citizenship League, the local UNIA, and Snow Grigsby’s Civic Rights Committee. Given the social and political prominence of the clergy, it was almost inevitable that a new generation of ministers and

activists would eventually come to question and even challenge the alliance with Ford. Hill was part of this “new crowd,” which rejected the “somber, reformist stance” of older, more established ministers and leaders of race improvement agencies such as the Urban League. As Beth Tompkins Bates has argued, a new crowd of activists, much more closely aligned with grassroots and working-class politics, emerged from the economic turmoil of the Depression and the social dynamics of the migration.

Whereas the “old guard” tended to rely on white philanthropy and patronage, the new crowd turned to direct action, mass pressure, collective organizing, and a much more confrontational style.¹³ Hill’s stance may also have been shaped by the ever-present tension between the priestly and the prophetic functions of African American clergymen. The priestly represented care for congregation and community, even at the price of accommodation, and the prophetic represented a forthright resistance to racism and other modes of exploitation and oppression. These two aspects have always existed in a dialectical relationship whose balance is dependent as much on individual propensity as on objective circumstances.¹⁴ As the decade wore on these two strains of Black religious thought and practice were brought increasingly into conflict.

THE NEW CROWD AND THE RISE OF A LABOR–CIVIL RIGHTS COMMUNITY

By the mid-1930s, a new crowd was emerging in Detroit made up of ministers, such as Hill, White, and Dade, who rejected the alliance with Ford. Father Dade was a graduate of Lincoln University and the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He arrived in Detroit in 1936 to serve first as vicar of St. Cyprian’s and later, when it officially joined the Michigan Diocese as a parish in 1944, as the church’s first rector. He remained at St. Cyprian’s until his retirement in 1972. Detroit must have been quite a change of pace for the energetic New Englander (he was born in the Massachusetts whaling town of New Bedford in 1903), and he was certainly struck by the implications of the church-company alliance. When Dade asked one of his parishioners why he belonged to both the St. Cyprian’s and St. Matthew’s men’s clubs, the man replied: “I belong to St. Matthew’s Men’s Club because of Mr. Marshall. All the men who belong to St. Matthew’s Men’s Club have some sort of tie-in with Mr. Marshall and Father Daniel, and through them you have to buy a car and also you’re assured of work and continuing to work at the Ford Motor Company.”¹⁵

Dade once remarked that he felt the “good Lord” guided him in

avoiding the “trap” of the church-company alliance, but courage must also be an important element in the explanation. Father Dade had not felt particularly friendly toward labor before coming to Detroit, which is unsurprising given the racial exclusion policies adopted by most unions prior to the founding of the CIO. Rather, his union sympathies grew out of his belief that “the church had to be relevant to whatever was good for people in all phases of their life, whether it was economic, political, or social.” “And here I came into a community,” Dade reminisced, “and here was a situation having to do with the working life of people that was just flagrantly bad, wrong, certainly not good.” By 1936 some of the more negative attributes of the patronage system were becoming evident, but acknowledgment of these drawbacks was a risk for a young minister of a church that had yet to achieve parish status. Not only was St. Cyprian’s under the direct control of the diocese, but it was also a west-side outpost of St. Matthew’s. There is a clear parallel between Hill and Hartford’s relationship to Reverend Bradby and Second Baptist, and Dade and St. Cyprian’s connection to Father Daniel and St. Matthew’s.

The contrast in power and privilege was even evident in the churches’ architecture. Second Baptist and St. Matthew’s were both stately brick structures with wide aisles, comfortable pews, and decorative altars. Early photographs of Hartford, by contrast, reveal a little wooden structure poised precariously on short stilts and sitting in the midst of a dusty lot. Similarly, Father Dade recalls being “surprised” that the physical structure of St. Cyprian’s offered him “practically nothing to work with.” “The church hadn’t been developed” and was closer in appearance to a storefront. Hill and Dade, the less-established ministers of less-established but growing institutions, sided with the UAW and opened their respective churches to union meetings. In so doing, both implicitly rejected the cautious path charted by their elder pastors.

As a result, both ministers were occasionally targeted for retribution. Dade was shocked to find that Father Daniel had complained to the local bishop that he (Dade) had hosted a “radical” political meeting at his church. “If the union had not succeeded,” said Dade, “I would have had to resign.” Looking back on the situation nearly three decades later, Dade adopted a generous view of his former senior cleric and the relationship Father Daniel had helped to build with the Ford Motor Company. “Father Daniel was a person of such intellectual standing that I could see why Mr. Ford and he would be friends,” he noted.

But, I think he was off base when he couldn’t see the union or anything to do with the union. I mean, he let his friendship with Mr.

Ford blind him to the real need and so forth of the black working man. Now, whether he knew what Mr. Marshall was doing, I don't know.¹⁶

Whether the elder clergyman knew it or not, Marshall was certainly Ford's main enforcer within the Black community. Dade and Hill both weathered his threats. Marshall once swore to "fire every Negro in the neighborhood" if Hill went through with plans to hold a UAW-sponsored meeting at his church.¹⁷

The third member of this triad, the Rev. Horace A. White, took similar risks and by all accounts did so gladly. A graduate of Oberlin College's Divinity School, White had come to Detroit in 1936 to pastor Plymouth Congregational. An advocate of the social gospel, Reverend White was as well spoken as he was outspoken, and he was often asked to address mass meetings of workers and unionists. He firmly believed in the rights of labor and insisted that "The Negro should not stand on the outside and look in; but should step in and join" the union.¹⁸ At the height of the 1939 Chrysler sit-down strike, he even did verbal battle with Don Marshall during a debate on the merits of the UAW. He would also come to play a leading role in community support for the UAW during the 1941 Ford strike. In later years he emerged as a prominent liberal political figure, heading the local NAACP's Legal Redress Committee; serving, by appointment, on the Detroit Housing Commission; and winning a seat in the state House of Representatives on a Democratic ticket.¹⁹

White, Hill, and Dade formed the core of a pro-union Black religious movement, but they were also part of a much larger network of progressive activists. The same year that White arrived in Detroit, Louis Martin, a recent graduate of the University of Michigan, became the editor of the *Michigan Chronicle*, a local subsidiary of the *Chicago Defender*. In the years to come Martin, an ardent supporter of the CIO, the New Deal, and the Democratic Party, managed to transform the *Chronicle* into an unabashedly pro-union alternative to the other major Detroit-based Black weekly, the *Detroit Tribune*, which was staunchly Republican and generally antiunion. Like White, Louis Martin eventually entered the political arena, joining the staff of the Democratic National Committee in 1944.

White and Martin, both of whom were in their early twenties when they arrived in Detroit, swiftly gravitated toward Charles C. Diggs, "a symbol and a model of progressive black political leadership unprecedented in Detroit's black political history."²⁰ Diggs was born in Tallula, Missis-

sippi, in 1894 and came to Detroit in 1913. A member of the Garvey movement in the 1920s, he was also the proprietor of a highly successful funeral home located on the lower east side. While he began his political career as a Republican, in 1932 Diggs changed his party affiliation and became active in Democratic ward politics. Diggs, along with attorney Harold Bledsoe and fellow ex-Garveyite J. A. Craigen, organized the first Black Democratic club in Detroit and by 1936 was confident enough to run for the state Senate, representing a district composed mainly of Blacks and Poles. Like their white ethnic counterparts, Black voters were increasingly turning toward the Democratic Party, and away from their traditional affiliation with the Party of Lincoln. The 1936 election that brought Diggs to the Michigan legislature as the first Black Democratic senator in the state's history also marked the first time that major Black districts in Detroit voted solidly for the Democrats in statewide and national races.²¹ Neither unions nor Democrats had previously earned the trust of African Americans; hence, the decision to vote Democratic was still controversial.

Diggs proved to be a powerful ally for the city's emerging labor-civil rights community. During his tenure in the legislature, he introduced a series of bills designed to strengthen Michigan's civil rights laws. Public Act 117 (the "Diggs Law"), for example, made discriminatory service on the basis of race, color, or creed a misdemeanor.²² He was also one of the two most-recognized "friends of labor" in the legislature, the other being Stanley Nowak, another key addition to the city's Left community in the 1930s. Nowak was a Polish immigrant who came to the United States with his family in 1913 and was raised in the slums of Chicago. After a parochial school education and several years spent as an altar boy, he began his political career as a newspaper reporter and a tireless organizer for the Unemployed Councils, as well as for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, in Chicago. Having traveled throughout the country in the early 1930s he finally settled in Detroit, where he met his future wife, Margaret Collingwood, at a social gathering sponsored by the Proletarian Party—a forum for the discussion of radical ideas.²³ The party, which focused on "educational communism" and ran the Proletarian University of Detroit, was the perfect intellectual home for a young woman like Margaret, who was searching for ways to translate her early religious beliefs into progressive social action. The two were a perfect match. Stanley, who had long ago lost his faith in the Catholic Church, dedicated his life to labor organizing and working-class politics, and Margaret, who had been a member of the Brethren church, quickly joined him. The Nowaks made their home in a Polish neighborhood on

the city's east side, just blocks away from the home of another local activist, Mary Zuk, who was to become a friend and political ally.

Because of his bilingualism and his connections with the Polish community, Nowak was appointed creator and head of the UAW Polish Trade Union Committee in 1936, a position that involved him in many UAW strikes from 1936 to 1941.²⁴ By 1938 Stanley had decided to run for elected office, which would enable him to use his community-based campaign as an organizing and publicity tool for industrial unionism. Much to his surprise, he won a seat in the Michigan Senate representing the Twenty-first District, which included the municipalities of Ecorse, predominantly Black Inkster, Allen Park, Dearborn, and River Rouge; he was returned to office four times, three times after running joint campaigns with Charles Diggs. In Diggs, "Stanley found a staunch ally on civil liberties, the rights of minorities, and organized labor," wrote Margaret Collingwood Nowak. "A friendship developed, and Diggs often rode with us to Detroit on Friday afternoons, sometimes having dinner when we took him home." Their friendship with the Diggs family also gave the Nowaks an intimate glimpse into the workings of racism. The Nowaks, for instance, were distressed to learn that Diggs could not find accommodations near the state capital, and was forced to reside in one of Lansing's segregated neighborhoods during the week. Together the two men initiated investigations into the misuse of welfare funds, fought "antisubversive" legislation, and introduced bills on academic freedom. When Nowak was repeatedly threatened with deportation for his ties to radical organizations, Diggs, along with Reverend Hill, Mary Zuk, Louis Martin, and others, rallied to his defense.

Friendships were an important medium for the growth of the city's interracial and interethnic Left—a simple point that is too often overlooked in histories of social movements and the communities of activists that support them. And friendship may in fact be even more important to social formations that involve more than one racial, ethnic, or cultural group. "The first time I came to Detroit," recalled Black attorney George Crockett, who would become yet another leading figure in local labor and civil rights activism, "the best way you could describe me was apolitical. . . . I suppose the way I got interested in politics in the broad sense of the term was my contact with Maurice Sugar, who was general counsel of the UAW and one of the leading labor lawyers in the city."²⁵

Crockett worked with the radical lawyer Sugar to desegregate city bowling alleys so that the union's "mixed teams" could play. It was a small but significant beginning. Crockett also got to know Reverend Hill and eventually became a member and later a trustee of Hartford Avenue

Baptist Church. Ernest Goodman, another prominent labor lawyer, tells a similar tale. Goodman grew up in one of the city's Jewish ghettos—"a completely Jewish environment"—and although it was not far from a Black neighborhood, he recalls the social distance as immense. After graduating from law school, Goodman joined the ACLU in 1935 and began to take a more active interest in union politics after he, like Crockett, met Maurice Sugar.

Goodman joined the left-leaning National Lawyers' Guild a few years later. "Through the Guild," he explains, "I became acquainted with lawyers across the country who held social and political views to suit my own. They formed a network of lawyers who were involved in the development of labor law, civil rights and liberties, and other people's struggles."²⁶ Such identifications and sensibilities were central to the creation of Detroit's early civil rights movement—which is not to suggest that friendships and political affinities alone were able to erase social tensions or interpersonal (and at times cultural) conflicts. Goodman, for example, tells a story about his lack of cultural knowledge of the Black community. Asked to speak at a Black church, he showed up without a coat or a tie, thus violating Black norms regarding appropriate church attire. For this he was politely and firmly chastised by the presiding minister. "I wouldn't have gone into a white church the way I was dressed," Goodman admits. "It was lessons of this kind, over a period of years, that helped me to feel more comfortable with Black people."²⁷

There were growing pains of all sorts as the labor-civil rights community took shape, and its leadership was shaped, in turn, by the local and national trends that began to converge in 1935–36. By 1935, having made few structural gains, most of the city's Unemployed Councils had ceased to exist. Yet community- and neighborhood-based militancy, in which women were often central, continued even as the economic situation began to show signs of improvement. Black women associated with the Housewives' League, the sister organization of the Booker T. Washington Trade Association, continued the effort to support Black businesses and target white-owned businesses in their neighborhoods that engaged in price gouging or refused to hire Blacks.

This sort of activity was hardly confined to the Black community. Struggling to make ends meet in the summer of 1935, Mary Zuk, the wife of an unemployed auto worker, and several of her friends decided that they had had enough. Demonstrations by women responsible for household economics broke out in Hamtramck, the east-side Polish neighborhood where Zuk and her allies resided, and these sporadic protests swiftly turned into a full-fledged meat boycott. The boycott

spread to other immigrant neighborhoods and adjacent Black areas in a matter of days and weeks.

These protests generated a harsh and sometimes violent response, especially in the Polish neighborhoods at the epicenter of the protest. Police arrested a growing number of housewives, but the women would not be deterred. An organizational structure, mostly Polish but also including native-born white women, Jews, and at least one African American woman, Irene Thompson, was soon devised. Its representatives, including Mary Zuk and Irene Thompson, were sent to Washington to testify before a congressional committee on food prices. Having won much publicity but few substantial gains, the movement faded by the fall of that year. But it launched the political career of Mary Zuk, who, despite charges of communist leanings and the endorsement of the CP, won a seat on the Hamtramck city council in 1936. Further, the meat boycotts led to the formation of the Peoples' League of Hamtramck, which was later instrumental in mustering public support for CIO organizing drives and sit-down strikes. Moreover, Mary Zuk and the women of the Housewives' League against the High Cost of Living gave working-class immigrant women a greater sense of their own political power and a greater appreciation for the importance of direct action and mass organization.²⁸

While such moments of grassroots protest developed on the local level, important developments were also under way on the national stage. The post-1935 shift in Roosevelt's New Deal administration—away from short-range palliatives and toward long-term modifications in the nation's economic and social structure—ushered in a new era of social reform. The New Deal itself was one of the forces that transformed civil rights into a national political issue, as its liberal advocates became part of a developing coalition of Black civil rights organizations, leftist activists, labor unionists, and intellectuals. Although Roosevelt was unwilling to antagonize powerful southern Democrats in Congress, and his administration's policies often sanctioned racial discrimination, the New Deal recognized the aspirations of Black Americans and other marginalized groups to a greater extent than any previous administration in the twentieth century.²⁹

Roosevelt's staff was even more acutely cognizant of the rising tide of labor activism. The second phase of the New Deal, 1935–40, witnessed the passages of the National Labor Relations Act, also known as the Wagner Act, in honor of Sen. Robert F. Wagner. Signed by Roosevelt in 1935, it gave workers the right to organize and vote for the union of their choice, outlawed unfair labor practices, and established the

National Labor Relations Board, which was imbued with mediation and enforcement powers. The act replaced section 7(A) of the National Recovery Act of 1933, which had generated a wave of grassroots organizing efforts and wildcat strikes but the Supreme Court had deemed unconstitutional.³⁰ Thus, the Wagner Act not only revived the rights of workers to unionize but also helped shape the public discourse on rights in general. Castigated by its detractors as an unconstitutional violation of individual rights to contract between employers and employees and heralded as “labor’s bill of rights” by its supporters, the Wagner Act advanced the idea of state-protected corporate rights adhering not to individuals but to groups (e.g., workers). In 1937, when a slightly more liberal Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the act, Chief Justice Evan Hughes noted that the right of workers to unionize and seek the collective representation of their choice was a “fundamental” one.³¹

By instituting a new class of rights that were protected under the First Amendment and by federal action, Wagner encouraged the activities of the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations. Unlike the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which organized workers according to trades and skills and thereby excluded nonskilled industrial workers, the CIO was committed to organizing all workers into industrial unions across technical specialties and, more important, across lines of race, nationality, religious affiliation, and (albeit with less conviction at first) gender. With its desire to unionize heavy industries such as steel and automotive production now sanctioned by the state, in 1936 the CIO began the most massive organizing campaign in American history. From the start, the CIO received the support of the Communist Party, which had been pursuing a similar strategy in its own unions, including the Auto Workers Union, though with limited success. With the 1935 decision of the Seventh Congress of the Communist International to dismantle these “dual unions” in favor of constructing a “popular front” with other progressive forces and even liberals (as long as those groups did not express overt hostility toward the Soviet Union), the CP sent hundreds of seasoned organizers into the ranks of the CIO-affiliated unions, including the UAW. Indeed, labor organizing, especially industrial unionism, was, along with the fight against fascism, a key focal point of the Popular Front strategy lasting, in its first official phase, from 1935 to 1939.³²

The timing of the Popular Front was crucial. At the same time that labor organizing assumed a new legitimacy and militancy, *communism* was redefined, in the words of Earl Browder, the CP’s 1936 presidential candidate, as “twentieth-century Americanism,” with the party trans-

formed into “the standard bearers and pioneers of that revolutionary tradition out of which the United States was born.” For the CP, then, the primary political choice was not so much between socialism and capitalism as between democracy and fascism—at least until the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact undermined the CP’s official Popular Front ideology and severely hampered the effectiveness of Communist organizers within unions, including the UAW.³³ As historian James Pickett notes, during the initial phase of the Popular Front, Communists inside the UAW embraced a “self-effacing affability” and a deferential posture in order to avoid clashes with other “progressive forces.” This deference came to an abrupt end eighteen months later when the pact was announced and Communists “stopped deferring to the Roosevelt administration and the liberal CIO leadership.” At least two strikes—at Allis-Chambers in Wisconsin and North American Aviation in California, along with, less dramatically, the Ford strike in Michigan—were affected by these changes and ongoing factionalism within the CIO itself. Of course, after the United States entered the war in 1941 the CP enthusiastically endorsed the CIO’s “no strike” pledge.³⁴

Another difficulty internal to the party had to do with criticisms of the Popular Front by African American members such as Harry Haywood. Historian Mark Naison is surely correct on one level when he notes that initially the Popular Front policy “engendered a spirit of cooperation between liberals and radicals that facilitated the empowerment of North America’s least privileged citizens and placed ethnocentrism on the defensive in U.S. intellectual and political life.”³⁵ Yet for many Black Communists, including Haywood, the new policy sacrificed revolutionary antiracism and the long-standing dedication to Self-Determination in the Black Belt. Indeed, Haywood dated the beginning of the party’s backsliding on Black liberation to 1936, when in a fit of popular frontism the Communist leadership of the Alabama Sharecroppers Union pushed for the union’s incorporation into the Agricultural Workers Union and the Farmers Union of Alabama, which were, Haywood argued, “strongly influenced by the racist and right-wing Coughlinites forces.” Haywood was also highly critical of the party for backing away from A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington movement in the name of “‘unity’ in the face of the fascist enemy” as well as of its general hostility toward the African American “Double-V campaign” during the war.³⁶

West Indian Marxist C. L. R. James, then a member of the newly founded Socialist Workers Party, similarly viewed the Popular Front as

the “chief reason” why the CP “cannot gain the allies it wants if it fights the difficult fight for Negro rights.” “The C.P. is now an American Party,” James continued, “and the petty bourgeois supporters of democracy who are coming into it have nothing in common with the Negro, who, finding himself an outsider, has simply left the party.”³⁷

All of these national, and indeed international, developments were followed closely in the ranks of Detroit’s labor–civil rights community and the newly formed UAW. Communist Party members had laid the foundations for industrial unionism in several of the city’s plants. The Michigan CP, then under the direction of William Weinstone and Phil Raymond (both secular Jews), had established associations of the Popular Front sort even before this became official policy. In backing the 1935 campaign of Maurice Sugar for a position on the Recorder’s Court, for instance, Communists joined hands with Frank X. Martel, the local head of the AFL; with Black ministers, including Reverends Hill and Peck; and with the full array of the city’s Left community—with the notable exception of the Socialist Party, which maintained its traditional aversion to the CP. Although Sugar lost the election, before it was over “the cause of organized labor was preached in virtually every fraternal hall and political club in the city, and more impressively, in black churches where the very word ‘union’ had been traditionally uttered in low whispers, if at all.”³⁸

Sugar was extremely popular among Black Detroiters, who regarded him as a “champion of the underdog,” largely due to his spirited defense a year earlier of James Victory, an African American World War I veteran accused of slashing the face of a white woman in an alley and stealing her purse. Victory’s alibi was solid, he had no prior criminal record, and the method used by the police for witness identification was faulty. Armed with these facts, Sugar successfully argued the case before an all-white jury and, luckily, a sympathetic judge by the name of Edward L. Jeffries. Black Communist Harry Haywood, who was then head of the CP’s Negro Department, came to Detroit to organize around what he called “Detroit’s Scottsboro.” In his memoir *Black Bolshevik*, Haywood vividly recalls Victory’s case and the work of the Detroit branch of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, headed by Joe Billups, as well as the efforts of the ILD and Maurice Sugar. Victory’s arrest and trial came, Haywood notes, “in the midst of one of the most vicious campaigns of racist incitement in Detroit’s history,” orchestrated by Police Commissioner Heinrich Pickert, who boasted that an average of fifty arrests were being made each day. The local papers, especially the *Detroit Times*, carried on an

equally vicious campaign of “slanderous race-baiting in which Blacks were depicted as natural rapists, voodooists, murderers and all-round thugs who were conspiring to assault white women.”³⁹

Various segments of the Left sprang to Victory’s defense. Haywood remembers addressing a large mass rally held at the Israel Baptist Church along with the Rev. John Bollens, Joe Billups, Black attorney C. LeBron Simmons, William Weinstone of the Detroit CP, and Nat Ganley, the trade union director for the CP. The decision of this quickly organized committee to retain Sugar as defense counsel proved decisive. While Sugar could not match the oratorical power of Clarence Darrow, his sharp defense of Victory recalls Darrow’s strategy some ten years earlier in the Ossian Sweet trial. In both cases, white lawyers argued in front of white juries that the existence and pervasiveness of white supremacy was an issue in the indictments. Sugar began his long closing statement by pointing out the obvious: “Every one of you is a white person—every one. The defendant is black. Many of his witnesses . . . are black.” He continued:

Well, I asked you if you had any prejudice against a man because of his color and you said “No.” I believe that you believe it. But is it really possible for a white person not to be prejudiced? . . . The man who participates in the lynching of an innocent Negro in the South doesn’t think he is prejudiced; he thinks he has a proper view of things. “That’s the way to handle these niggers,”—that is his view. That does not apply to the same degree in the North, but unfortunately it seems to be growing in the ideas of a good many people. . . . Be careful, oh, be careful, because if there is a verdict of guilty in this case, then I am telling you that it can be only because white people are unable to overcome prejudice when it is about them. That must not happen here!

At the close of his statement, Sugar made an impassioned plea for the jury to see past the barrier of color and understand that Blacks have “the same hearts, they have the same pleasures, they have the same joys, they have the same pains, they have the same agonies as other people.” At the same time, he called on the jurors to acknowledge the differences that racism had produced, namely, that the “Negro is doubly exploited. He is exploited as a worker and he is further exploited as a colored worker.” It was a risky strategy, to be sure, but it paid off, and James Victory was set free.⁴⁰

Sugar encouraged the comparison between himself and Darrow by

featuring Darrow's endorsement on Black-oriented campaign literature during his 1935 run for a seat on the city's Common Council as part of a labor ticket. The pamphlet "United Labor Candidates for Council: William McKie, Maurice Sugar, Fay O'Camb on Equal Rights for Negroes" carries Darrow's endorsement on the back cover and includes an open letter from Snow Grigsby and the Civic Rights Committee to all councilmen and candidates about the patterns of racial discrimination in Detroit's public and municipal employment. Sugar, O'Camb, and McKie were the only candidates to respond to the letter. They assured their readers that they were "fully aware of the gross discrimination practiced against Negroes in the City of Detroit" and pledged to fight it "with all our power."⁴¹ The campaign also distributed copies of Sugar's closing argument in the Victory case under the title *A Negro on Trial for His Life: The Frame-Up of James Victory Exposed!*

Sugar's campaign, and the public circulation of materials like those just mentioned, drew the city's progressives closer together in 1935–36. Other factors contributed to this process as well. Black Communists such as Joseph Billups, Paul Kirk, Veal Clough, and William Nowell—all of whom had been active in the old AWU and the Unemployed Councils—were willing to make common cause with activists such as Maurice Sugar and Charles Hill, with others who had worked in the councils or on the Scottsboro defense, with Snow Grigsby, and with those who, like Coleman A. Young, had forged their radicalism through endless discussions in such places as Maben's barbershop on the city's east side.⁴²

During these years the labor–civil rights community also began to develop a more stable organizational infrastructure. Its major components included the UAW and its various organizing committees (e.g., the Polish Organizing Committee and the Negro Organizing Committee), the CP and its various "front groups," and the two significant labor–civil rights organizations founded in 1935–36: the local branch of the National Negro Congress and the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights (CFPCR, later known as the Civil Rights Federation and still later as the Michigan division of the Civil Rights Congress [CRC]), both of which proclaimed the rights of labor to be indivisible from the rights of Blacks and other minorities and both of which were infused with the spirit of religious radicalism. The NNC and the conference went beyond the effort to protect civil rights in this period by seeking to both broaden and extend them.

The leftists' perspective on rights in general was very much informed by their understanding of the rights of labor in particular. When thousands of workers "sat down to stand up for their rights"—as they did so

A NEGRO ON TRIAL FOR HIS LIFE

The Frame-up of James Victory Exposed!

**SPEECH TO JURY BY
COUNSEL FOR DEFENSE**

MAURICE SUGAR



**CANDIDATE FOR JUDGE
OF RECORDER'S COURT**

**NON - PARTISAN
Election, April 1, 1935**

Price 5c per copy

Cover from *A Negro on Trial for His Life: The Frame-Up of James Victory Exposed!*
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dramatically during the 1936–37 Flint strike against General Motors (GM)—both the conference and the NNC argued that even if the sit-down strikes were illegal workers had a moral right to engage in such activities. “There’s no doubt that the sitdown is illegal,” stated Michigan’s newly elected pro-labor governor, Frank Murphy, “But laboring people justify the sitdown on the grounds that it is effective. They claim that it is moral.”⁴³ As with the sit-ins in the 1960s, activists used moral reasoning to justify acts of civil disobedience.

“We start by asserting that every worker in America has the right to live in decency and as a free man,” argued Maurice Sugar in his defense of the sit-down tactic. “Now, when the workers engage in a sit-down strike. . . . [i]s this an encroachment upon the property rights of the employer? Of course it is. But encroachment upon property rights is not *ipso facto* illegal.” In contradistinction to the supposed illegality of this form of protest, Sugar, who eventually joined the UAW’s Legal Department, insisted that because the sit-down strike is “legal to millions of workers” and no one would “dare say that millions of American workers have suddenly become criminals” labor had, in essence, already caused the law to be changed: “Now we await only the acceptance by the courts of the change which has already been made.”⁴⁴

Although the virtual occupation of private corporate property by hundreds—at times, thousands—of workers was never ruled legal by any court, this powerful tactic proved wildly popular among protesters for a time and helped structure arguments for the extension of rights and freedoms. As Detroit’s Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights defined the issue in its statement of purpose, civil rights included “the rights of free speech, press, assembly and worship as granted in the Bill of Rights . . . the rights of labor to organize and carry out the functions essential to collective bargaining as guaranteed in the Wagner Act,” and “equal rights with all others in the community of religious, racial and political minorities.”⁴⁵

The statement’s mixture of civil libertarian fears and pro-labor idealism neatly encapsulates the CFPCR’s understanding of rights. First, by invoking the Bill of Rights, the conference demonstrated an affinity with the traditional sphere of constitutional liberties and the underlying philosophy that all individuals possess a class of fundamental or “natural” rights, which the state cannot unduly interfere with or violate. Second, by citing the rights of labor and minorities the statement identifies the conference with an understanding of group or corporate rights, which the state must act not only to protect but also codify and extend. Finally, the conference’s statement reflects the growing importance of economic

and social rights (along with civil and political ones) within segments of the Left, where the call for economic justice and industrial democracy was becoming commonplace.

In a 1938 article in the CFPCR's *Civil Rights News*, the Rev. John H. Bollens, pastor of the Messiah Evangelical Church and executive director of the conference, reflected on the circumstances that led to formation of the conference and the concomitant shift in thinking about civil rights. Before the conference, Bollens writes, "civil rights work in this community was handled by the Detroit branch of the ACLU, of which I was chairman." He continues:

The cases were practically all infringements upon an individual's civil rights. . . . When the depression came, we noted not only a change in the attitudes of the workers but also a definite change in the trends of civil rights cases. As the men in the factories came to realize that they were being victimized not as individuals, but as a group, they spontaneously began to bond themselves together. . . . This spontaneous movement, being driven by necessity, brought with it opposition from the side of reaction. . . . The reactionary forces sought legislation which would not only curtail, but make this movement impossible.⁴⁶

The piece of "reactionary" legislation to which Reverend Bollens referred was the Dunkel-Baldwin bill, which was introduced in the state legislature in 1935 and was supported by the conservative Liberty League.⁴⁷ The bill, which Bollens denounced as "the most vicious anti-civil liberties piece of legislation that had ever been introduced into any legislature in the United States," would have outlawed most forms of strike activity and made possible the "abolition of any kind of labor or liberal activity in the state" under the guise of stopping "subversive activities." Instead of adopting the usual policy of the ACLU and waiting to see if the state Supreme Court would render the bill unconstitutional in a test case, Bollens and other concerned citizens launched a frontal attack while the bill was still under consideration. "Since the proposed bill endangered the existence of even a civil rights organization," he explained, "we decided that it would be necessary to change our policy and organize anew so that we might get to the people, arouse public opinion to the extent that this bill could not become law."⁴⁸

The idea was to create a "real united front" of labor and farm groups, as well as fraternal, language, race, civic, professional, women's, and youth organizations. They realized that such groups differed widely in

their primary aims and interests but believed that the ideological glue holding them all together was “a desire to preserve democracy” by protecting the rights of all. “The effort now being made by organized labor to unionize the workers in all industries and occupations,” conference spokespersons insisted, “is of vital concern to every American who cherishes our democratic institutions.” Unionization, according to the conference, transcended “the ordinary objectives of a labor controversy” and became, in essence, “a crusade for the political and economic emancipation of a great multitude of our fellow citizens who are employed in industries which deny them the elementary rights of free speech, free association and free assembly.”⁴⁹

Middle-class professionals, who compromised a major portion of the group’s membership, should be engaged in this emancipatory struggle, the conference proclaimed, because what was at stake was not only the rights of workers “but even more the liberties of every American citizen irrespective of his immediate concerns in labor controversies.”⁵⁰ Working closely with Sugar (who belonged to both the ACLU and the ILD), as well as Frank Martel of the Detroit Federation of Labor (the local branch of the AFL), the conference sent delegates to Lansing and throughout the state to publicly debate the merits of the Dunckel-Baldwin bill. Although they did not succeed in killing the measure completely, the bill that was finally passed by the legislature was a pale reflection of its former self.⁵¹

Inspired by this success, the conference became a permanent organization, with Reverend Bollens as its chief executive and another white minister—the Rev. Owen Knox, pastor of the Bethlehem Methodist Episcopal Church—as treasurer. Over the years, the group retained its mass-action and legalistic bent. In fact, it attracted some of the best legal minds in the city, including Michigan attorney general Patrick O’Brien and lawyers Ernest Goodman and Ned Smokler, both of whom had ties to the local branch of the National Lawyers Guild, thus ensuring a close connection between the guild and the federation.⁵² “We had representatives from most of the language groups in Detroit,” recalled Eleanor Maki, who joined the conference after a friend alerted her to the censorship power of Dunckel-Baldwin, “and from some of the union groups, and of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Progressive Party. All sorts of different people, very different, who would come together and they were concerned about the inroads being made on civil rights.”⁵³ A teacher at Detroit’s Northwestern High School and a member of the first teacher’s union organized in the city’s public schools, Maki was also one of dozens of women who became involved in the

movement around this time. By October 1935, the conference claimed to be composed of 295 Michigan-based organizations representing over 465,000 individuals. Those numbers are grossly inflated; in terms of active membership the number was closer to 1,200 persons at its height, although this is still impressive for a local radical organization.

Like a few of her fellow white members, Eleanor Maki was also a member of the Detroit chapter of the National Negro Congress. The conference was conceived as an interracial organization but increased its standing in the Black community primarily through its ties with the local NNC, which was formed in 1936. Arthur McPhaul, a Black Communist and auto worker who joined both the conference and the NNC, recalled that the former “was organized mainly as a sort of defense for the struggling trade union organizations at the time” while the latter was primarily “interested in fighting against brutality, for the rights of Negroes.” For McPhaul himself, his priorities were “Number one, black people, and number two, left progressives.”⁵⁴ The NNC attracted Black unionists such as McPhaul, Christopher Alston, Coleman Young, Hodges Mason, and Joseph Billups, as well as Black women such as Rose Billups and Vera Vanderberg. The participation of McPhaul, Alston, the Billupses, and Mason also contributed to the charges, especially common after 1940, that the NNC was a Communist front.

Unlike the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights, the NNC was national in scope. The idea for its creation grew out of a conference on the economic status of Blacks held at Howard University in May 1935. Sponsored by the university’s Social Service Department and the Joint Committee on National Recovery—a short-lived coalition of twenty-two Black organizations formed to lobby the federal government—the Howard conference brought together a number of young militants committed to aggressively bettering the plight of the Black working class. Having agreed that the situation called for coordinated strength, John P. Davis, an economist and head of the joint committee, along with Ralph E. Bunche, then head of Howard’s Political Science Department, invited a select group to Bunche’s home to discuss plans for the formation of the NNC.

Their discussions consciously harked back to a venerable African American political tradition from the mid-nineteenth century. The Negro Convention Movement, initiated in Philadelphia in 1830, was the “first effort within the race to effect united action on a national scale.” Beginning with antislavery agitation before the Civil War and focusing on injustices toward Blacks thereafter, the Negro Convention Movement continued to function until the close of the century.⁵⁵ Well aware of this

precedent, Bunche, Davis, and more than 250 other men and women signed a call to hold the first national meeting of a new organization in Chicago in February 1936. Local sponsoring committees were set up in cities, including Detroit, Chicago, and New York. In October 1935, the pamphlet "Let Us Build a National Negro Congress," written by Davis with an introduction by A. Philip Randolph, rolled off the press. It was both a manifesto and a call to arms.

We believe that this Congress will furnish the opportunity for considering the problems that face all the Negro people and that a plan of action—the collective wisdom of all freedom-loving sections of our population—can be intelligently worked out for the solution of these problems. By unity of action we can create a nation-wide public opinion which will force real consideration from public officials, such as no single organization can hope to muster. The sincerity of purpose of all organizations to whom this call is addressed assures harmonious cooperation in the common cause for justice.⁵⁶

At the Chicago meeting, which was attended by 817 delegates representing 585 organizations, including labor unions, religious bodies, fraternal organizations, and political parties, Randolph was elected president and Davis agreed to serve as executive secretary. Before the meeting was officially adjourned, the NNC had established itself as a permanent body and passed resolutions on issues ranging from the rights of women and the support of Black business to a lynching and the invasion of Ethiopia.⁵⁷ The invasion of Ethiopia, like the Spanish Civil War before it, provided common ground between the CP and the Black community, including in some areas the surviving sections of Garvey's UNIA.⁵⁸

From the beginning, however, the presence of leading Black Communists such as James W. Ford, the CP's 1936 vice presidential candidate, was a source of tension in the congress. Indeed, in an attempt to procure the endorsement of Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, Randolph gave his assurances that "so far as I have any power, the Congress shall not be 'sold down the river' to any political group [e.g., the Communist Party] and I think this is the sentiment of numerous forces in it."⁵⁹

The friction between the NNC and the NAACP did not end there, nor did the constant accusations of Communist infiltration and control. The Detroit branch of the NAACP, then headed by the Rev. Robert Bradby of Second Baptist, was not enthusiastic about the NNC's presence in Detroit. But the Detroit NNC did manage to circumvent one of

the other flash points on which the national organization stumbled, namely, the religious question. During its first convention, the NNC passed a resolution insisting that the churches devote every fifth Sunday to the work of the congress. It also urged ministers to preach a “social and economic gospel as well as [a] spiritual gospel.” Yet shortly after the Chicago meeting a group of disgruntled clergymen drafted a letter criticizing the congress for its inattention to religious issues.

“We know that the interest and cooperation of church leaders, clergy and lay, is important to the success of any race movement,” the statement read.

We also know that a neglect or shunting of the Christian Church Leadership causes resentment from the church. We know, too, that the church leadership is rightly jealous of maintaining spiritual notions and injecting Christian ideals in all community, race, or national efforts. The church’s program must be labor, industry, education, human rights, human justice, plus a baptism of the truly spiritual and Christian attitude.

Arriving at the crux of the matter, the statement continued:

Our displeasure with the program, such as in [*sic*] presented in the National Negro Congress that includes no outstanding church positions of sentiment making—only to pray or pronounce benediction on general programs, was voiced in executive and council meetings and herein expressed.⁶⁰

The churchmen, headed by the (AME) Bishop J. A. Bray, knew that they had history on their side. The first Philadelphia meeting of the nineteenth-century Negro Convention movement had been presided over by Bishop Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Church, and prominent religious figures had provided leadership throughout the history of the movement. In dealing with the NNC, it is difficult to determine what caused the group of religious leaders more displeasure: the extension of secular radicalism symbolized by the presence of Communists in the NNC ranks; the inroads being made on their own position; or the NNC’s general usurpation of their moral high ground, which placed the clergy in the marginal role of “merely” praying and pronouncing benedictions. Whatever the case may have been, the religious issue became problematic for the congress at the national level.

The Detroit NNC had more success in this area. Snow Grigsby, chair-

man of the Civic Rights Committee, head of the Michigan Sponsoring Committee for the NNC, and an active member of St. John's United Presbyterian, had established warm relationships with members of the local clergy, including Reverend Hill. Moreover, the religious community was generally supportive of the Civic Rights Committee's efforts to desegregate the post office and other municipal entities, and, due in part to Grigsby's influence, the local NNC was very sensitive to the politics of religion in Detroit. Members of the Detroit NNC were also well aware of the long-standing ties between Black clergymen and the Ford Motor Company, and any minister willing to buck Ford's paternalist system was a welcome addition. The Rev. G. W. Barber, pastor of Detroit's Ebenezer AME, and Reverend Peck, pastor of Bethel AME and founder of the Booker T. Washington Trade Association, were both given highly visible positions in the congress. The Executive Committee was rounded out with young militants such as C. LeBron Simmons, a recent graduate of the University of Michigan Law School; Coleman Young; and Communists Paul Kirk and William Nowell.⁶¹

The Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights was equally adept at navigating the religious terrain. It was not until 1940 that a secular radical took over as its head: Jack Raskin, a secular Jew who took the CFPCR's helm after the terms of Reverends Bollens and Knox. From the beginning, the conference was stamped with the imprint of progressive religion. Both Bollens and Knox had been shaped by the example of Harry F. Ward, a major figure in the national ACLU until 1940 and one of the country's leading proponents of a radicalized social gospel. Aside from his position on the ACLU's Executive Board (from which he resigned in 1940 in response to the organization's increasingly anticommunist positions), Ward was also one of the five founding members of the left-leaning Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA).

Ward wrote and lectured widely on the need for an activist Christianity in which churches and religious institutions would engage in movements opposing oppression and social inequality, especially on behalf of industrial laborers. Once the pastor of a congregation abutting the Chicago stockyards, Ward gradually came to believe that "wage slavery" was the most pressing problem of his time. Under his guidance, the MFSA sought to bring the same moral passion to the alleviation of this social affliction as the abolitionists had brought to their fight against racial slavery. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Ward's politics and theological writings, which paired Christ and Marx, moved even farther to the left. As an activist and clergyman, Ward lent his time and his name to a number of organizations, including the American League against War

and Fascism, the American Friends of Spanish Democracy, and the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship.⁶²

Reverends Bollens and Knox, like Ward, believed that the clergy should play a commanding role in the creation of a just social order, and they brought these insights to their political work in Detroit. Ward and Bollens had both held positions with the ACLU, and both became critical of what they saw as the liberal organization's lack of moral perspective. One local activist also recalled that problems developed between the ACLU and the conference over the ACLU's so-called purist concept of civil rights. For the ACLU, all rights had to be protected—the rights of workers and industrialists alike. Such an abstract approach clashed with the perspective that pro-labor religious activists such as Bollens and Knox were attempting to articulate and act on.

For Reverend Knox, the point was to secure the rights of workers now and worry about the industrialists later if at all. Knox had been raised in the West, but his first assignment as a clergyman was in Camden, New Jersey. While there, he witnessed the exploitation of workers and became involved in their strikes. Feeling that his religious calling was to minister to industrial workers, he moved to Detroit in 1936, where he joined the conference almost immediately. An ardent pacifist, Knox resigned from both the conference and the National Federation of Constitutional Liberties after Germany invaded Russia and both organizations threw themselves into the war effort.⁶³ Still, the organization was fairly successful in recruiting clergymen. Because of the early influence of figures such as Bollens and Knox; Reverends Barber, Peck, Hill, and Horace White; and Snow Grigsby, both the CFPCR and the NNC had strong religious underpinnings from the start. Most of these men would likely have agreed with Hill's statement that "The church can lead the fight for democratic rights, all we have to do is use it. That's what we're doing here in Detroit."⁶⁴

The activists involved in these two local organizations came from varied religious backgrounds, as well as secular humanist traditions. They also came from disparate racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. And yet there was a common commitment to civil rights and social justice. "But most important," Coleman Young summarized, "for all our social, ethnic, and ideological differences, we shared the same preoccupation with the plight of the working class—particularly the black working class."⁶⁵ That activists such as Hill, Father Dade, Young, Simmons, and others would be attracted to such groups as the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights and the National Negro Congress is understandable. Each of these men was excluded, by choice or circumstance from the leader-

ship of established race improvement organizations such as the NAACP and the Detroit Urban League.

Much has been made of how the struggle between the old and new guards shaped African American politics in northern industrial centers during this period, but similar struggles were going on in the city's other ethnic communities. For instance, it was the need for a more militant approach to the social and economic ills confronting Poles, combined with the conservatism of some segments of the Polish Catholic Church, that gave rise to Mary Zuk's political career and the People's League of Hamtramck. The league combined with the Polish section of the International Workers Order (IWO) and the Slavic factions of the Communist Party to form an important pro-labor cadre. Likewise, the conference offered Jewish radicals such as Jack Raskin an alternative to the more conservative Jewish Community Council (JCC) and American Jewish Congress, both of which tended to keep a low profile.⁶⁶

Such intraracial and intraethnic tensions, particularly among Blacks, Poles, and Jews, fueled the growth of Detroit's early civil rights community. Activists joined the more militant factions of the city's Left community not only in sympathy for what the civil rights community represented but also in opposition to the ideas of their racial and ethnic compatriots. Generating an "enemies list" and defining one's position as more militant than that of groups such as the NAACP and JCC were important organizing actions that produced and sustained an oppositional consciousness. Indeed, identifying the individuals and groups that the civil rights community defined as external adversaries is a helpful step in understanding how this community constructed its own identity and particular commitment to civil rights and social justice.

US VERSUS THEM

Fighting Fascism

The need to distinguish themselves from more moderate groups was important, but the fight against fascism, both international and domestic, lay at the core of the "us versus them" mentality that shaped the formation of Detroit's civil rights community. Members of the community drew parallels between their experiences and events unfolding in the international arena, especially the Spanish Civil War and the invasion of North Africa. Domestic fascism, however, was defined quite broadly, perhaps too broadly. In the mid- to late 1930s, activists identified local "fascistic threats" to civil rights and social peace in the antilabor and anti-Black practices of the Detroit Police Department, and its complicity with

splinter groups of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), in the rhetoric of Fr. Charles Coughlin and other religious demagogues, and in the union-busting policies of the Ford Motor Company. Propaganda and protest campaigns against each of these groups played a major role in the self-definition of the civil rights community.

The NNC's first major action (with the aid of the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights) was against the Black Legion, a splinter group of the KKK. Founded in Bellaire, Ohio, in late 1924 or early 1925 and dedicated to the extermination of "Anarchists, Communists and the Roman [Catholic] hierarchy," the Black Legion targeted African Americans, trade unionists, and radicals for condemnation and at times violent attack. Drawing on the growing numbers of white southern migrants who arrived in Michigan and Ohio between 1933 and 1936, the Legion's sixty to one hundred thousand members created a climate of fear that hampered the efforts of union organizers. Although the group was similar to the KKK (which it supplanted in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois) in its location in heavily industrial states, and its ability to recruit among southern-born whites thrown into competition with Eastern Europeans and Blacks, the legion was much more antiunion than the Klan. Its propensity for violence and its ties to police departments and industrial espionage units made the legion a significant menace.⁶⁷

The civil rights community encouraged public investigations into the legion's activities. When there was "a danger of the campaign against the Black Legion slowing down," the conference organized people to complain to the Detroit Common Council, the state legislature, and various federal agencies.⁶⁸ They also kept extensive files on the legion and other Klan-like groups and even sent their own undercover operatives into meetings to gather firsthand information. At least two activists suffered personal reprisals for these activities. Walter Hardin, a Black unionist with ties to the CP, was kidnapped and flogged by a vigilante mob, while Maurice Sugar, targeted as a "communist nigger lover," received death threats from the legion on a regular basis. As it turned out, the NNC's fears were well placed. From 1936 to 1937, various trials of legionnaires uncovered no less than fifty-seven murders and attempted murders—some of them committed, as legion triggerman Dayton Dean admitted, just for the thrill. Many of the victims were members of religious and ethnic minorities or the nascent movement for industrial unionism. "The night-rider 1936-style, in Ford's Detroit," commented a writer for the *New Republic*, "is likely to be a labor spy as well as a Catholic baiter. The lash that speaks his dark will may as well be hatred of Communists, i.e., union organizers, as well as distrust of Jews."⁶⁹

It also came as no surprise that many of the Black Legion's crimes were committed by workers, factory foremen, and, not inconsequentially, off-duty policemen. Labor spies had long been a problem for unionists. The Detroit Employers Association, a major contributor to the coffers of the Detroit Urban League, had a history of hiring spies, including policemen and foremen, to keep track of any labor organizing being carried out in area plants. As early as 1912 the association compiled a blacklist of nearly eighty thousand people who had had contact with unions or organizers. One legionnaire, who was also a policeman, admitted that he had personally delivered a list of suspected "communists" working in local factories. In some suburban communities the legion network included not only policemen and workers but mayors, police chiefs, and the area's leading officials.

Although arrests, trials, and convictions essentially destroyed the Black Legion, new threats arose from different quarters, including the Detroit Police Department.⁷⁰ The department, then under the direction of Commissioner Heinrich Pickert, a Black Legion sympathizer who was appointed in 1934, had been a source of tension for a number of years, especially within the Black community. Under Pickert's tenure the police force became even more militaristic and openly antilabor. As a result, the ongoing fight against police brutality became a central concern of Detroit's civil rights community. Police brutality, like the anti-legion campaign, was an issue around which Blacks, labor organizers, workers, and political dissidents could be rallied. Pickert organized the police department's Special Investigations Division, colloquially known as the Red Squad, headed by Sergeant Harry Mikuliak and Sergeant Leo Maciosek—"Mic and Mac"—two self-proclaimed experts on local "Reds." While the regular police divisions were called on to directly intervene in strikes and other actions, the Red Squad worked behind the scenes, infiltrating organizations, compiling files, and engaging in covert surveillance. When the ACLU issued its 1939 report on the state of civil liberties in the major urban centers of the nation, the Red Squad was identified as the cause of "perhaps the most flagrant violations of the civil rights of Detroiters."⁷¹

Pickert's policies also deepened tensions between the police and the Black community, making a bad situation worse. A 1926 study by the Mayor's Committee on Race Relations had identified the racist practices of the police as the chief cause of poor race relations in Detroit, and this problem only worsened during the 1930s. In 1933, the Detroit branch of the NAACP, along with local representatives of the International Labor Defense, lodged formal complaints against the "promiscuous" shootings

of African Americans. These complaints, and others like them, fell on deaf ears; year after year, the “orgy of police brutality” against Blacks increased. A report on the main activities of the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights from 1938 to 1939 listed the “defense of the rights of the people against an arrogant and nazi-like police administration” as its most important task. In 1938 alone, the conference, which changed its name to the Civil Rights Federation that year, identified three killings and numerous arrests and beatings of Blacks by white officers. Linking the conditions facing Blacks with the conditions facing workers in general, they also charged that in the summer of 1938 large corps of police were used as strikebreakers in five successive labor conflicts, resulting in hundreds of illegal arrests and injuries to at least two hundred persons on the picket lines and in adjoining neighborhoods.⁷²

The Civil Rights Federation and the Detroit NNC continually monitored these incidents of police brutality. Indeed, the categories of police brutality and domestic fascism were regarded as complementary elements of big industry’s “divide and conquer” strategy. Some activists, such as the UAW’s Emil Mazey (a socialist) drew an analogy between anti-Black violence in the United States and anti-Semitism in Europe. “The Negro worker in America today is facing many of the conditions recently imposed upon Jewish people in Germany,” Mazey wrote. “The Ku Klux Klan and the Black Legion are avowed enemies of the Negro people. . . . Why have officials ignored the Negro problem? Can it be that industrialists in America are waiting to play the Negro in a similar role as the fascists in Germany are using Jewish people?”⁷³

White leftists tended to eschew such ideas, instead placing the blame for racial and ethnic tensions on the existence of secret societies and subversive organizations or on the specter of fascism and the supposed connections between fascism and industrialists bent on dividing the working class. (This tendency became even more pronounced among Communists after the invasion of the Soviet Union encouraged them to “close ranks” with the war effort and subordinate all other struggles.) Black activists, however, tended to see the attacks in narrowly racial terms. Reverend Hill, for one, viewed police brutality as a manifestation of the influence of uneducated southern whites, who “said they know how to handle a Negro.”⁷⁴ Even though there was disagreement on the primary causes of police brutality, African Americans, unionists, and the Left community returned to the issue again and again. There was general agreement that brutality toward Blacks was part of a larger pattern of violence and intimidation that had to be addressed.

By 1938 it was becoming clear that the civil rights community would

have to take matters into its own hands. When a delegation from the Civil Rights Federation managed to secure an audience with Commissioner Pickert, he only confirmed their worst fears. The delegation, composed of Reverends Bollens and Knox, Ernest Goodman, and Milton Kemnitz (the CRF's executive secretary), got a chilly—and chilling—reception. “The police department,” Pickert is reported to have said, “will continue to arrest people and search homes without warrants whenever, in the personal opinion of the Commissioner, such actions should be taken. Until Federal, state and local laws are changed, this will continue to be our policy.” Not only did Pickert refuse to take any responsibility for the violation of civil (and basic human) rights committed by his officers; he also questioned the integrity of the two “ministers of the Gospel,” whom he openly suspected of being communists.⁷⁵ At one point the situation in Detroit got so bad that Reverend Bollens solicited the aid of Sen. Robert M. La Follette Jr. of Wisconsin and his Senate Civil Liberties Subcommittee, which was then holding nationwide hearings on civil rights violations in connection with labor organizing.⁷⁶

La Follette's committee was never able (or willing) to hold hearings in Detroit, but another committee, the Dies Committee, took up the challenge. The House Committee on Un-American Activities (known as HUAC), headed by Texas Democrat Martin Dies, was authorized to “investigate (1) the extent, character, and objects of un-American propaganda activities in the United States, (2) the diffusion within the United States of subversive and un-American propaganda that is instigated from foreign countries or of a domestic origin and attacks the principles of the form of government as guaranteed by our Constitution, and (3) all other questions relating thereto that would aid Congress in any necessary remedial legislation.”⁷⁷ Since the city's civil rights community tended to equate “un-American” activities with domestic fascists, it originally hoped to influence the tenor of the hearings.

Citing the existence of “Nazis, the Black Legion, the Patriotic League and the Silver Shirts as subversive elements in Detroit which should be investigated,” Reverend Bollens wrote, “[W]e welcome therefore the investigations of the obviously Un-American . . . elements.”⁷⁸ This was a “welcome” that Bollens, the CRF, and the entire Left community would soon come to regret, as the Dies Committee quickly shifted its definition of *un-American* from nazis to communists. With this change the committee launched a political assault on the CIO and civil rights organizations, including the CRF. When Dies sent an advance team to Detroit to prepare for the committee's October 1938 hearings held in the city, he found the police department's Red Squad a willing ally.

During the hearings Sergeants Mikuliak and Maciosek were both called to give “expert” testimony on the communistic leanings of local activists. The proceedings of the three-day hearings read like a who’s who of the city’s Left. Maurice Sugar and his ex-wife Jane Mayer; Mary Zuk; Reverend Bollens; state senator Stanley Nowak; Joe Billups; Patrick O’Brien; Phil Raymond and his wife, public school teacher Vera Katz; William Weinstone, Nat Ganley, and William Allen, all associated with the Michigan Division of the CP; Walter Reuther, then president of the UAW’s west-side Local 174; and Rabbi Leon Fram, among others, were identified as part of Michigan’s “subversive network.”⁷⁹ The committee heard days of testimony not only about individuals but about organizations as well, especially the Communist Party.

“The Communist Party,” stated Walter S. Reynolds, head of Michigan’s American Legion, “is an organization to fit any purpose and every purpose.”

If it happens to be a question of war, the protection of the Soviet Union, they have an organization for that in the name of the Friends of the Soviet Union. If it is a question of legislation, they have the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights [the Civil Rights Federation]. If it is a question of deportation, they have the International Labor Defense. If it is youth, it is the American Youth Congress, and if it is trade-union work, today it is the CIO and the American Federation of Labor.⁸⁰

At times, the testimony descended to the level of the bizarre, particularly when the issue of race was raised. White women, one witness testified, were being used by the CP as a means of “ensnaring young Negroes,” even though the idea of racial equality is “unnatural and repugnant to the American Negro.” As proof that white women were being used in this regard, the witness cited a number of interracial marriages within the Left community, including CP member William Nowell’s marriage to Pearl Demercy, a Ukrainian woman; Christopher Alston’s marriage to Sylvia Hornstein; and William Brown’s marriage to a white woman (there was also a seemingly contradictory allusion to his “homosexual tendencies”).⁸¹

There were indeed quite a few interracial marriages among local radicals, and the witnesses were to some extent justified in their description of the existence of a radical network of organizations, institutions, and individuals—though not one necessarily plotting the violent overthrow of the nation. Not only did members of the city’s Left community share

information, strategies, and fund-raising sources; they were also tied together by friendships, loyalties, and in some cases love. This may or may not account for what the Dies Committee saw as a disturbing number of interracial couples, but it certainly does speak to how communities of protest form and sustain themselves on both the institutional and interpersonal levels. As Coleman Young recalled, members of the Left community “went to the same houses, the same picnics, the same fund-raisers and the same black-and-tans (integrated clubs).”⁸² There was, in short, a communal feeling that helped to reinforce their shared political commitments.

One would also expect that these social and emotional ties only intensified in the face of collective attack. Hence the Dies Committee probably served, unintentionally, to further unify the city’s growing civil rights community. Confronted with state repression and the willful violation of civil liberties, Detroit’s Left forces were driven—and drawn—closer together.

THE RELIGION OF FASCISM

Yet this Left community was hardly content to adopt a defensive posture. In the midst of the accusations and counteraccusations of the Dies hearings, local activists attempted to keep the public’s attention on what they identified as the “real” subversive threat: the local reactionaries who were striving for a mass following.

Once again, religion and religious activists were deeply implicated. “To be a Klansman,” began one typical recruiting letter, “one must subscribe to the Christian religion.”

There was never a time when our members as well as the whole citizenry of the nation need more firmly to imbibe their thinking in these tenets and shape their course of action thereby. In these days of vague ideas and confused voices it is well for us to pause sometime and renew our indebtedness to the Christian religion. . . . From His teachings there has come the impetus for every really worthwhile social improvement.⁸³

This flyer was among many collected by the Civil Rights Federation. Throughout its existence, the federation was particularly interested in the reactionary uses of religion among what it termed “nativist fascists,” especially Fr. Charles Coughlin, Gerald L. K. Smith, and the Rev. Frank J. Norris. Like police brutality, “nativism” was an issue that the Left used

to unite African Americans, Jews, Catholics, and political radicals in a politics of fear, revulsion, and anger. Coughlin is a particularly instructive example. By the late 1930s, Detroit's famed "radio priest" was growing more and more extreme. Interestingly, he was as dedicated to a politics built on a moral foundation of religion and faith as were Reverends Hill, White, Bollens, and Knox. In this regard, Coughlin is a useful reminder that the connections between religion and oppositional political activity are not inherently leftist or liberal.

Born in Hamilton, Ontario, and educated at St. Basil's Seminary in Toronto, Coughlin arrived in the Detroit area in 1926 with the intention of building up the Shrine of the Little Flower parish in Royal Oak, a near suburb of Detroit. Royal Oak and its environs had long been a stronghold of anti-Catholicism, and the community provided a relatively congenial home for an active branch of the KKK. A cross had been burned on the lawn of Coughlin's church shortly after its construction, and Klan activity had ensured the small size of its congregation and the size of the mortgage payments they could carry. Coughlin originally took to the airwaves in 1926 to pay off parish debts and counteract this rabid anti-Catholicism. Although he initially limited his Sunday radio hour to dissertations on biblical themes, by 1930 he was preaching strong and increasingly popular denunciations of *both* communism and capitalism in the name of compassion and justice for workers. He was soon broadcasting on nearly thirty stations, reaching every major population center in the East and Midwest, and was reportedly receiving more than ten thousand letters and cards each day—most of them, he claimed, from non-Catholics. A Hollywood studio offered him five hundred thousand dollars for the rights to his life story, "The Fighting Priest," with a proposal that Coughlin himself accept the leading role. (He refused both offers.) In the fall of 1930, when the Fish Committee—a precursor to the Dies Committee—invited Coughlin to testify on the threat of communism, his popularity soared. To the chagrin of the committee, he did not speak of subversive activity among dangerous Reds but instead denounced Henry Ford and the Ford Motor Company as "the greatest force in the movement to internationalize [i.e., communize] labor throughout the world."⁸⁴ The Hoover administration and a mysterious conglomerate of Wall Street bankers also earned his ire.

As a major figure in Detroit who enjoyed the support of both liberal politicians (including Frank Murphy) and the Catholic hierarchy, Coughlin could scarcely avoid contact with the city's emerging drive for industrial unionism. In a more general sense, he had long been a voice in defense of workers. He advocated better working conditions, higher

wages, and shorter hours and spoke of the responsibilities of industry and government for the welfare of laborers. Thus far, none of Coughlin's ideas had placed him at variance with the general principles of Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (*On the Condition of the Working Class*).

Although in many ways it is a vague and ambiguous document, *Rerum Novarum* was the Catholic Church's official response to the growing "menace" of socialism in Europe. While reaffirming the Church's traditional teachings on the rights and duties of property ownership, it also harked back to the teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, renewing Church and state obligations to have

special consideration for the weak and the poor. For the nation, as it were, of the rich, is guided by its own defenses and is in less need of governmental protection, whereas the suffering multitude, without the means to protect itself, relies especially on the protection of the State. Wherefore, since wage workers are numbered among the great mass of the needy, the State must include them under its special care and foresight.

The encyclical further affirms the concept of social justice, the idea that "justice demands that the dignity of the human personality be respected," and defines *special care* and *foresight* most prominently in terms of a fair and living wage for workers: "The oppressed workers, above all, ought to be liberated from the savagery of greedy men, who inordinately use human beings as things for gain." In one of the long document's more stirring passages, it reminds all Catholics that the Church must not "so concentrate her energies on caring for souls as to overlook things which pertain to moral and everyday life."⁸⁵

Although impressed with the teachings enshrined in *Rerum Novarum* as a seminary student, it was not until 1935 that Coughlin sought any active involvement in union politics. Sharing (and indeed inciting) many Catholics' fears that the newly formed CIO was dominated by communists, Coughlin sought to influence the Automotive Industrial Workers Association (AIWA), an independent union that had competed with the UAW-CIO until the two unions merged. To the leaders of the AIWA, Coughlin appeared to be a valuable ally. After Richard Frankenstein, then head of the AIWA, solicited Coughlin's aid in June 1935, the energetic young priest appeared to be everywhere within the organization. "Father Coughlin seemed to feel that this was his organization," recalled Frankenstein. "He started to say, 'Your dues are this—we will have this

meeting.’” Coughlin’s influence had grown to the point where many considered the AIWA Coughlin’s union. While Frankenstein remembers being “tickled pink because of the strength of his [Coughlin’s] name,” the CIO and its supporters within the civil rights community saw Coughlin’s popularity among Catholics and non-Catholics alike as a cause of great concern.⁸⁶

This concern continued to grow as Coughlin’s religious and political views took a sharp turn to the right in the late 1930s after the failure of his Union for Social Justice (his next major undertaking after the AIWA merged with the hated CIO) and the third-party presidential bid of his associate, William Lemke. (Lemke, who ran on the ticket of the National Union Party, which united the anti-New Deal organizations of Coughlin, Francis Townsend, and Gerald Smith, received 2 percent of the vote nationally; in Michigan, he received 4 percent.) Coughlin’s attacks on Roosevelt and the New Deal—both of which he had once praised—now grew more extreme every month. Proclaiming that no true Catholic would join the CIO, Coughlin formed his own “independent” (but actually company backed) union, mainly in the Dodge, Chrysler, and Plymouth plants. At the same time, his radio sermons and articles in his paper, *Social Justice*, were becoming openly anti-Semitic and racist. In 1938, for instance, *Social Justice* serialized the bogus “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” in Coughlin’s “From the Tower” column and named Mussolini as its “Man of the Week.”⁸⁷

Denunciations of Coughlin’s anti-Semitism, racism, and anti-CIO position issued from a number of quarters. Archbishop Edward Mooney did his best to counter Coughlin, telling readers of the *Michigan Catholic* that the Church certainly did not discourage membership in CIO-affiliated unions. Nor did the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU). Fr. John Clancy, a pro-union priest, also took to the press to denounce Coughlin. In an article published in the Civil Rights Federation’s *Civil Rights News* under the heading “Pope’s Words Aren’t Safe When Coughlin Quotes Them,” Clancy wrote, “Not even by the wildest stretch of the imagination can a careful reader of the encyclical [*Rerum Novarum*] possibly mistake Coughlin’s words for anything but what they were intended to be; namely a description of the Fascist system.” The CRF itself was equally vigilant. It held a number of rallies and mass meetings—the largest of which attracted fifteen thousand people to Detroit’s old Olympia Stadium—aimed at repudiating Coughlin’s views.⁸⁸

This local effort was part of a much larger, national anti-Coughlin movement. The publication *Equality*, which was launched by movement activists in 1939, was “dedicated to an uncompromising fight against

anti-Semitism and racism” with Coughlin a chief target. *Equality* was financially backed by a variety of Jewish individuals, and many Jews served on its editorial board. Several Catholics also served on the board, and contributors with a variety of religious (and nonreligious) positions were welcome. The range of authors, from Albert Deutsche and Albert Maltz, to Dorothy Thompson and Emerson Fosdick, was impressive.⁸⁹ In spite of all of these efforts, though, Coughlin continued to promote his policies until 1942, when he agreed to be silenced by the Catholic Church rather than face a criminal indictment on charges of subversion for his attacks on Roosevelt and the government. His official silencing did not end the tendency within the civil rights community to equate certain brands of religious expression with domestic and international fascism, however. During the war years, as Detroit was transformed into the “Arsenal of Democracy,” the presence of religious fundamentalists and supposed fascists would occupy a good deal of the Left’s time and energy.

“FORDISM IS FASCISM”

In its pre-World War II antifascist and antiracist campaigns, Detroit’s labor-civil rights community attacked not only the Detroit Police Department and Father Coughlin but also the Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford’s anti-Semitism and racial paternalism had been well known since the 1920s. For six years he financed and made editorial contributions to the notoriously anti-Semitic *Dearborn Independent*, a paper that ran scads of articles proclaiming the superiority of the “Anglo-Saxon-Celtic peoples,” on the one hand, and the degeneracy of the Jews on the other. If there was any “strange unrest” and militancy among African Americans, the *Independent* unfailingly claimed it was only because “Bolshevik Jews” were using them as “a tool” to destroy the country. Resurrecting the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” much as Coughlin’s *Social Justice* had done, Ford carried on his own personal campaign against the “International Jew.”

Many older Detroiters recall instances of Ford’s “fascist tendencies” emerging during the 1930s, with his acceptance of the Nazi Iron Cross of the German Eagle cited as final proof of his sympathies.⁹⁰ Indeed, more than any other cause during the period extending from the Great Depression to the nation’s entrance into World War II the UAW’s drive to organize Ford—the last anti-union holdout after GM and Chrysler signed agreements with the UAW—served as a focal point for the various factions within the city’s Left community, uniting antifascists with pro-

labor and civil rights activists from a range of backgrounds and organizations. The struggle to unionize Ford became, in essence, a proving ground for the entire early civil rights movement in Detroit.

As early as 1936 the prospect of an open shop at the massive River Rouge plant, which employed over 9,800 Black workers (or 12 percent of the plant's workforce), was a source of racial, ideological, and class tensions.⁹¹ Yet, even as traditional race improvement organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League began to shift toward a more pro-union attitude on the national level, their executive committees in Detroit refused to forget the "debt" that African Americans supposedly owed to (Uncle) Henry Ford. When the CIO began massive organizing drives in the steel, auto, and manufacturing industries, the national NAACP gave its cautious endorsement, but the local NAACP refused to follow its lead. Although a small cadre of pro-union activists pushed for greater receptivity of industrial unionism, the majority of the Black middle class—like a majority of Black workers themselves—remained at best aloof and at worst hostile to the early UAW.

This old guard was not entirely unified, however. Some NAACP and Urban League leaders, such as Geraldine Bledsoe and Beulah Whitby, both of whom were members of Plymouth Congregational, were pro-union, as was insurance company executive Louis Blount, a former president of the local NAACP who maintained close ties with the BTWTA. Carlton Gaines, president of the BTWTA, remained "on the fence," and even the *Detroit Tribune* avoided taking sides. Working-class Blacks were equally divided. Few African American workers participated in the now famous sit-down strikes against the automotive industry in 1936 and 1937 against GM and Chrysler, mostly because they remained unsure and cautious about the new union's promise of equal treatment.⁹²

The pros and cons of union affiliation, and the question of whether the new CIO unions would be better and less racist than the old AFL ones, were hotly debated in Detroit area barbershops and beauty salons, in bars, on street corners, and around kitchen tables. Hundreds of men and women became ardent supporters and organizers in the new union, but the bulk of Black workers adopted a very practical wait-and-see attitude. Many, like Hodges Mason, a Black auto worker employed in area plants since the 1920s, had studied the older craft union's dismal treatment of African Americans and as a consequence were initially "very anti-union." Yet Mason, who had come to Detroit from Atlanta, Georgia, in 1926, was eventually "so inspired" by the conduct of CIO-affiliated unions that he became an organizer and even compared the union to Christ for its efforts toward the salvation of Black workers.⁹³

It was not until 1937, however, when the national convention of the NAACP was held in Detroit and labor organizers were invited to speak, that the issues of race and unionization came to a head in a more public way. Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the national NAACP, arranged for a session on labor issues featuring Paul Kirk, a Black auto worker and communist labor organizer; John Davis of the National Negro Congress; and Homer Martin, a white UAW organizer who would go on to a rather checkered career. The panel was rounded out by remarks from John Dancy, the still very pro-Ford head of the Detroit Urban League.

When Fr. Everad Daniel and other ministers linked to the alliance between Ford and select Black ministers got wind of these plans, they launched a vigorous counteroffensive against the inclusion of labor radicals and even brought pressure to bear on the local NNC's Rev. G. W. Barber to renege on the offer of his church, Ebenezer AME, as the site for the proceedings. When these efforts failed, the group threatened a boycott. But the debate proceeded as planned, with Davis and others arguing for support of the UAW on the grounds of Black economic self-interest and Homer Martin, a former Baptist preacher, injecting an evangelical appeal. Martin assured the crowd that for the UAW interracial industrial unionism was both practical and moral. Comparing the UAW to Christ, he said: "I come to you tonight representing the poor, the oppressed and the exploited people, both colored and white. . . . The elimination of prejudice against the Negro is to me a definite part not only of a wise labor movement . . . [but] of Christianity itself."⁹⁴

In the wake of a three-day fight over whether to endorse the UAW (which was finally done, albeit in a cautionary way), the tensions between the priestly and prophetic aspects of the church came to the fore. On the one hand, Father Daniel, along with Reverend Bradby and others, denounced the UAW and the national NAACP from both press and pulpit. The "arrogance" of Martin's Christ-UAW analogy simply provided more fuel for their fire. On the other hand, in the pages of the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine and other Black publications, pro-union advocates attacked the alliance between the ministers and the company. Of Daniel and others, Roy Wilkins wrote, "The spectacle of poor preachers, ministering to the needs of poor people whose lot from birth to death is to labor for a pittance, rising to frenzied, name-calling defense of a billionaire manufacturer is enough to make the Savior himself weep." In response, Father Daniel warned, "We can't afford to have Ford close down on us" and castigated the national office of the NAACP for not minding its own business. Although many Black workers probably identified with Daniel's question "Where would we go?" the national

office continued its battle with the Detroit ministers.⁹⁵ It was in this sense that the question of “true” versus “false” religion entered the debate about workers’ rights, unionization, and the political interests of African Americans.

Because of the close connections between Black ministers and the Ford Motor Company, the religious issues involved in unionizing Ford could not be easily dismissed. The alliance led many to ask, with the Rev. Horace A. White, “Who owns the Negro church?” The juxtaposition of White’s prophetic question with Daniel’s more cautious and priestly one nicely captures one aspect of this difficult debate. But White and other pro-union activists were also well aware that the company’s influence extended far beyond the churches. Indeed, Henry Ford was as supportive of the Republican Party as he was antagonistic to unionization, and he used his influence over Black ministers, businessmen, and civic leaders to create an informal political machine. For example, the company oversaw the organization of Republican Clubs and Loyalty Clubs, in which membership was less than strictly voluntary. According to Christopher Alston, these clubs were yet another manifestation of Ford’s power. To illustrate this point, Alston relates the plight of Willis Bradford, a Black worker and member of the Thirteen Men Committee (a Democratic organization), who lost his job after he refused to transfer his affiliation to one of the company-sponsored Republican groups.

AFFIDAVIT

I, Willis Bradford . . . was called into the Employment Office by Mr. Donald Marshall on or about February 19th or 20th, 1940. Our conversation was as follows: Mr. Marshall asked me what club I was a member of. I told him that I was a member of the “Thirteen Men Committee,” a Democratic organization. Mr. Marshall said that he had organized the Wayne County Voters Association. . . . Mr. Marshall asked me how long I had been employed by the Ford Motor Company. . . . He then asked me if he and the Ford Motor Company had always treated me right . . . [and] said that if I wanted to keep my bread and butter and if I wanted to continue working for the Ford Motor Company I had better connect up.

Three weeks later, according to Bradford, he was laid off because “I was a member of a Democratic organization.”⁹⁶

This attitude was hardly confined to Ford’s dealings with Black workers. As one observer noted, “In the fall of 1937, the Bill of Rights was also partially suspended in Dearborn when the Company-controlled City

Council banned all leafleting around the Rouge plant.”⁹⁷ Regardless of race or ethnicity, workers were routinely fired for even discussing the merits of unionization inside or outside of the factories. When one thousand pro-union Ford workers marched in the 1937 Labor Day parade, they wore masks to conceal their identities. There was good reason for the masks, as one Black worker found out two years later. “In 1939 when I was marching in the Labor Day parade,” recalled Shelton Tappes, a foundry worker and member of the local NNC. “I had my Ford badge pinned to my lapel. And as I got to the Fox Theater, a man stepped out from the curb and took a good look at my badge. . . . The next day I found myself fired.”⁹⁸ Most of the reprisals were carried out by Ford’s Service Department, which was assigned the task of psychologically, and at times physically, assaulting workers suspected of “radical activities.” The National Labor Relations Board repeatedly cited Ford’s militaristic practices, ruling that the company was engaged in a “war” against its employees’ right to self-organization, but the company simply ignored it.⁹⁹

In response to these conditions, the Civil Rights Federation launched a “Fordism Is Fascism” campaign, and enlisted the aid of the National Conference for the Protection of Constitutional Liberties in a nationwide boycott of all Ford products. Calling for “Human Rights—Not Fordism,” the CRF proclaimed, “Our job is to make Ford’s fascist island of Dearborn submit to democratic American principles.”¹⁰⁰

The anti-Ford campaign was widely supported; no major faction of the city’s Left remained aloof from the ensuing struggle. With resentment growing, by 1940 the UAW felt strong enough to launch a drive to break the power of the company. Under the direction of Mike Widman, the UAW recruited one thousand volunteers and a staff of seventy full-time organizers, including veteran Ford workers such as Bill McKie and Veal Clough and younger workers such as Shelton Tappes, the foundry worker fired after marching in the 1939 Labor Day parade.

The battle to organize Ford has been described in detail elsewhere. Some aspects of the campaign are worth repeating, however, especially the efforts of the union to ingratiate itself with the Black community. For instance, when the Booker T. Washington Trade Association (hardly a hotbed of radical pro-unionism) staged a “75 Years of Negro Progress Exposition,” the union arranged for Hodges Mason and Black communist Luke Fennel to man a CIO exhibit.¹⁰¹ Much of the initial organizing occurred secretly within the plants and local communities—in homes, in small meeting halls, during social events, and in churches. Alongside organizing committees for Italian and Polish workers, a Negro Organiz-

ing Committee that included Joseph Billups, Walter Hardin, Chris Alston, Leon Bates, Clarence Bowman, Veal Clough, and Sheldon Tappes was established. The group immediately laid out a plan of action and enlisted the aid of the local NNC, to which many on the Organizing Committee belonged, as well as the support of community activists, including Reverends Hill and White, John Miles (Hill's assistant pastor), Father Dade, state senator Charles Diggs, Louis Martin (the editor of the *Michigan Chronicle*), attorney C. LeBron Simmons, and others.

A number of women also became involved in the effort. "We brought Negro women into the organization," remembered Rose Billups, who organized the Women's Auxiliary for Local 600,

because the wives were afraid the husbands, the Negro husbands, would join the union and lose their jobs, so we had to go in, individually, even if we couldn't get them in. . . . Each woman used to bring in one member, two members, because I was promising that no one would know but myself. I used to go to the saloons, in the alleys to meet the Negroes. . . . They gave me their dues, and I used to bring them to Mike Widman.¹⁰²

The Negro Organizing Committee, along with the Polish Committee, and with the aid of the entire civil rights community and groups such as the IWO, kept up a constant barrage of anti-Ford and pro-union propaganda. Christopher Alston published a number of special issues of *Ford Facts* devoted to Black workers.

Meanwhile, the Left factions within the Polish community—the other major ethnic group represented at the Rouge plant—rallied behind the UAW. The People's League of Hamtramck, with the backing of individuals such as Stanley and Margaret Nowak and Mary Zuk, and groups such as the Polish National Alliance and the Polish Lawyers Society issued a manifesto denouncing Henry Ford as a fascist and friend of Adolph Hitler and characterizing the unionization of the company as a necessary step in the preservation of democracy.¹⁰³

The moment of decision came on April 1, 1941, when Service Department chief Harry Bennett forced eight men out of the rolling mills, and fifteen hundred workers initiated a sit-down strike in response that eventually grew large enough to paralyze the entire complex.¹⁰⁴ In a matter of hours fifty thousand men were refusing to work or leave the facility, and on April 2 the union called for a march out of the plant. An estimated ten thousand picketers massed at strategic points; only about fifteen hundred to two thousand workers remained inside the plant as

strikebreakers. Many of those still inside were Black workers, and when the company went on the offensive these Black employees became a key component in Ford's anti-union strategy. Don Marshall, among others, was sent into Black communities to address "Back-to-Work" rallies, which represented a major threat to the success of the strike and the tenor of race relations in the city. The 1939 Chrysler strike had been a dress rehearsal for this moment. Then, too, the company had attempted to generate a back-to-work movement among Black workers—a movement that would have surely led to intense racial violence. Then, too, Black workers were caught between rival factions: the UAW-CIO and the UAW-AFL, the latter headed by the same Homer Martin who had caused such a stir at the 1937 NAACP convention by comparing the union to Christ and whose organization now called for Black workers to return to the plants.¹⁰⁵

In 1941, along with the back-to-work rallies, ministers sympathetic to Ford opened their pulpits to Marshall and other company spokespersons. Marshall worked hard in these forums to disparage the union, even using a bit of class baiting to dismiss "the various doctors, ministers, dentists and other near-professional men of the race who are ranting over the radio and riding in union cars to exhort the Negro to follow them."¹⁰⁶ Marshall's suggestion that the activities of pro-union middle-class Blacks were driven by a desire for status augmentation, and not an identification with the interests of workers, probably found a receptive audience.

Among those "men of the race" speaking on the radio and riding in union sound cars were Reverends Hill and White, both of whom used their authority as ministers to appeal to Black workers. According to veteran organizer Bill McKie, "Charles A. Hill, prominent Negro minister, who had been active all along in helping to organize Ford, stood for a solid day outside the foundry gates, his voice booming over the concrete walls asking the men inside not to fear the men outside, but to drop their fear and walk out, as brothers."¹⁰⁷ By the end of the month the strike was drawing to a close, and Ford finally capitulated to the presence of a union, though not necessarily the UAW. The next big push for the city's civil rights community, therefore, was to prepare for the National Labor Relations Board election to be held on May 21, 1941. At that time workers would be called on to decide which union would be authorized to bargain in their name.

Once again, members of the city's Left took to the airwaves, the newspapers, and the pulpits to ensure a favorable outcome for the UAW-CIO as opposed to the company-backed UAW-AFL. The NNC sent its mem-

bers out to canvass for the UAW-CIO. State senator Diggs, in tandem with state senator Stanley Nowak, issued a joint statement appealing to both Black and Polish workers, while a series of pro-CIO editorials were run in the *Michigan Chronicle*. Ironically, the UAW-CIO won by a margin so wide that the votes of Black workers, many of whom supported the company-endorsed union led by Homer Martin, were not really crucial to the outcome. Yet, as labor historians August Meier and Elliott Rudwick note, the “long-range developments” indicated that the union’s efforts to recruit Black workers had not “gone for naught.”¹⁰⁸

First, the UAW’s efforts, where Black workers were concerned, had helped prevent wholesale strikebreaking, which could have led to riots, loss of life, and calls for the National Guard to end the strike by force. Second, the UAW-CIO’s attention to Black workers gave valuable organizing experience to a number of unionists and community activists working with the organizing committees. The Black leaders that came of age during World War II and assumed control of the Black rights agenda did so, in part, on the basis of lessons learned doing union work. Third, the battle to unionize Ford decreased the company’s influence and, as a result, strengthened the leftist labor–civil rights community. The Ford strike, that is to say, endowed the Left with a standing it would not necessarily have had otherwise in either the Black community or the city’s ethnic enclaves. Moreover, this struggle prepared the civil rights community for the battles that lay ahead as the United States entered the war.

For Reverend Hill and his allies in organizations such as the Civil Rights Federation, the National Negro Congress, and now the huge and powerful UAW-CIO Local 600, the war years would prove critical to the development of political radicalism and civil rights activism in Detroit. A “new crowd” of activists, one aligned with the Left (especially the CP and its front groups), the Democratic Party, and the UAW-CIO, had finally begun to come into its own. During World War II, these activists effectively shifted the terrain of Black politics in Detroit.