

### THREE

## EXPLOSIVE FAITH

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### The Politics of Religion in the Arsenal of Democracy

“In recent times,” wrote Louis E. Martin, editor of the *Michigan Chronicle* and a careful student of local politics, in January 1944, “there has been increasing friction between the two old American traditions, one which is essentially liberal and democratic and the other patently reactionary and anti-democratic.” He continued:

In perhaps no other great American city does this conflict come into sharper focus than in tumultuous Detroit. Even before the war this city was notorious for its union struggles and sit-down strikes, for its booms and depressions, for its industrial prowess and its almost vulgar vitality.<sup>1</sup>

When Martin penned this piece for the *Crisis*, he, like other prominent members of Detroit’s civil rights community, was feeling chastened by the tensions and sporadic violence that plagued the city (and the nation) throughout World War II. By the end of the war, Detroit had experienced racially motivated skirmishes in its overcrowded residential neighborhoods, its high schools, its recreational spaces, its factories, and in a riot during the summer of 1943 that claimed 34 lives. Martin struggled to define what these episodes meant in terms of the city’s past, present, and postwar political future.

Martin located the source of the violence in the “patently reactionary

and anti-democratic” traditions identified with religious demagogues such as Father Coughlin, Gerald L. K. Smith, and J. Frank Norris, all of whom found fertile soil for their racist, anti-Semitic, and antilabor views in the social and economic dislocation created by the war; in the “poor leadership” provided by city officials such as Mayor Edward J. Jeffries Jr., who lacked the political will and moral fortitude to deal with the city’s racial, ethnic, and religious tensions; and in the “restive, unassimilated masses of industrial workers” among the nearly five hundred thousand men, women, and children who had migrated to the Detroit metropolitan area during the war, many of whom “had to work out some practical pattern of life and make awkward adjustments to one another and all this in a brief period of time.”

On the other side of Martin’s equation—among the essentially liberal and democratic traditions—stood the civil rights community, including interracial groups such as the Civil Rights Federation, which confronted the city’s social and political ills with direct action and mass pressure; “strong religious forces” comprising progressive Protestants, Catholics, and Jews and their organizations, “which profess interracial goodwill”; and, most important, organized labor or more accurately those union officials who supported the Black civil rights agenda over the protests of the rank and file.

Martin’s analysis of these conflicts and coalitions, categorized into a “liberal” Left and “reactionary” Right, serves as a starting point for investigations into how the war influenced the tenor of civil rights activism in Detroit. A close understanding of the personalities and political theologies of both the reactionaries (Smith, Norris) and progressives (Williams, the People’s Institute of Applied Religion) enables us to appreciate how religious beliefs and manifestations of faith were invoked on both left and right in a battle for the hearts and minds of Detroiters and the very soul of the city.

#### HILL, THE HOME FRONT, AND THE “DEMOCRATIC LEFT”

As Louis Martin suggested, on the eve of America’s entrance into World War II Detroit’s Left community was made up of labor unions and union officials, race improvement agencies, civil rights organizations, and, although Martin omits any direct mention of it, the Michigan Division of the Communist Party (MDCP). With the successful unionization of Ford Motor Company, Local 600, representing over sixty thousand members, became one of the largest and most progressive locals in the nation. The foundry, where Ford employed many of its African American workers

based on company ideas of inferiority and social control, became a particularly influential base of union power, so much so that for the next decade Local 600 was to be a center of civil rights militancy and a virtual training ground for Black activists.<sup>2</sup>

George Crockett, an African American attorney who first came to Detroit from Washington, DC, in 1944 on behalf of the Fair Employment Practice Commission (FEPC) and subsequently went to work for the UAW, was essentially correct when he observed that it “was in the trade union movement that Detroit’s Black leadership got its start in politics. They learned their political ropes in being elected or influencing the elections of union leaders, and from that they went out to organize the community.”<sup>3</sup> The foundry unit sent more than a score of Black delegates to every UAW convention and provided at least half of all Black staff members hired by the UAW. With strategic input from Shelton Tappes, who was elected recording secretary in 1941, and foundryman Horace Sheffield, as well as Black unionists such as Christopher Alston, Arthur McPhaul, Dave Moore, and Nelson Davis, Local 600 provided time, money, and human resources for a series of civil rights mobilizations throughout the war years.

Local 600 was also a stronghold of the Communist Party, which had a decisive influence on its development. The River Rouge plant was “one of the few workplaces in the country where Communists, black or white, could proclaim their political allegiance without immediate persecution.”<sup>4</sup> Copies of the *Daily Worker* were sold and read freely, and such “radical” ideas as racial and gender equality were discussed openly in meetings and the local’s newspaper and publications. Further, there was a “special relationship” between Blacks and the CP. Inside the union, prominent party members such as Nat Ganley consistently supported the demand for a Black seat on the International Executive Board—a measure denounced in some quarters as “reverse discrimination”—and for the upgrading of Black workers. In return Black unionists, with a few exceptions, tended to back the left-of-center coalition headed by R. J. Thomas and George Addes in the factional fights that often pitted the CP against such anticommunist antagonists as the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists and Walter Reuther’s UAW. Outside of the union, Black activists (and the civil rights community in general) found the party a willing participant in many, though by no means all, of the era’s civil rights struggles.<sup>5</sup>

With the cause of industrial unionism now an established fact, Black unionists and their pro-union allies were accorded a new level of respect within the Black community. As the civil rights agenda shifted to focus

on the social and economic plight of African Americans,<sup>6</sup> and as Black militants became increasingly vocal about the lack of democracy and freedom on the home front, activists such as the Rev. Charles Hill were able to extend their field of influence within the city's Left. Hill in fact became part of a cadre, based in the union movement and the orbit of the CP, that engaged in a barely muted struggle with the generation of community leaders that had achieved prominence after World War I and before the UAW's 1941 victory over Ford. Although the Ford-aligned minister Father Daniel had died in 1939, many others from this generation remained skeptical, if not openly hostile, to the radicals, especially those associated with the communists. Throughout the war years, both groups publicly appealed for unity while often working behind the scenes to increase their own influence.

The election for president of the Detroit branch of the NAACP at the end of 1942 was indicative of this ongoing tension. The local race pitted Hill against the incumbent, Dr. James J. McClendon, who had served as branch president since 1938. A native of Georgia and a graduate of Meharry Medical College, McClendon had remained studiously uncommitted in the debate over Black support of the UAW, and throughout his tenure as head of the Detroit branch he had tended to focus more on discrimination in public accommodations than in factories. The race was therefore widely viewed as a "contest between important political factions," with McClendon cast as the defender of a liberal strategy that eschewed radicalism and Hill as the representative of labor and militant progressives, especially those aligned with the Local 600 and the National Negro Congress.<sup>7</sup>

At no point in the campaign, however, was Hill publicly accused of being a communist. His platform is best described as pro-labor and broad based. Convinced more than ever that "the future of the Negro is tied up with the future of labor," he called for an extension of the recently formed cooperative relationship between the NAACP and labor organizations, especially the UAW. He also called for an increase in direct involvement by the NAACP membership. "I want to see the NAACP run by its members in regular membership meetings, and functioning through broad committees and neighborhood chapters. . . . I want to see the executive board include representatives of all groups. It must be inter-racial," he told the *Michigan Chronicle*, which devoted extensive coverage to the race, much of it with a pro-Hill bias.<sup>8</sup>

Hill ran a credible albeit slightly disorganized campaign, with the NNC's C. LeBron Simmons and the UAW's Shelton Tappes providing vigorous and vocal support. Equally vigorous but better-organized sup-

port was thrown behind McClendon by a politically diverse constituency that included the Rev. Horace White and Beulah Whitby, Reverend Peck and Carlton Gaines of the Booker T. Washington Trade Association, and Reverend Bradby, who, rumor had it, “instructed” his large congregation at Second Baptist to cast its ballots for McClendon. In fact, in the aftermath of the election, the Hill camp lodged complaints about the nominations and vote-tallying process and charged that the election was rigged because the vast majority of the approximately thirteen hundred members present were McClendon supporters and members of Second Baptist. Hill, who was defeated by an overwhelming margin, tried to stay above the fray.

The loss did not deter him from seeking other outlets for his political theology of community activism.<sup>9</sup> Still preaching a gospel of social and economic justice, Hill appeared to be everywhere at once on the city’s home front. “There [was] always something going on all the time,” he recalled, and “we just [didn’t] have any rest.” The war itself was emotionally draining. Like thousands of other parents, Reverend Hill and his wife Georgia bid a tearful farewell to their oldest son, Charles Jr., an auto worker and part-time law student, as he left home to join the armed forces. He enlisted in August 1942 and served with distinction in the Fifteenth Air Force Division (the Tuskegee Airmen), receiving three Battle Stars, the Air Medal, and two Bronze Oak Leaf Clusters.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Reverend Hill’s conventional ministerial duties were as pressing as ever. There were weddings to perform and eulogies to deliver, babies to bless, sick congregants to visit, and a church to continue to build and expand. He still occasionally made pancakes on Saturdays for the neighborhood children.

But Hill’s role in the Ford strike had thrust him into the limelight of citywide oppositional politics. Having developed his view of religion as “a man’s job” in the midst of the first world war, he now sought to apply that lesson during the second. His view of leadership was fairly straightforward: “Anytime a person accepts leadership, he has got to have the courage of his convictions. If he will have the courage . . . he will keep on and ultimately find that there are many others willing to join.”<sup>11</sup>

Hill remained critical of ministers who would not take stands on important issues. Moreover, his “earthly piety” and no-nonsense style of activism, coupled with his ability to at least appear to avoid the factionalism that periodically flared up between leftists and more moderate liberals, gave him a reputation that few others could match. Jack Raskin, who took over the helm of the local Civil Rights Federation in 1940, recalled that Hill was “somehow separate from” the factionalism and per-

sonality politics that often hampered the effectiveness of the city's civil rights community and that he was perceived as "sort of a neutral kind of person."<sup>12</sup> Hill was not in fact a neutral person, although he did tend to be nonconfrontational. "And then he had another very cute saying," another local radical, Eleanor Maki, remembered, "about people who criticized him for supporting the left wing, and he said every time he saw a bird flying, he could see very well that it had a right wing and it had a left wing, and he couldn't see how it'd be able to keep going if it didn't have them both."<sup>13</sup> For both pragmatic and moral reasons, Hill cast his net widely.

While he often framed his activism and his political statements in a religious context, he was well received by those with a decidedly secular worldview. It seems that Hill's political ecumenicalism was equally applicable to the religious and nonreligious. For him, one of religion's jobs was to speak to the nonreligious in a language that they could understand and connect with on a moral and humanistic level. Hence Maki's comment that Hill was one of the few preachers "I could ever sit and listen to comfortably."<sup>14</sup> Many of the organizations in which Hill held leadership positions during the war revolved around single-issue initiatives that gave rise to a series of citizens' committees. Unlike more formal organizations that required membership dues, constitutions, and bylaws, citizens' committees were ad hoc political associations that nonetheless maintained close ties with the more stable groups and institutions that comprised the organizational network of the civil rights community. Along with the NAACP, the UAW, and the CP, the backbone of that community was the local branch of the National Negro Congress and the indigenous Civil Rights Federation. Both groups were founded in the mid-1930s, and both had animated Hill's idealism.

Reverend Hill had been head of the CRF's Negro Department since 1938, and his personal and political ties to the group strengthened during the war when he became a fixture on its Steering Committee. In 1941 the CRF underwent an internal shake-up. The Rev. Owen Knox resigned his directorship, and Jack Raskin became executive secretary. Knox, a white Methodist minister whom Hill had come to respect, was a committed pacifist whose opposition to U.S. involvement in World War II had, in the wake of Hitler and Stalin's nonaggression pact, placed him in temporary agreement with the Communist Party. Knox knew there was a CP presence within the CRF (the party was listed as a supporter on the CRF's letterhead) and the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties, the CRF-like national organization of which he became chairman in 1940. But when Germany invaded Russia and the American com-

munists threw themselves into the war effort some voiced the suspicion that Knox's continued opposition to the war was a cover for his anti-Semitism. Publicly, at least, Knox blamed the "strong Russian sympathies" of both organizations for his resignation.<sup>15</sup>

Hill and the small core of committed activists at the CRF were apparently less concerned than Knox about communist opportunism and tended to support the war. Whether this was because of a directive from the Comintern is open to debate, as is the question of exactly how many members of the CRF's Executive Committee were also members of the CP. What is clear is that throughout the early 1940s the CRF expanded in size and increased its influence in the city's civil rights community.

Raskin's ascendancy helped fuel this process. He was the first head of the CRF who had not been a member of the clergy, and unlike Reverends Bollens and Knox he came from a working-class background. He was also the first Jewish head of an organization based, to some degree, in Black and Jewish communities. By one estimate, nearly 50 percent of the group's core membership (no more than twelve hundred at its height) were either Blacks or Jews, and the group's Executive Committee embodied roughly the same proportions.<sup>16</sup> Raskin's parents were refugees from czarist Russia who immigrated to Detroit around the turn of the century. Born in 1913 and raised in Detroit, Raskin went straight from high school into the factories, where he became involved in union activities during the Depression. He joined the CRF as a volunteer in 1938 after visiting his brother, Dr. Morris Raskin, who worked in the UAW's medical department. His brother's office was in the Hoffman Building, down the hall from the CRF's tiny headquarters, and Raskin was there during a particularly violent strike, which was met with a great deal of police brutality. People were bringing injured workers into the medical offices, and the CRF was taking statements. "And I became, well, sort of emotionally involved, and became interested in the CRF at that time."<sup>17</sup>

Raskin appears to have had even more of an interest than his predecessors at the CRF in the demands of African Americans, and he threw himself and the CRF more and more into the struggles of the city's Black population. He saw a basic affinity, an ideological kinship, between working-class Blacks and Jews; as a result he helped move the organization, during World War II, toward a more explicit focus on "the elimination of anti-Semitism and prejudice against the Negro people."<sup>18</sup> For Raskin, this was one way to continue the federation's tradition of positioning itself well to the left of both the Jewish Community Council and the NAACP.<sup>19</sup>

The desire to offer a radical alternative to more traditional organizations remained equally important to the NNC, whose national body continued to have internal difficulties of its own. As was the case with the CRF, many of these difficulties were directly related to the presence of and fears about communists. And, again like the Civil Rights Federation, tensions within the NNC were heightened because of changes in the CP line. When the NNC held its third national meeting in 1940, any speaker, including A. Philip Randolph, who was not sympathetic to the new CP position against the “imperialistic war” raging in Europe was booed and shouted down. When Randolph linked the Soviet Union with other imperialist and totalitarian nations, the first exodus, led primarily by white delegates (presumably CP members), began. As he stressed the loyalty of African Americans to the United States, and assured the audience that in any conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union Blacks would side with their country, even more delegates left the hall. Randolph ended his controversial speech by urging that the NNC remain controlled by Blacks and dedicated to their struggles, with a leadership “free of intimidation, manipulation or subordination, with character that is beyond the reach of the dollar . . . a leadership which is uncontrolled and responsible to no one but the Negro people.”<sup>20</sup>

Almost immediately after the meeting, Randolph was denounced as “a traitor,” a “red-baiter,” and “a frightened Negro bourgeoisie.” His resignation, due to “Communist infiltration,” caused quite a stir; many of the group’s former supporters followed suit, and a number of local branches of the NNC did not survive. The Detroit branch was weakened, but it managed to weather the storm.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the widespread view of the NNC as communist dominated did not deter Reverend Hill and many of his colleagues. There were a number of possible reasons for his decision to stick with the NNC and, by extension, to remain within the orbit of the CP. Unlike Randolph, who, as a member of the Socialist Party, had opposed the CP since its inception, Hill was not invested in the long-standing ideological battles that had fractured the Left. Nor did Hill appear to have had Randolph’s burning desire for organizational control or his commitment to all-Black and Black-led organizations. Hill’s decision to stay with the NNC (and the CRF) may also have been related to timing and circumstance. The changes in the CP’s position from the Popular Front to revolutionary fermentation and back again were contemporaneous with the battle to unionize the Ford Motor Company—a circumstance that may have provided an extra impetus to place unity and pragmatism over the machinations of the distant Comintern. Despite the internal difficulties of the national organization, the Detroit

NNC, as noted in the previous chapter, played an important role in mobilizing support for the UAW within the African American community, and it was likely for this reason that Hill had assumed the helm of the local chapter by 1942.

Finally, Hill may have been influenced by a certain amount of naïveté, on the one hand, and the pull of friendship and personal affinity on the other. When Hill became chair of the Detroit NNC, his young friend and protégé, Coleman Young, became executive secretary (before being inducted into military service), and many of the men and women he had been allied with remained active members. It was, in short, a community of like-minded activists. The local branch of the NAACP remained as suspicious of the NNC as ever, but in an atmosphere of increased racial tension the NAACP and the NNC worked together on a number of occasions in the early 1940s.<sup>22</sup> Navigating between the NAACP and the NNC, Hill used both groups—along with his church and the CRF—as a base of operations for his activism throughout the war years.

As with many African American activists operating within the orbit of the CP, Hill may have had personal reservations about Randolph's resignation from the NNC and his call for an all-Black mobilization, but he did not fail—in defiance of the CP's position—to support Randolph's newly formed March on Washington movement (MOWM).<sup>23</sup> Perhaps more than any other single event during the 1940s, the nationwide mobilization for the march set the tone for contemporary civil rights activism. Louis Martin called it a "classic example in recent history of the effectiveness of the mass demonstration technique," a technique that has its "ultimate base" in the theory that "the inherent sense of justice of the American people when sufficiently aroused will not countenance the persecution of the Negro."<sup>24</sup> Initiated in July of 1941, the MOWM was a national mobilization organized to bring one hundred thousand Blacks to the nation's capital to protest economic and social injustices and demand federal action. It was to be an all-Black movement for two reasons: first, to keep the MOWM free of communist contamination; and, second, to give African Americans across the nation a better sense of their own agency and power.<sup>25</sup>

Toward this end, the national organization was to provide an overarching framework for the march, with the movement's core contained in local branches in various cities. On June 7, the MOWM reported active branches in Kansas City, Saint Paul, Saint Louis, Chicago, Buffalo, Newark, Jersey City, Asbury Park, Westchester County, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York City, Richmond, Atlanta, Tampa,

Savannah, Jacksonville, Washington, and Detroit. The MOWM received a great deal of support in Detroit, and Reverend Hill, among others, including Reverend White and Father Dade, devoted a large portion of his time to soliciting funds and marchers, arranging transportation, and preparing for a simultaneous march to be held in Detroit. Reverend White, whose politics seemed to be increasingly aligned with Randolph's, was especially active.<sup>26</sup>

Whether the MOWM would have been able to mobilize one hundred thousand Black marchers was and is debatable. There is some justification for viewing it as a "magnificent bluff." Although the march was eventually called off, or rather delayed (for some twenty-two years as it turned out), after President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, the MOWM was significant for a number of reasons—first and foremost for the existence of 8802 itself. The executive order outlawed discriminatory hiring practices in the defense industries, government agencies, and job-training programs for defense production. It also established the Fair Employment Practice Commission as an investigative agency. While the FEPC had few powers of enforcement and was terribly understaffed throughout its existence, it did have the power to expose discrimination via public hearings that garnered national and international media attention. For many aggrieved Black workers, the FEPC was also one of the more viable mechanisms for redress. Moreover, just as the Wagner Act became the Magna Carta of labor organizing and legitimized the right to unionize, Executive Order 8802 upheld the demand for a new class of rights—fair employment.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the definition of what constitutes a "civil right" became even more expansive.

Characterized as the first significant federal policy to address the concerns of Black Americans since the Emancipation Proclamation, Executive Order 8802 (and the FEPC), like the Wagner Act (and the National Labor Relations Board), also strengthened the idea that the state was the final arbiter of minority rights. As A. Philip Randolph was fond of saying, "All roads led to Washington."<sup>28</sup> From 1941 on, the need to maintain pressure on the government and provoke its decisive intervention remained an important strategy for activists. By borrowing from the direct-action, mass-pressure techniques of the CIO-led union movement, the MOWM was, at the same time, an important bridge between labor activism and civil rights. As was the case with many progressive labor leaders, especially those with ties to the Left, Randolph and the MOWM adopted the same theory of power that had given the CIO many of its early victories. "Power and pressure do not reside in the few, the intelligentsia," Randolph maintained. Instead, power and pressure "lie and

flow from the masses.” Power, for Randolph and like-minded activists, was an “active principle of only the organized masses” when they are united for a definite purpose. Thus, the “Call to Negro Americans to March on Washington for Jobs and Equal Participation in National Defense” read, in part:

Dear fellow Negro Americans, be not dismayed in these terrible times. You possess power, great power. Our problem is to hitch it up for action on the broadest, daring and most gigantic scale. In this period of power politics, nothing counts but pressure, more pressure and still more pressure, through the tactic and strategy of broad, organized, aggressive mass action behind the vital and important issues of the Negro. To this end we propose that ten thousand Negroes MARCH ON WASHINGTON FOR JOBS IN NATIONAL DEFENSE AND EQUAL INTEGRATION IN THE FIGHTING FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES.<sup>29</sup>

This is not dramatically different from the strategy advocated by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in his seminal 1932 text *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Therein, the theologian, whose first parish appointment was in Detroit, argued that the liberal overreliance on personal conscience and “social goodwill” was obsolete and ineffective. In the future, he wrote, reform movements would have to incorporate a “measure of coercion” and force if they hoped to succeed. Individual men and women may be swayed by moral arguments, Niebuhr declared in an implicit critique of the excessive optimism of the old social gospel, but an organized force only yielded power to an equally organized force.<sup>30</sup>

Even though the FEPC represented only a partial concession to the MOWM’s demands, in both strategy and outcome, the movement signaled a new era in Black political protest—one squarely rooted in the tactics of mass pressure on state agencies, direct action, and moral suasion to bring about economic justice and industrial democracy. The use of labor unions, especially union locals, along with other mediating structures such as churches, clubs, and race organizations, to mobilize large numbers of people in order to cajole or threaten federal agencies into action would become the major strategy of civil rights activists throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. The demand for fair employment legislation and additional FEPCs within states, cities, and labor unions, would become equally characteristic of postwar protest.<sup>31</sup>

Randolph attempted to keep the MOWM alive after the cancellation of the march, but the group never achieved either a sustainable mass

base or an organizational structure sufficient to make this truly possible. Ideologically, however, Randolph continued to play a leading role in shaping the debate about civil rights struggles. During a 1942 MOWM convention held in Detroit, he stressed the need to see a national march as just one of the options available to activists. Calling attention to “the strategy and maneuver of the people of India with mass civil disobedience and non-cooperation,” he proposed that these techniques could also be applied in America “in theaters, hotels, restaurants, and amusement places.” On this score, the religious-political leader Mahatma Gandhi and the political theologian Reinhold Niebuhr were in complete agreement. By echoing both, Randolph gave a philosophical and spiritual framework to the course of civil rights protests being carried on in Detroit and elsewhere.<sup>32</sup> In Detroit, the MOWM—along with its tactics and ideology—was duly incorporated into the general tenor of civil rights militancy and melded into a growing series of interlocking organizations. The question of an alliance between African Americans and whites and between liberals and radicals was also incorporated. This, too, would become a prominent and often contentious feature within Black protest in the second half of the century.

If Randolph and the MOWM provided a philosophical framework for activists, the war provided the urgency. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, local activists applied pressure politics both locally and nationally. Like African Americans across the nation, Detroiters joined the *Pittsburgh Courier's* call for a “Double Victory”—victory at home and victory abroad—and increased militancy within the context of national loyalty. Having “closed ranks” during World War I, few were prepared to sacrifice their rights again in the name of national unity. When a Black man was savagely beaten and lynched in Silkeston, Missouri, a few weeks after Pearl Harbor, the *Chicago Defender* offered a second slogan: “Remember Pearl Harbor and Silkeston too.”<sup>33</sup> “The very character of this war,” read an editorial in the *Michigan Chronicle*, which avidly supported the *Courier*-inspired campaign, “a war for freedom, for democracy, for liberation, has of necessity produced profound changes in our own thinking and has accelerated the hopes of all of us for a new America and even a new world.”<sup>34</sup>

While some religious figures opposed America’s entrance into the war on pacifist grounds, Reverend Hill did not. He urged an all-out attack on the “Nazi juggernaut” before it reached the Western Hemisphere and, like Louis Martin and others, was equally enthusiastic about attacking the racist juggernauts at home.<sup>35</sup> In Detroit, this offensive posture meant a concerted effort to secure fair employment, adequate hous-

ing, and alleviation of the racial and religious tensions dividing the city. In each area, and throughout each domestic battle, the civil rights community was drawn closer together, in some ways, and pulled farther apart in others. Summing up the civil rights activism in wartime Detroit, the *Chronicle's* Martin could write: "In few cities have mass demonstrations been used so effectively as in Detroit in the last six years. The Negro leadership and the rank and file citizens march and picket as a matter of course today."<sup>36</sup>

There was much to picket and march about. Discriminatory practices in the auto industry during the conversion to war production had been a serious topic during the year before America's entry into the war. With the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the enactment of Executive Order 8802, the issue of fair employment became one of the most salient matters confronting the city's civil rights activists. Conversion to defense production, which relied more heavily on skilled workers in traditionally white jobs, rendered many of the jobs that Blacks had been restricted to unnecessary. Even in the plants where Blacks had achieved a measure of seniority, white workers with less seniority received a disproportionate share of upgrading. Unemployment, too, continued to be a pressing issue. Nationally, the percentage of Black workers involved in manufacturing and industry, having grown from 6.2 percent in 1910 to 7.3 percent in 1930, had, by 1940, reached a new low of 5.1 percent. In Detroit, Black male unemployment rates still managed to exceed the average jobless rate by three times. For Black women, the situation was equally tenuous. In a striking reversal of its earlier policy, the Ford Motor Company virtually ceased the recruitment and hiring of Black men—and continued to refuse to hire Black women—even in the midst of a labor shortage.<sup>37</sup> Hence the shortcomings of the national FEPC had swiftly become apparent.

In response, activists in Detroit organized two FEPC-inspired groups: the interracial Metropolitan Detroit Council on Fair Employment Practice (MDCFEP) and the predominantly Black Citizens Committee for Jobs in War Industry. The histories of both groups reveal important aspects of the city's early civil rights community. The MDCFEP, for instance, grew out of a long-standing tradition of informal lunchtime conversations at the cafeteria of the Lucy Thurman branch of the YWCA, located in the heart of the east-side Black community on St. Antoine street. Geraldine Bledsoe recalled that "this was a very famous period for Lucy Thurman because [we] used to have a meeting there almost every day at lunchtime; we'd be meeting to discuss what new issues there were, what the strategies were, what needed to be done." The chief problem

with this approach was that it often excluded members of the working class or anyone else whose job precluded these casual “working” lunches. For people like Bledsoe, who had gone from being a placement officer in the Michigan Unemployment Commission to state supervisor of Negro placement in 1941, a lunchtime meeting was simply a matter of scheduling. For someone with a factory job, this type of flexibility was rare.<sup>38</sup>

But the history of the MDCFEP is not just a story about subtle class bias in protest organizations. It is also a story of activism spawned as much by the strengths of the federal FEPC as by its weaknesses. A discussion of both, along with the continuing problems of fair employment in the city and the region, was the topic of the lunchtime meeting in the spring of 1942 that led to the formation of the Metropolitan Council. A small coordinating committee was set up, and within a month’s time the group had representatives from over seventy organizations. The council was interracial and interfaith, with Edward W. McFarland, a professor of economics at Wayne State University, serving as chairman. Drawing on the moral authority of church and temple, Reverend Hill, along with Rabbi B. Benedict Glazer, Fr. J. Lawrence Cavanagh, and Dr. Thoburn Brumbaugh of the Detroit Council of Churches, served as vice chairs.

The Executive Board was rounded out by Zaio Woodford, a white feminist attorney associated with the Detroit Federation of Women’s Clubs; Geraldine Bledsoe; Gloster Current of the NAACP; Jack Raskin of the CRF; and fifteen others representing labor and civic groups. The overall aim of the council was to “assure the full utilization of the local labor supply in the war effort, using every worker at his highest skill level.” They understood that the mere five officials in the Detroit FEPC office were insufficient for the task at hand and viewed themselves as a supplement to the government agency. At the same time, the MDCFEP *superseded* the terms of the president’s executive order by adding sex to the list of discriminatory practices that needed to be addressed.<sup>39</sup>

Throughout the war years members of the council handled complaints and heard charges. Working in small groups, they interviewed and pressured personnel managers and corporate presidents. Funded by the War Chest of Metropolitan Detroit, the group maintained a small staff for these and other purposes. Acting as a clearinghouse for information, the Metropolitan Council also engaged in educational activities to sway public opinion and increase understanding among interracial groups. It supported legislation to implement fair employment practices and assisted employers and unions in developing a sound policy for integrating members of minority groups into industry.<sup>40</sup> By August 1943 the

group had agreed to refer all cases to the FEPC, which had established a subregional office in the city, and thereafter limited its activities to non-referral cases from August 1943 to August 1945. During its existence, the Metropolitan Council handled just under one thousand cases involving more than seven hundred companies and was able to adjust 58 percent of them.<sup>41</sup> The organization would also prove instrumental during postwar efforts to make the FEPC permanent and seek fair employment legislation in both Michigan and Detroit.

The second group, the Citizens Committee for Jobs in War Industry, was also characteristic of wartime activism in Detroit. The citizens committee had a less formal structure than the MDCFEP, but it, too, worked in the area of fair employment. Established by Reverend Hill, with support from Black union leaders in Local 600 and members of the NNC, it was an umbrella group spanning the ideological spectrum of the city's African American activists from the Booker T. Washington Trade Association and the Detroit Urban League to the Detroit National Negro Congress and the local NAACP. Gloster Current, a militant in his own right, served as the group's recording secretary, while first Mamie Thompson, the NAACP's treasurer, and later Raymond Hatcher of the Detroit Urban League handled the finances.<sup>42</sup> Like the Metropolitan Detroit Council, the citizens committee worked in tandem with the national FEPC's Detroit investigators, securing the "loan" of Ray Hatcher for the task of gathering actual cases of discrimination and turning them over to official FEPC investigators.

While the MDCFEP adopted a more mechanistic approach and received municipal funding, the citizens committee sought to function as a mass protest and pressure group, aspiring to be the "main instrument for exerting . . . pressure upon federal government, city government, unions and plant management" and to be "an example of the 'Double Victory' they [Blacks] want to see as the outcome of this war."<sup>43</sup> It was also, unlike the MDCFEP, predominantly African American and very much in the spirit of Randolph's MOWM, especially in its attempt to keep the group Black led and directed.

The citizens committee adopted a broad perspective in the fight "against refusal to hire persons of minority races, religions and nationality groups," but nonetheless it managed to reserve special consideration for the plight of African American workers. Under the principle that "segregation is discrimination," it maintained a high standard for what constituted fair employment and fought against the creation of special segregated divisions in plants. Committee members, for example, were particularly worried that the recent appointment of an African American

to the personnel department of the Briggs Manufacturing Corporation “may mean the beginning of a policy of segregation” and planned to send a delegation to Briggs to discuss the issue. They were dedicated, as one statement put it in January 1943, to the “integration of Negroes into their jobs and into the unions.” Moreover, they advocated direct representation of Blacks on the War Manpower Commission, for the passage of a Michigan State FEPC bill, for mass demonstrations against employers who discriminated, and, finally, for the “mobilization of the Christian Church in behalf of the anti-discrimination fight.”<sup>44</sup>

Why the committee viewed fair employment and nondiscrimination as a religious issue, or at least an issue around which religious bodies and communities should organize, is an interesting question. Certainly, both the Metropolitan Detroit Council on Fair Employment Practice and the Citizens Committee for Jobs in War Industry incorporated interfaith religious leadership and participation, including Black and white churches, the Detroit Council of Churches, the Catholic Youth, the Congregation of Beth-El, the Jewish Community Council, and the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, among others. And discrimination on religious grounds, especially toward Jews and Catholics, was among the practices that they fought against. (And this with good reason: of the 355 cases of alleged discrimination based on religion filed with the FEPC from July 1943 through June 1944, a significant proportion involved people of the Jewish faith, followed by Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Catholics.)<sup>45</sup> Still, there is a suggestion of a *particular* duty on the part of the religious. Part of this duty, at least on the part of Catholics toward Blacks, is captured in a statement released by the National Catholic Welfare Conference at the direction of archbishops and bishops in 1943.

“We owe these fellow-citizens,” the statement says of African Americans, “who have contributed so largely to the development of our country, and for whose welfare history imposes on us a special obligation of justice, to see that they have in fact the rights which are given them in our Constitution.” These rights include not only political equality, “but also fair economic and educational opportunities, a just share in public welfare projects, good housing without exploitation, and a full chance for the social advancement of their race.” Such sentiments were viewed as consistent with the church’s social teachings enshrined in documents such as *Rerum Novarum* and Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *Sertum Laetitiae* (1939), which deals explicitly with “special and considerate care” toward “neighbors of the Negro race.” White ethnic lay Catholics, including many Detroit area Poles, often took a very different position on their

Negro neighbors, but the moral tone set by the Catholic hierarchy—on issues ranging from fair employment to national health care—was indicative of the shared morality of many members of the city’s civil rights community. Moreover, it helps to explain why groups such as the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, along with the local diocese in general, were important members of that protest community.<sup>46</sup>

Guided by this (holy) spirit, the citizens committee and the MDCFEP struggled to bring the federal FEPC to Detroit for a series of public hearings on the vexing situation in Detroit’s industries, especially at the Ford Motor Company. After months of negotiations involving numerous trips to Washington, DC, to meet with federal officials—“I was going to Washington all the time,” remembered Hill—the groups had to turn to other means. This was especially true for the citizens committee and its efforts around African American women. Black women faced more obstacles to securing industrial employment than either Black men or white women. Although Detroit was experiencing an acute labor shortage, the labor pool created by African American women, approximately twenty-eight thousand potential workers, went relatively untapped. Black women, then, constituted the most neglected source of nondomestic labor. Of the 389 Detroit-area plants surveyed by the War Production Board, only 74 employed Black women, whereas 239 used female laborers.

Even when Black women did find jobs in plants they were generally excluded from the more profitable skilled jobs for which white women were being trained and were relegated instead to positions as janitors and matrons.<sup>47</sup> As historian Jacqueline Jones points out, the majority of Black women “measured the impact of the war on their own lives primarily in terms of the quality of their jobs and living quarters.” Challenging the “Rosie the Riveter” stereotype, which held that women worked only for patriotic reasons, she quotes Lillian Hatcher, a union activist and one of the first African American women hired above the service level in Detroit’s auto industry.

I was working not for patriotic reasons, I was working for money. . . .  
 And I really needed that money, because my son was wearing out corduroy pants, two and three pair a month, gym shoes and all those other things my daughters too had to have. . . . And our house rent . . . we had to save for that . . . and keep the light and gas.<sup>48</sup>

Although many Black women were barely staying afloat economically, the drive to place them in industrial employment represents one of the few times that Hill and his predominantly male colleagues directly

addressed the particular concerns of working-class women and took direct action on their behalf.

Black women themselves used every available avenue to secure fair and gainful employment. As Nancy Gabin demonstrates in her study of women in the UAW, African American women appeared more willing than men to utilize the power of the state and the union hierarchy to crack the barriers that confronted them—perhaps because of the resistant nature of those barriers. Many more women than men lodged complaints with the FEPC, and the first FEPC probe into the situation in Detroit specifically addressed their concerns. In the process, argues historian Megan Taylor Shockley, they “transformed their relationship with the state” and “redefined citizenship during and immediately following World War II by basing it on their real or potential contributions to the wartime state.” They also became more prominent within the city’s civil rights community. The drive to secure positions for Black women was a protracted battle, which began with negotiations with top company officials and ended with pickets and public protests.<sup>49</sup>

The citizens committee, with the aid of Black unionists in Local 600, manned picket lines at the plants and produced educational handbills. They also attempted to involve the federal government, with Reverend Hill leading delegations to persuade officials with the FEPC and the War Manpower Commission to intervene on behalf of Black women. By February, the citizens committee could claim victory, as sixty-eight women were hired at the Rouge plant and slower gains were being made at the Willow Run plant near Ypsilanti. Still, by 1943 African American women were only about 3 percent of the female industrial workforce. Although these protests led to some concessions by industry, and helped to generate support for the formation of a Woman’s Bureau in the UAW in 1944 with Hatcher as codirector, the record of the Left community and the unions in addressing the concerns of Black women was a mixed one.<sup>50</sup>

The struggle to bring more African American men and women into the defense industries did increase the public profile of the city’s Left-labor activists, helping to establish fair employment in terms of both race *and* gender as a major civil rights issue. It was, as we shall see, the chief motivation behind an April 1943 joint NAACP-UAW demonstration held in downtown Detroit’s Cadillac Square—a prime downtown site during the early 1930s for marches and rallies of the unemployed—and the issue provided a point of convergence for a Black united front. This is not to say that the tensions were erased, however. Following Hill’s defeat in the election for the presidency of the Detroit NAACP—the largest branch in the nation throughout the war years—McClendon

moved to marginalize him. While he continued to give some public support to Hill and the Citizens Committee for Jobs in War Industry, at the same time McClendon effectively triangulated the committee by bringing Black unionist Walter Hardin, who also served as head of the UAW's Inter-racial Committee, onto the NAACP's board and making him cochair with Prince Clark of the branch's Labor Committee.

Drawing the NAACP and the UAW closer together would render the citizens committee redundant, even though the NAACP's Labor Committee was not without problems. As Gloster Current suggests in a July 1943 letter to Walter White, the group's constitution is "not clear on what a labor committee is to do, nor has the National Office, seemingly, given much thought to fully incorporating labor into its program." Finally, the Executive Board decided to no longer handle the group's finances, a move that, as Meier and Rudwick suggest, "delegitimized the Citizens Committee's operations among the mainstream of the black community. . . . Yet for a few brief moments it had brilliantly articulated black protest against race bias in Detroit's war plants and Hill himself remained a figure to be reckoned with."<sup>51</sup>

The committee's brief and brilliant activism not only solidified Hill's place within the city's civil rights community; it also contributed to the earning and purchasing power of the Black working class. The housing situation in Paradise Valley, as the thirty-four blocks of the city's east-side ghetto was still commonly known, was bad and getting worse as each year brought more and more Black migrants to the city in search of work and opportunities. Even as the rapid increase in population brought more squalor and misery to the neighborhood, the increase in earning potential fueled Black businesses, the underground economy of numbers runners, the building funds of churches, and the coffers of the entertainment industries. All of this made life in Detroit's African American communities a little more bearable. Musicians and singers, such as blues vocalist John Lee Hooker and saxophonist Yusef Lateef, worked in the factories by day and in small clubs in Paradise Valley by night. The Forest Club, Club 666, Brown's Bar, and the Paradise Theater, along with the Blue Bird on the west side, were patronized by working-class men and women. "Detroit had Ford and Chrysler as well as Studebaker and Packard plants," recalled one of the city's local musicians. "Black folks was coming up from the South and getting hired, and making a lot of money in those factories. Motown had a lot of folks." Years later this would still be the case: "Folks would work in the factory but would go and record for Berry Gordy"<sup>52</sup>

According to another local artist, Roy Brooks, "it was a whole social

thing going on. . . . Music had a lot to do with it.” The music produced and performed there embodied the struggles of the clientele, as southern gospel and blues traditions mingled freely with the fast pace of industrial life set against the backdrop of the assembly line.<sup>53</sup> Many of these clubs also drew an interracial crowd and were frequented by members of the Left. Going to black-and-tans (integrated clubs) was part of the culture of local members of the Left community.<sup>54</sup> In a sense, the clubs became part of the movement culture in Detroit in both direct and indirect ways. Man cannot live by protest alone. Churches provided solace and spiritual communion on Sunday mornings; clubs and cabarets spoke to the soul in a different way on Saturday nights. Some institutions aligned with the civil rights community gave local musicians another outlet with which to hone their skills and earn a little extra money. Musicians recall getting gigs at Detroit Urban League and NAACP affairs, and “in the churches you could perform—like St. Stephen, Hartford Baptist, and so on.” Moreover, some local activists were themselves talented musicians. Gloster Current was a jazz pianist and director of the Gloster Current Orchestra, which played in area clubs. Future activist the Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr. also had a small band that was able to secure a few bookings.<sup>55</sup> Hence, it is difficult not to see the cultural industry in Detroit as an integral part of social activism. It was a tradition that would continue to express itself over and over, from the performances of gospel singer and rhythm and blues artist Aretha Franklin in her father’s church in Detroit to the explosion of Motown Records on the cultural (and political) scene.

#### CONFRONTING THE REACTIONARY RIGHT

As significant as these cultural and political developments were, they did not lessen (and probably increased) the level of ethnic and religious tension in Detroit. Union officials and civil rights activists, members of the Catholic hierarchy, and others may have taken a forthright stance on equality, but for a large segment of the white working class such proclamations and resolutions were essentially meaningless. Intense economic competition and the social distance between racial and ethnic groups often took precedence over ideological statements about the “Brotherhood of Man” and “Solidarity Forever.” These tensions were compounded as more and more southern whites flocked to Detroit. The flowing waves of migration among African Americans have received far more attention by scholars, but the “Great White Migration” was equally important in reshaping the city. From 1940 to 1943, more than fifty

thousand additional Black southern migrants arrived in Detroit; during the same period half a million southern whites followed a parallel path along the railroad tracks and Interstates 65 and 75.

The white migration began during World War I, hit its peak in the years between 1945 and 1960, and continued through the 1970s, leaving the South with a net decrease of almost five million people by 1960. Hailing from the lowlands and highlands, from the rural Appalachian Mountains and more urbanized areas such as Birmingham, Alabama, southern migrants were actively recruited during both world wars by industrialists in the Midwest, especially Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, and, of course, Michigan. Only the Far West—the destination of the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel and film that played a prominent role in creating the cultural iconography of the “Okie” migration—received more white southern men, women, and children. Detroit, too, had long been a popular destination for migrants. By 1930, the city had attracted over 66,000 white southerners, compared to close to 50,000 in Chicago, 30,000 in Indianapolis, 11,000 in Hamilton, Ohio, and over 8,000 in Flint, Michigan, where 60 percent of all southern migrants were white. Along with Flint, Detroit was very popular among migrants from Arkansas, followed by Tennessee and Kentucky.<sup>56</sup>

While many among this early wave of migrants returned home during the hardships of the Depression, the floodgates had reopened by the late 1930s and early 1941. This much larger secondary influx corresponded with the drive for industrial unionization and helped to solidify the stereotype of the southern “hillbilly” as a hardworking, hard-drinking “redneck” who was determinedly antiunion. It was a stereotype generated in part by industrialists, who seemed to favor the “less militant” southerner over the “more radical” white immigrant or native-born northerner. Part of this mixture of fact and fiction was captured in a 1935 *Nation* article by Louis Adamic.

These hill-billies are for the most part impoverished whites, “white trash” or little better, from the rural regions. The majority of them are young fellows. They have had no close contact with modern industry or with labor unionism—this, of course, is their best qualification. Their number in Detroit is variously estimated as between fifteen and thirty thousand, with more coming weekly, not only in company-chartered buses but singly and in small groups on their own hook, for no one has a better chance of employment in Detroit these days than a Southerner of unsophisticated mien. . . . These workers are happy, are . . . much “safer”—for the next few

months anyhow, while big production is on—than local labor, poisoned by the ideas of unionism and perhaps even more dangerous notions.<sup>57</sup>

It is true that many of these newly arriving workers had not been involved in the struggles for industrial unionism that had created a sense of working-class solidarity. It is also true that many white southerners, much like their Black counterparts, were initially wary about the merits of unionization and thus tended to remain aloof. Yet, as historian Peter Friedlander notes in his study of the development of the UAW, their level of activity in the nascent union did eventually increase, and once converted to the cause of unionism they rarely backslid. Moreover, while the racism and conservatism so endemic to white southern culture remained a problem inside the racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse UAW, some of the men and women who migrated north had participated in union struggles in southern industries such as mining and textiles and they brought these experiences with them.<sup>58</sup>

By 1941 estimates placed the white in-migration to Detroit at over seventy-five thousand, with a housing vacancy rate of only 0.4 percent, which meant that clashes over housing in wartime Detroit were inevitable. The average migrant during this period had traveled roughly 340 miles to get to the city. Forty-one percent were from rural areas, 21 percent were last involved in agriculture, 68 percent were in Detroit for the first time, 10 percent were unemployed, more than 50 percent were alone, approximately 33 percent were living in a separate dwelling, over 50 percent were doubling up with others, and 10 percent were living in trailers and motels. Overall, these wartime migrants were younger than their predecessors; most dramatically, the proportion of white southern migrants in the labor force rose from 57 percent in prewar Michigan to 67 percent in wartime Detroit. Almost overnight, Detroit was transformed into a “boomtown” without the resources to accommodate the increase in population.<sup>59</sup>

Although many migrants traveled alone, they brought with them a distinctive culture that contributed to “a new cultural and ethnic mix that distinguished Detroit from New York and Cincinnati from Boston.”<sup>60</sup> They brought with them a worldview rooted in a “plain-folk culture” of honor and dogged independence that emphasized “hard work and plain living [and] promised deliverance from the forces of power, privilege and moral pollution.” They established neighborhoods throughout the city and developed cultural institutions as rich and varied as those simultaneously flourishing in Paradise Valley. As James

Gregory rightly observes in his study of transplanted southern culture in the Far West, it was also a culture structured by the twin pillars of the church and the saloon, two seemingly polarized elements in Protestant life. Drinking, hard drinking, in the South was often an act of defiance, but, Gregory writes, “it was a kind of ritualized, guilt-ridden defiance which in the end reinforced the religious-based moral codes.” It was, he continues, part of “the large rhythm of sin and repentance that tied together this culture of moral opposites.”<sup>61</sup>

This sense of eschatological rhythm captures a central feature of the lives of southern exiles struggling to sing familiar songs in a strange and often cold land. The songs themselves were an important contribution to the urban cultural mix of Detroit. The distinctive sound of “hillbilly” music was created within the southern diaspora by folk musicians who traveled from Florida to Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois before and during World War I and was propagated by radio programs such as *National Barn Dance* out of Chicago and by jukeboxes in local saloons wherever migrants settled. One popular song played repeatedly in Detroit area bars and social clubs catering to the white southern population was Danny Dill and Mel Tillis’s “Detroit City,” whose lyrics wailed:

Home folks think I’m big in Detroit City.  
 From the letters that I write they think I’m fine.  
 But by day I make the cars, by night I make the bars.  
 If only they could read between the lines.

As was the case with African Americans’ blues songs, the hardships of life in Detroit’s factories and neighborhoods figure prominently in a number of hillbilly ballads of heartache and homesickness, loss and disappointment.<sup>62</sup>

The other major way of dealing with feelings of cultural vertigo and personal insecurity was provided by religion and the hundreds of small churches that were interspersed with bars and music venues. Historians of religion in America have generally located the roots of the so-called postwar religious revival in the social dislocation engendered by the war years. But if it makes any sense at all to speak in terms of revival then it was not located in the mainstream Protestant congregations, which experienced a decline during the Depression and afterward. Rather, the revival was located in the rise of Holiness and Pentecostal churches and a variety of “free” Baptist congregations founded by southern whites (and Blacks) in overwhelming numbers in urban centers such as Detroit.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps because many migrants expected to return home

after a brief sojourn up North, large and established churches with white southern congregations were fairly slow to develop. At the same time, established Northern Baptist churches were often unwelcoming and the styles of worship much more constrained and formal than in the South.

Moreover, the 1850s split between that Northern Baptist Convention (which became increasingly liberal) and the Southern Baptist Convention (which became increasingly conservative) could still be felt theologically and culturally. For many, the sheer variety of religious groups and institutions was overwhelming. "There's so many different denominations," one migrant recalled. "Southern people went to a Baptist or Church of God or Methodist type of church. . . . But so many northern people are Catholic people, an awful lot of them, so there's an awful lot of Polish people in Detroit"—not to mention the thriving chapter of the Nation of Islam and an array of sects and cults. Hence, for migrants in wartime Detroit, small storefront congregations and the services of "factory preachers" were a welcome alternative.<sup>64</sup>

The common observation that wartime Detroit had become part of a "Bible Belt" was not far off the mark as the city experienced a religious explosion that attracted national attention. "Since Pearl Harbor," a writer for *Collier's* magazine observed of the rise of small storefront and basement churches, "Detroit has become the scene of a greater American Armageddon."<sup>65</sup> By one account, "over 1,000 little church communities have been set up. . . . [The] bond with their preachers and little storefront and basement churches is about the only real tie for tens of thousands of uprooted families."<sup>66</sup> Although the existence of close religious ties, transplanted and transformed in a new urban environment, belies any simplistic understanding of "uprootedness," these small congregations, with their charismatic pastors, did help smooth the process of social adjustment for many believers.<sup>67</sup>

For Detroit's civil rights community, the existence of these churches was not an inherent problem. True, they grated on the nerves of more progressive, mainstream clergymen, who tended to equate fundamentalism with backward, conservative political views. But what concerned leftists the most was what they perceived to be the connections between these small churches, ethnoreligious bigotry, and racism in the automobile industry and the unions. "One of the best holds of the big executives on the life of the community is their influence through the local churches," stated a 1943 survey of religious and ethnic tensions in the city. Composed by a five-person research team that conducted nearly three dozen interviews between September 10 and September 30, it was

meant to be a confidential report on the conditions facing civil rights organizations such as the Civil Rights Federation and the Jewish Community Council. As such, the "Survey of Religious and Racial Conflict Forces in Detroit" provides a virtual road map through the various sources of reaction in the "cauldron" of Detroit, with special emphasis on the "3,500 fundamentalist clergymen in Detroit," who, the authors believed, "look to the company for jobs and subsidies to help their storefront and basement churches."<sup>68</sup>

The accuracy of these numbers, and of the extent of any direct dealings between industry executives and these churches, should be questioned. On the one hand, there was a deep cultural and probably class bias against southerners and fundamentalists, who are often referred to as "primitive" and characterized as mindless followers of powerful men. On the other hand, there was an equally deep political bias against Detroit area auto executives, who the survey described as the most reactionary, antisocial, and uncooperative group of industrialists in the country. The policies of the notoriously anti-Semitic Henry Ford and the existence of an alliance between Black ministers and Ford in the 1920s and 1930s provided a precedent for the collusion of religion and industry, but there was a tendency to play rather fast and loose with the equation of fundamentalism and a reactionary politics in the service of big business. And yet there was some reasonable cause for concern. Gerald L. K. Smith, for example, proudly admitted that he "came so completely into the confidence of Mr. Ford that he specified: 'Everyone who sold merchandise to the Ford Motor Company contributed to [Smith's] Christian Nationalist Crusade.'<sup>69</sup> Similar claims were made by and about the Rev. J. Frank Norris, who tended to huge flocks of followers both in Fort Worth, Texas, and at Detroit's Temple Baptist Church, of which he became pastor in 1934.

Although not well known today outside of fundamentalist circles, during the 1940s Norris was one of the most prominent and controversial ministers in the nation. Reverend Hill saw him as the civil rights community's "worst enemy," working hand in glove with the automotive industry to recruit Southern Baptist preachers to act as both rabble-rousers and pacifiers. "Norris gives these fundamentalist preachers their line here," Hill said. "He helps them get money from the bosses" and ties in their activities with "several Klan outfits."<sup>70</sup> Norris was indeed a powerful figure and a commanding orator possessed of a fire-and-brimstone style and a set of political positions that were as proindustry as they were anti-Black and anti-Semitic. Reverend Hill seemed very deliberate in his

choice of the term *fundamentalist* as opposed to *evangelical* to describe Norris, as if he, as an evangelical, did not want the two confused.

There is a saying that a fundamentalist is simply an evangelical who is angry about something. Norris was angry. He was angry about “modernism,” that is, the need to make adjustments to the modern world, especially what we would now call secular humanism. He was angry about theological liberalism, particularly those forms codified within the social gospel. He was angry about Darwinian theories of evolution, the application of higher criticism to the Bible, and the rejection of the Bible’s inerrancy.<sup>71</sup>

Reverend Norris accepted the position in Detroit and shuttled back and forth between his two large congregations out of a desire, in part, to do battle with the Northern Baptist Convention. As a nominal Southern Baptist and, more important, as a fundamentalist—in fact he helped to spread the fundamentalist doctrine across the South and throughout the nation—Norris, who was born in Dadeville, Alabama, in 1877, adhered to a strict faith that viewed itself as being at odds with modernism in general and liberal theology in particular. A firm believer in biblical literalism and dispensational premillennialism,<sup>72</sup> Norris saw the hand of God bringing history rapidly to an apocalyptic close. Although the end was near, he nonetheless tirelessly preached the obligation of all true Christians to fight a host of threats to the faith and the American way of life, including modernism, communism, Jews, labor radicals, and any form of race mixing.

Temple Baptist, which Norris promptly removed from the Northern Baptist Convention when he assumed the pastorate, consisted mostly of transplanted southerners pulled north by opportunities in the auto industry. Temple, which was located on Fourteenth Street at Marquette, had roughly 800 members when Norris arrived in 1934. Two years later he reported an increase of over 4,000 new members at both churches, and after five years Temple alone had added another 6,193 souls. By 1946, the combined membership of Temple in Detroit and First Baptist in Fort Worth was 25,000.<sup>73</sup> By the 1940s Reverend Norris was a nationally known figure with perhaps the largest following of any American minister, making him something of a precursor to the pastors of today’s megachurches. From his pulpits and a radio broadcast on Detroit’s WJR, as well as in the pages of his paper, *The Fundamentalist* (with a circulation in Detroit and across the South estimated at around 40,000), Norris continued to preach a message of antimodernism, anticommunism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Black racism. He struck up a friendship with Father Coughlin, believing that fundamentalists had more in common with the

Catholic Coughlin than the “modernist machine Baptist.” He was also popular with a number of the city’s industrial leaders, including presidents and vice presidents of General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford.<sup>74</sup>

In the sections of the “Survey of Religious and Racial Conflict Forces” devoted to Norris, the authors note that he had “built up a religious community that rivals Father Coughlin’s” and had the advantage of being “independent of denominational control,” which meant that there was “no bishop to silence him.” The survey also raises a number of claims (some made by Norris himself) that he received funding from area industrialists to expand the properties associated with Temple Baptist and to travel throughout the United States and Europe. Viewing Detroit as a major site in the struggle between “concentrated heavy industry and organized labor,” any hint of a relationship between industrialists and figures such as Norris seemed indicative of the battles still to come. “It should not be taken as an indication of class-war mentality by the writer to note the fact [that] in Detroit the big executives are expecting an eventual knockdown and dragout fight against organized labor,” they wrote. While some of the “older industrialists” believe it possible “to kick the unions out and restore the open shop,” the more “realistic” executives expect “Detroit management to regain a dominant position and put the unions in a very subordinate position.” In light of this inevitable confrontation, the industrialists “find it more useful to plan their labor strategy now and to begin gathering about them the kind of hard-talking and hard-hitting stooges (G.K. Smith, Frank Norris et al.) who can wage the eventual fight.” For many within the civil rights community this was precisely the problem.<sup>75</sup>

There was a war to win—at home and abroad. When considering these fundamentalist congregations, the implication always (and at times unfairly) pointed in one direction: fascism. Antifascism, it should be recalled, had been the rallying cry for the civil rights community from at least 1935 onward. The existence of a series of fascist dangers—the police department, the Black Legion and the Klan, Father Coughlin and the Ford Motor Company—was a central part of the community-building process, and the CRF continued to keep records on the various hate groups that sprung up in and around the city. These antifundamentalist/antifascist sentiments persisted as Norris and Smith came to replace Coughlin as the city’s leading religious demagogue to fear and revile after he was finally silenced by the Catholic Church in 1942.

The path that led Gerald L. K. Smith to the city in 1939 was long and indirect, taking him from the Midwest to the South to Detroit. Born in February 1898 in the small hamlet of Pardeeville, Wisconsin, roughly

thirty-five miles south of Madison, Smith and his family were heirs to the spirit of independence and self-reliance of the midwestern pioneer. The son and grandson of Disciples of Christ preachers, he was also heir to a frontier faith, one that rejected the man-made and therefore hopelessly artificial creeds and denominational structures of Presbyterians, Methodists, and other mainline churches. Known variously as “Christians,” “Churches of Christ,” and “Disciples of Christ,” the Disciples of Christ was founded in 1831 with the ultimate goal of transcending the factionalism of the Protestant faith and restoring the pristine, primitive church of the New Testament. As restorationists, they held the Bible to be an unambiguous guide for contemporary belief, practice, and organization. Unlike the brand of fundamentalism practiced by Norris, the Disciples generally opposed a “settled clergy” and discouraged even the taking of the title Reverend, which might explain why Smith found it so easy to drop once he left the official ministry. The Disciples were also loosely structured, requiring few creedal obligations and maintaining a diversity of views on the relationship between God and man.<sup>76</sup>

Theirs was not an emotional, spirit-infused style of worship. Rather, it was highly rational and even legalistic in approach. It was not, Smith recalled, “one of those excitable fundamentalist outfits where you could substitute groans and amens for a clear-cut discourse.”<sup>77</sup> At the age of twelve he publicly confessed his faith in Jesus, preached a small sermon to his parents, and set about devoting his life to the ministry, taking seriously the restoration of “New Testament” religion. Having previously accepted pulpits in Illinois and Indiana, in 1929 he took a position at the Kingsway Christian Church in Shreveport, Louisiana, where he eventually met the politician Huey “the Kingfish” Long, the man who changed his life. Smith’s association with Long was strange and intense. He was a self-described “hero-worshipper” who left the formal ministry to carry on a “ministry of truth to the people” as an organizer for Long’s Share Our Wealth campaign—a populist Depression era movement that centered on a guaranteed annual income. Smith was so enthralled by Long that rumor had it he slept curled up at the foot of the Kingfish’s bed.<sup>78</sup>

When Long was assassinated in September 1935, Smith delivered the eulogy to 150,000 mourners at the open-air funeral in Baton Rouge. Long’s death left Smith rudderless and in search of a constituency. Given that Smith, like Coughlin (and Norris), had come to reject Franklin Roosevelt and vilify the New Deal, it is not surprising that he eventually washed up on the shores of Detroit and joined Coughlin in the failed anti-Roosevelt presidential campaign of William Lemke. He was also drawn to the city by promises of money and support from

Horace Dodge and other local businessmen. Although relations between Smith and Coughlin soon soured, Smith found Detroit, with its influx of migrant workers from the South and the rural Midwest, a congenial location and set up shop. He organized his Committee of One Million (he boasted of a membership of three million, but it was probably far fewer than even the one-million goal) and was “on the air every Sunday night naming all the Communists in the CIO.” “WJR,” he later recalled, “went out thousands of miles. You could even hear it in New Orleans.” His following continued to grow as the United States, much to the dislike of his America First Party, entered World War II.<sup>79</sup>

No sooner had Coughlin’s *Social Justice* ceased production and circulation than Smith’s paper, *The Cross and the Flag*, made its appearance. While he tended to be much more obsessed by the specter of the “international Jew,” his political theology was tinged with anti-Black racism. In one issue, he wrote:

I know of no self-respecting person in the city of Detroit who is opposed to Negroes having every modern facility necessary to make them comfortable and to assist them in a desire to be progressive. But most white people will not agree to any of the following suggestions: (1) Intermarriage of blacks and whites; (2) Mixture of blacks and whites in hotels; (3) Inter-relationships between blacks and whites in a school system; (4) Wholesale mixture of blacks and whites on streetcars and on trains, especially where black men are permitted to sit down and crowd close to white women and vice versa. I have every reason to believe black women resent being crowded by white men on streetcars and elsewhere; (5) Permitting mixtures of blacks and whites in factories, especially where black men are mixed with white women closely in daily work.<sup>80</sup>

Of course, Detroit was filled with white workers who hardly needed any prodding from religious figures such as Smith and Norris. But, true to form, the civil rights community tended to focus on the dark side of fundamentalism, so much so that for local activists fundamentalism as fascism became the cause of almost every racial disturbance in the city, from racially motivated hate strikes in the plants to the controversy over government housing projects and the 1943 riot. If, as one observer put it, “Detroit was ripe for a socially conscious religious movement” during World War II,<sup>81</sup> it was also true that the city was a prime site for a religious war as battle lines were drawn over jobs, housing, and race mixing.

Intertwined with the dynamics of race, national origin, class, and the

social distance between groups, housing had long been a touchy subject in Detroit—and would remain so well into the 1960s. Restrictive covenants, the racism of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which allowed Blacks to build homes in relatively few areas, and at times racially motivated violence had kept most of the African American population crowded into a few localized sites. Although the boundaries of the heavily congested east-side ghetto had expanded over the years and Blacks had begun to move to the west side of the city, Black migrant war workers faced a devastating housing shortage. “In spite of the fact that the Negro population has expanded from 135,000 persons in 1940 to approximately 185,000 in 1944,” Shelton Tappes reported in his 1944 address to the Wayne County CIO Housing Conference, “it can definitively be stated that by no means has the availability of housing been proportionate to this population increase.” As a result of legal and illegal restrictions, Tappes concluded, “Negroes must either pay excessive rentals for overcrowded quarters, or . . . live in dilapidated areas so unsafe or unsanitary that they are unfit for human habitation.”<sup>82</sup> Rent strikes and protests filed with the city’s Fair Rent Committee had done little to alleviate the housing problem, and it became clear that some sort of governmental intervention was necessary.

In September 1941, a temporary housing project for African American workers bearing the name of Sojourner Truth was constructed by the Detroit Housing Commission (DHC) and financed by the Federal Housing Administration. Black activists and their white supporters had hoped that the project could be used to break down segregation. Yet both the FHA and DHC had an explicit policy against “any attempt to change the racial pattern of any area in Detroit” since such an action “will result in violent opposition to the housing program.”<sup>83</sup> Given the choice between segregated housing and no housing at all, a coordinated movement to challenge the status quo would have to wait. Unfortunately, even segregated housing did not sit well with whites in the neighborhood. The area’s Polish residents, quipped Reverend Hill, thought that Sojourner Truth was a Polish woman. Realizing their “mistake,” the project soon became embroiled in a seven-month-long controversy.<sup>84</sup>

The Sojourner Truth housing controversy, in which Reverend Hill played a leading role, was more than a battle over Black occupancy of defense housing.<sup>85</sup> Placed in a broader context, the controversy was also about the racial, ethnic, and religious tensions that afflicted the city throughout World War II. It was, as Coleman Young put it, “a microcosm of all the indigenous issues that plagued Detroit—the severe housing shortage, the competition between blacks and immigrants, the polariz-

ing agenda of the left wing and the right, and the chronic insensitivity of the United States government.”<sup>86</sup>

At the outset, however, the site seemed ideal. It was some distance from the main African American district on the city’s lower east side but only three or four blocks from a Black middle-class community called Conant Gardens where nearly 125 Black families resided. Between Conant Gardens and the project, approximately 50 Polish families lived intermixed with a few Blacks. Both of the public schools in the neighborhood were racially and ethnically mixed. Moreover, in the past the relationship between Blacks and Poles, the city’s two largest cultural minorities, had been relatively good. State senators Stanley Nowak and Charles Diggs, for instance, had run joint campaigns in city elections, and both were elected to represent districts with Polish and Black residents. Still, the DHC was met with a storm of criticism from residents led by Congressman Rudolph G. Tenerowicz, Joseph Buffa, an Italian American realtor, and Fr. Constantine Dzink, a Polish Catholic priest—who wanted to exclude non-whites altogether.

Father Dzink, who was also interviewed by the authors of the 1943 “Survey of Religious and Racial Conflict Forces,” was in effect a Polish Catholic version of Gerald Smith and Frank Norris. He is described as “an aged, bald, Polish peasant” who has “power without a show of force” and regularly gives “‘instructions’ (not sermons) to his obedient Poles at five Masses each Sunday morning.” Throughout the interview, Dzink continuously referred to “niggers” and the growing alliance between Blacks and Jews: “And now here in Detroit . . . we have the Jews and Niggers making a combination,” he is quoted as saying. “The Niggers are trusting the Jews and giving up their money to them and defending them and voting for them. Nobody ever votes for a Jew except another Jew or a Nigger.” As men of the cloth, Dzink, Frank, and Smith each latched onto racial and ethnic fears and then legitimated these fears by endowing them with a quasi-divine character. For each, the dictates of God and country rendered race mixing a dangerous practice.<sup>87</sup>

Citing the damage to property values and fear for the safety of “our white girls,” an association—the Fenelon–Seven Mile Road Development Association, a white citizens committee—was formed. The association met weekly at Dzink’s St. Louis the King parish church, located on St. Louis Avenue in the heart of a large Polish neighborhood, to hear speakers (including priests), and plan strategy.<sup>88</sup> Their persistence paid off. In the first in a series of reversals, the Federal Housing Administration turned the project over to whites. Immediately, the Black community, aided by the national offices of the NAACP and the Urban League,

swung into action, and the controversy gave rise to a Black citizens committee. The committee was organized by the Rev. Horace A. White, who was the only African American member of the Detroit Housing Commission, State senator Charles Diggs, Louis Martin, J. J. McClendon, and Gloster Current of the NAACP, as well as attorney C. LeBron Simmons and Reverend Hill. Hill was elected as chairman, with Simmons serving as treasurer.<sup>89</sup>

As with the Citizen's Committee for Jobs in War Industry, which would be organized subsequently, the Sojourner Truth Citizens Committee reveals the degree to which coalition politics, organized around a single issue, was a real possibility in wartime Detroit. The committee arranged for mass meetings every Sunday at various churches to distribute information and raise funds. Its activities were supplemented by almost daily lunchtime meetings at the Lucy Thurman YWCA. Eventually, every major institution, organization, and socioeconomic class in the Black community was represented. Support from white leftists and liberals was a bit lacking at first, but as the controversy heated up the committee began to take on an interracial character. Jack Raskin and the CRF helped with legwork, strategy, and publicity. Using the mimeograph machine at the CRF office, they kept the community informed by producing a weekly newsletter, and details of the controversy were reported in the city's Black papers. While the majority of the members of Jewish community maintained a very low profile, "considerable financial assistance" was given by Jewish merchants led by Samuel Liebermann of the Jewish Community Council. To counter the inflammatory pronouncement of racist demagogues, Dr. Henry Hitt Crane, the noted pastor of the Central Methodist Episcopal Church, served on the Steering Committee and "spoke courageously before congregants, councilmen and irate white protestors."<sup>90</sup> Pressured by the foundry men of Local 600, particularly Horace Sheffield and Shelton Tappes, the local protested, manned picket lines, and donated large sums of money. Financial assistance from these sources, coupled with plate passing at weekly mass meetings that attracted over three thousands persons at their height, gave the committee an operating budget of over six thousand dollars—funds held and guaranteed by the Detroit NAACP.

Reverend Hill spoke at many of the mass meetings and large rallies held throughout the summer of 1942 and accompanied the interracial delegations that met with local, state, and federal officials. Geraldine Bledsoe, one of the dozens of women who became involved in the controversy, remembered Hill as being "in the forefront of it all. . . . We'd go

out to the Sojourner Truth grounds and stand upon trucks and make speeches. . . . And he [Reverend Hill] really did give his, you know, enormous part of his physical strength, an enormous part of his economic resources as well."<sup>91</sup> With the involvement of prominent clergymen and the utilization of churches as meeting sites, the fight to save the Sojourner Truth homes for Black occupancy took the form of a religious crusade. "God give you courage to stand for the right you will be rewarded with the faith and support of the people," read a telegram Geraldine Bledsoe sent to Mayor Jeffries's office. Louis Martin, who was a Catholic, urged other Catholics and the archdiocese to support the citizens committee. Even a telegram from the secular-minded Jack Raskin begins with congratulations extended by "my church and organization."<sup>92</sup> For Reverend Hill, this religious bent was even more pronounced. "I believe," wrote Hill to a fellow clergyman who suspected that the Sojourner Truth committee was part of a communist plot "to expose the damnable hypocrisy of white America and the white Christian church, so-called—which cries 'Let us be brothers and have unity,' and yet fosters and harbors the best instrument that denial has to prevent the kingdom of God coming here on earth, which is racial hatred through the claim of white supremacy."<sup>93</sup>

Hill was careful to frame his and the committee's demands in terms of morality, justice, and loyalty to the nation and its principles. The Sojourner Truth controversy was, according to Hill, "a crisis of all America," and in this vein he reached out to the loyal and patriotic Polish Americans living near the Sojourner Truth homes. "Our enemies are the same," he declared, "Hitler hates both of us."<sup>94</sup> Hill was well aware of the positions in favor of Black occupancy that had been taken by Polish friends and fellow activists such as Stanley Nowak and his wife Margaret, as well as the outspoken and uncompromising Mary Zuk. In fact, Hill's view appeared to rest on the idea that no individual or group willing to give time and energy to the fight should be excluded.

The committee was victorious, but the price of victory was violence. As the first group of Black workers attempted to move in, they were met with over a thousand angry whites armed with clubs and knives. Although neither side involved in the controversy needed any outside encouragement, the white citizens committee blamed the violence and disruption on a communist conspiracy to stir up race hatred while Hill and the civil rights community put the blame on domestic fascists, religious demagogues, and the KKK. Once again, the connections between the KKK and fundamentalist demagogues (with anti-Black Catholics

lumped in for good measure) were repeatedly invoked as a cause for unrest.

#### CLAUDE WILLIAMS COMES TO TOWN

Although the bigotry and episodes of violence in wartime Detroit had myriad causes, members of the city's Left remained fixated on what they perceived to be the religious roots of racism. Left-labor activists took every opportunity to denounce divisive religious figures such as Gerald Smith, J. Frank Norris, and their followers, but none of their efforts made much of a dent in either Smith's or Norris's popularity. The problem was that all of their activities took place almost exclusively on the level of negative propaganda. Rarely did they attempt to reach the thousands of the city's evangelical and fundamentalist believers directly in a language to which they could relate. The deficiencies in this tactic were finally addressed in the spring of 1942 when another potential solution to the perceived fundamentalist problem presented itself. In early May, just months after the violent scuffle generated by the Sojourner Truth housing controversy, Detroit's civil rights community was augmented by the arrival of Claude C. Williams, a southern white minister who preached a radical gospel inspired as much by Marx and Lenin as it was by Christ. Accepting a position as "minister of labor" for the Detroit Presbytery, Williams soon became involved in local political struggles. Just as the CIO and UAW deployed workers as organizers able to reach other workers, the Left welcomed Williams as a white religious southerner able to reach other white religious southerners. Along with many of the members of the civil rights community, Williams was convinced that the "500,000 uncritical ex-rural people who have come to Detroit . . . provide fertile soil for all who would sow 'Divide and Conquer' seeds of hate."<sup>95</sup>

Williams was no stranger to Detroit and acclimated quickly. He had first visited the city in the fall of 1941 as a speaker at an event organized by the CRF's Professional League for Civil Rights, when he probably met Hill for the first time, and he had a warm relationship with the Rev. John Miles, who was Hill's assistant pastor at Hartford Avenue Baptist. Miles was "an old colleague of Tennessee days" whose antiracist work with Williams had once led them to be run out of Chattanooga. He also came to know Stanley and Margaret Nowak, Maurice Sugar, and the other members of the civil rights community. "Claude Williams is living proof to many people that the church can be interested in the people and in the problems of labor and people generally," wrote Stanley Nowak in

1944. “He has made those most neglected and ignored by the church feel that the church is for them, too, and that there is a brotherhood, a living, vital brotherhood in the church today, that is above color and labels.<sup>96</sup>

Williams’s ties to Reverend Hill were especially close. Not only did Hill literally thank God for Williams’s work in Detroit, but the two men remained friends even after Williams returned to the South.<sup>97</sup> When he was defrocked in the mid-1950s for his “communistic” leanings and unorthodox theology, Hill reordained him at a ceremony performed at Hartford.<sup>98</sup> The two ministers shared a number of views, but, unlike Hill, Williams developed a highly intricate political theology and left behind a rather lengthy written record. Although his stay in Detroit would prove to be brief, Williams’s sojourn is well worth considering for what it reveals about the nature of the relationship between religion and left-oppositional politics during the war.

Williams’s background made him ideal for the task at hand. Born in 1895 to a family of tenant farmers in the hills of Weakley County, Tennessee, Williams was raised in a strict, fundamentalist household. A respect for the often unyielding land and a pious belief in the promise of Heaven and the fear of Hell structured his early life. Indeed, Williams’s reflections on his fundamentalist upbringing and early education offer some insights into the general nature of these beliefs.

I entered the ministry in 1921, because I felt that God had called me to preach the Gospel. I believed that there was a literal burning Hell of Fire and Brimstone and that there was a beautiful, pleasant, joyous Heaven. I believed it. And I loved people. . . . And I didn’t want people to go to Hell. So I entered the ministry to save their souls. . . . The evangelical emphasis was the heart of all of my messages.<sup>99</sup>

After completing his religious training at Bethel College, a small seminary run by the Cumberland Presbytery, Williams married Joyce King, a Bethel missionary student from rural Mississippi. With Joyce, he accepted the pastorate of a cluster of Presbyterian congregations in middle Tennessee, where the two were warmly received.

Williams’s evangelicalism remained, but the context was gradually altered as he began to rebel against the strict fundamentalism of his youth. The pietistic view of God and Christianity that he and Joyce were given as a birthright was increasingly brought into question as the young couple began to explore the central themes of modern religious thought. When Williams discovered Harry Emerson Fosdick’s *The Mod-*

*ern Uses of the Bible* in 1927, he called it a “turning point” in his life. Like other theologians and practitioners of a militant social gospel, Fosdick counseled his readers to ignore biblical literalism (and apparent factual inaccuracies) and focus instead on the revolutionary potential of Christianity. Following this advice led Williams away from a conventional church ministry and toward a new struggle with the meaning of religion and its application in everyday life and politics. Taking a leave of absence from his congregation, he enrolled in the Rural Church School at Vanderbilt University where he participated in a series of summer seminars taught by Alva W. Taylor, who, like Fosdick, had adopted a perspective on the role of religion in modern society inspired by the social gospel. Williams credited both men with aiding him in the removal of “theological debris” from his understanding of Christ and His teachings.<sup>100</sup>

Williams also credited other students at Vanderbilt—especially Don West, Miles Horton, Howard Kester, and Ward Rogers, all of whom would become deeply involved in socialist, trade union, and civil rights work in the South—with helping him to see the connections among race, gender, class, and economic exploitation within the context of American capitalism.<sup>101</sup> By the time he left Vanderbilt, Williams had already developed an “unorthodox” view of the Bible and Christianity. The differences between him and Reverend Hill in this regard are instructive. In Hill’s preaching style, for instance, political affairs and social commentary were generally appended to the beginnings and ends of his sermons. “The meat of his sermons” recalled the Rev. Charles Adams, Hill’s protégé and the current pastor of Hartford, “did not seem to me to be titled in the direction of his ideological commitments.” Rather, he tended to focus on the exegesis of biblical themes and stories and the application of moral and spiritual—as opposed to overtly political—teachings. I have suggested throughout that Hill’s politics was very much rooted in his religious commitment to social justice, but there was, as Adams observed, a sort of theological separation between his sermons and his activism. Unlike Hill, who arguably never lost his evangelicalism or his conservative understanding of the Bible, Williams infused theology with politics and social commentary at every turn.<sup>102</sup>

Moreover, Williams was dedicated to stripping away much of the supernaturalism associated with religion. Thomas Jefferson famously created a revised version of the Bible by literally cutting away the references to miracles and other “irrational” and “unbelievable” passages. Williams did this and more—he transformed Jesus into the very human leader of a class-conscious revolutionary movement aimed at destroying “fascist” Rome. This, Williams argued, was a more authentic vision of

Jesus, one that could be fruitfully juxtaposed with the obtuse “Christ-centered” theology of Saint Paul. Such views, coupled with his growing affinity for labor unions, his attacks on segregation—not to mention his smoking, drinking, and swearing—precipitated his removal from his position at the church in Paris, Arkansas, where pictures of Eugene Debs, Lenin, and Jesus (his three heroes) adorned the parsonage walls. In the following years, Williams traveled throughout the state organizing hunger strikes, working with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) and laying the foundations for what he envisioned as “a mass people’s movement.”<sup>103</sup>

The cumulative result of Williams’s efforts was the People’s Institute of Applied Religion. The genesis of the institute was the Sunday evening “Philosopher’s Club” sessions held in the Williams home in Paris, Arkansas, where Claude and Joyce were sent in 1930 to serve a small Presbyterian mission church and where the young couple threw themselves, body and soul, into efforts to organize mine workers with an eye toward joining the United Mine Workers of America. The Sunday sessions were a regular feature of church life, involving open and wide-ranging discussions of religion, politics, and culture. As Williams traveled across the state to other mining regions, similar “socio-Christian forums” were established. It was through this kind of religious and political work that Williams first came to the attention of prominent theologians such as Reinhold Neibuhr and sympathetic religious laypersons such as Norman Thomas, who sent his regards as “a former Presbyterian minister and as a Socialist.” From his post at the Union Theological Seminary, Neibuhr offered more than his regards. He also sent financial and spiritual support, the former through the auspices of the seminary and its Fellowship of Christian Socialists and the latter through a sporadic correspondence that lasted several years.<sup>104</sup>

Even after Williams was forced to leave Paris in 1935—decamping first to Fort Smith, Arkansas, where he was jailed for three months for participating in a demonstration by unemployed workers and tried for heresy by the Presbytery, and then to the relative safety of Little Rock, where he and Joyce became heavily involved in the STFU—they continued to devote themselves to worker education and organizing in a religious context. It was in Little Rock that Williams got his first major opportunity to truly test some of his developing ideas of how to use the Bible as a foundation for political transformation, as his work with the STFU encouraged him to set up a school—the New Era School of Social Action and Prophetic Religion—to train grassroots organizers. Further, by 1938 he had taken over the directorship of the state’s most notable

labor school, Commonwealth College (founded by utopian socialists in the 1920s), which allowed him to use his work with sharecroppers as the field program of the institution. At Commonwealth, Williams collaborated with a local artist, Dan Genin, to develop charts and visual aids that demonstrated Williams's political interpretations of biblical themes and passages. The charts from this period were simple line drawings in black and white, such as one called the Divine Triangle, in which Love, Hope, and Faith were juxtaposed with Individualism and equated with the Religion of the People using plus and minus signs to express the relationships: Love, Hope, and Faith minus Individualism equals Religion of the People.<sup>105</sup>

This productive period in Williams's life did not last long. Sectarian conflict within the STFU, primarily between socialists and communists, led to his expulsion from the board, and he subsequently resigned from Commonwealth. In the aftermath of disappointment and potential defeat, he persevered by transforming the New Era School into the People's Institute of Applied Religion. Formally organized in 1940, the PIAR was the culmination of years of practical work as an organizer among both rural farmers and industrial workers whose perceptions of life were deeply rooted in religious belief. In its initial years, it worked closely with the sharecropper movement and the emerging activism of the CIO in the South, for which it received union support and praise. The PIAR also received support from Niebuhr and Harry Ward, as well as organizations such as the Methodist Federation for Social Action, the Church League for Industrial Democracy, and especially the National Religion and Labor Foundation, whose executive secretary, Willard Uphaus, was a friend of Williams's. Liston Pope, a student of the role of religion in the Gastonia strikes in textile mills and author of *Millhands and Preachers*, was on the board in the early 1940s.<sup>106</sup>

In terms of practical programs, the PIAR sponsored three-to-ten-day institutes for roughly fifty people equally divided between Blacks and whites and men and women. The participants were generally drawn from members of the clergy and lay preachers because, as Williams put it, "[T]hese were people who had some tendency toward leadership." These leaders were "the toiling Negro and white preachers, exhorters, deacons and teachers among the mass religious movements, denominations and sects." Using scripture, songs, prayer, and the increasingly elaborate visual aids designed by Williams, the PIAR attempted to *supplement* religious piety with a conscious critique of the social system and its failings. "We were realistic," Williams explained years later, "or at least we tried to be."



We discovered that the fact that people believed in the Bible literally could be used to an advantage. . . . Being so-called fundamentalists, accepting the Bible verbatim, had nothing whatsoever to do with a person's understanding of the issues that related to bread and meat, raiment, shelter, jobs and civil liberties. Therefore, our approach was not an attempt to supplant their present mindset, but to supplement it with a more horizontal frame of reference. And we found that supplementing and supplanting turned out to be the same thing."<sup>107</sup>

In this way, the PIAR worked to influence religious leaders—and, by extension, those who looked to them for guidance and reassurance—to renounce the sin of ultraindividualism, racism, sexism, and ultimately the capitalist system as a whole.

A PIAR report from the fall of 1941 describes several institutes held in Cotton Belt places such as the Missco, Arkansas, federal farm; Longview, Texas; Hayti, Missouri; and Osceola and Carson Lake, Arkansas. The work of these institutes was carried out by a group of colleagues who joined the organization shortly after its formation, including the Rev. Owen H. Whitfield, a Black Missouri preacher and codirector of the PIAR; Williams's brother Dan, himself a sharecropper and preacher in Missouri; the Rev. A. L. Campbell, a white preacher and dynamic organizer from Arkansas; Don West, who had studied with Williams under Alva Taylor at Vanderbilt; Harry and Grace Kroger; and others. Thus, by the time Williams was invited to Detroit in the spring of 1942, he could boast of a substantial organization with a two-year track record of success.<sup>108</sup>

In his correspondence with the Rev. Henry Jones prior to his arrival in Detroit, Williams claims to be thoroughly convinced of two things: first, that to do anything about the growing intolerance in America "we must do something among the people whose economic conditions and lack of understanding have made them intolerant"; and, second, that the international situation and conditions at home "provide an ideal opportunity to launch an all out offensive for justice and goodwill among these people through prophetic religion." In this regard, his decision to follow the waves of southern migrants to the Arsenal of Democracy is understandable, especially given his belief that these migrants "constitute the balance between democracy and fascism, being potentially the democratic instruments for a just society and potentially the shock troops for an unjust society"—between, that is to say, the two traditions that Louis Martin claimed structured the tensions in America and wartime Detroit.<sup>109</sup>

When Claude Williams arrived in Detroit, he found many willing allies, including Reverends Hill and Miles, who were supportive of the PIAR's work among "factory preachers." Williams immediately grasped the importance of the men, and occasionally women, who worked in the factories during the week and ministered to the spiritual needs of tiny congregations in storefronts and basements on Sundays, as well as those who set up makeshift altars and held services in the plants themselves. He was particularly interested in the Pleasant Valley Tabernacles, which, as he explained to the authors of the "Survey of Religious and Racial Conflict Forces," began in the Ford plants and were "in most of the large plants," including "very large well-supported Tabernacles in Department 71 of the Dodge Truck Mound Road Plant, in the DeSoto Gun Plant, and in the Dodge Main Plant." The report summarizes "Congregations of these Tabernacles comprise, in addition to fellow workers, company officials and their white collar workers, plus the munitions workers from the Southern Baptist churches."

The pastors are usually ignorant and often almost illiterate. These pastors of the basement churches preach and pray for their college-bred bosses, company officials, and favorite stenographers. They must be laughing up their sleeves. Of course the preachers are flattered and are given good enough collections to keep the little basement churches going.<sup>110</sup>

These shop preachers were the PIAR's chief target audience. One prominent recruit, Virgil Vanderburg, an African American shop preacher and worker employed by the Packard Company, strove to implement the institute's teaching—its belief that "the starting point of learning is at the level of the known"—at his Packard plant. Beginning in February 1943, he told an audience at a PIAR event, "we gathered the names of and made acquaintance with some twelve work-a-day preachers" at the plant. This group served as "a nucleus" for PIAR recruitment and training and allowed them to steadily increase their in-plant network of "Negro and white brothers in the ministry." "At present," Vanderburg proudly related, "there are twenty religious meetings in Packard each week at the noon hour" and the number of "listeners at the Thursday and Friday meetings combined far outnumbered the attendance at the monthly Packard Local union meetings."<sup>111</sup>

Such laudable efforts to fight fire with fire, did not prevent the outbreak of hate strikes at Packard touched off by the upgrading of Black workers. On June 3, 1943, twenty-five thousand white workers walked

out and many milled around the gates of the plant listening to local members of the KKK deliver anti-Black diatribes. A frantic UAW president, R. J. Thomas, had to threaten the men with the loss of their jobs to get them back to work.<sup>112</sup> As Williams observed in a 1943 article entitled “Hell Brewers of Detroit,” an “exposé” of religious fascist and racist demagogues in the city, Detroit seemed headed for a major racial and religious explosion. And Williams, personally, seemed headed for a showdown with Gerald Smith.

Smith was featured prominently in Williams’s article, as he was in the Civil Rights Federation’s pamphlet “Smash the Fifth Column” and the 1943 survey, which quotes him extensively. In response, Smith contacted the Presbyterian hierarchy and demanded that Williams be silenced. Years later Smith was still angry, calling Williams a “fraudulent clergyman” who was as “completely in the Communist apparatus as a man could be.”<sup>113</sup> Throughout the summer of 1943 Smith distributed copies of a “confidential” report on Williams, detailing his “subversive” activities in the South and the city to members of the local Presbytery along with a variety of local religious figures—including, oddly enough, Reverend Hill. The feud between Smith and Williams lasted for years, even after Williams left Detroit.

Throughout the spring and summer the city remained as much a study in contrasts as Smith and Williams. On the one hand, the UAW and NAACP worked together to bring ten thousand of their members to Cadillac Square to protest racial discrimination in Detroit area plants. On the other hand, hate strikes and periodic violent flare-ups seemed to portend a darker future. Speaking at the rally at Cadillac Square, Walter White added his voice to a growing chorus of foreboding. “Let us drag out into the open what has been whispered throughout Detroit for months, that a race riot may break out here at any time.” “The ugly truth,” agreed the Association of Catholic Trade Unionist’s *Wage Earner*, “is that there is a growing, subterranean race war going on in the City of Detroit which can have no other ultimate result than an explosion of violence, unless something is done to stop it.” “Detroit,” warned a writer for *Life* magazine, “Is Dynamite.”<sup>114</sup>

The short fuse was finally lit on Sunday, July 20, 1943, when over ten thousand residents crowded onto Belle Isle, the city’s island park, seeking relief from the heat. Fights broke out across the park, escalating throughout the day, and rumors swiftly spread throughout the city’s downtown neighborhoods. Many residents of Paradise Valley heard and believed that a white mob had thrown a Black woman and child—in some versions a pregnant Black woman—off the wide stone bridge that

joins the island to the city. In other neighborhoods, the rumor was that a Black mob attacked a white woman. In any case, by 11:00 p.m. some five thousand people were battling along the expanse of the bridge while the violence spread to the city proper.

Throughout the night, roaming white mobs attacked Black residents, while the looting and burning continued nearly unabated. Representatives from the civil rights community, including Reverends Hill and White, Father Dade, Jack Raskin, and the UAW's R. J. Thomas, among others, gathered at the Lucy Thurman YWCA for a strategy meeting with Mayor Edward Jeffries, who was denounced by the assembled group for his inaction. After nearly twenty-four hours of violence and chaos, the governor proclaimed a state of emergency and the mayor took to the airwaves to plead for calm. By this time, nearly 75 percent of the city had been affected by the riot, sixteen transportation lines were cut off, the Fire Department was struggling to contain multiple fires, and city hospitals were operating at full capacity. After almost two days, federal troops entered the city and forcibly cleared the streets; shortly thereafter, President Roosevelt signed a proclamation placing Detroit under federal martial law. By the time order was restored, thirty-four people had been killed (twenty-five African Americans, seventeen of whom were killed by the indiscriminate shooting of the police into buildings and crowds around Hastings Street), more than seven hundred people had sustained injuries, over two million dollars' worth of property had been destroyed, and a million man-hours had been lost from war production. Overall the city was deeply scarred both physically and psychologically.<sup>115</sup>

Everyone seemed to have a different and often conflicting story about who or what had caused the riot. The mayor's office, in a "white paper," held African Americans and their Left and liberal white allies responsible and attempted, in the eyes of the civil rights community, to whitewash the whole affair. In response, union officials (including UAW president R. J. Thomas), city councilman and former UAW organizer George Edwards, the NAACP, the NNC, the Urban League, the International Labor Defense, the National Lawyers Guild, the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, and the Communist Party, among others, joined a coalition that spanned the left, right and center of the city's civil rights community and called for a grand jury investigation into the riot and its aftermath. Leftists tended, by and large, to place the blame on the KKK, Father Coughlin, J. Frank Norris, Gerald Smith, and other "hell brewers" in the city. Others, as a writer for the *Detroit News* recorded, blamed southern whites, who "have come here in vast numbers, bringing with them their Jim Crow notions of the Negro." One of

the stranger rumors blamed a shadowy organization, the Development of Our Own, founded by Satakata Takahashi (his real name was Naka Nakane), who represented himself as a major in the Japanese army dedicated to assisting African Americans in the fight against white supremacy.<sup>116</sup>

Reverend Hill, for his part, split the blame among southern whites, religious demagogues, and “jitterbugs”: a reference to the unconventional style adopted by Black and white youth in Detroit (and other cities) during the war. Hill saw no larger social or cultural meaning behind the zoot suit or its place in Black urban youth culture. While he always took a special interest in the welfare of young people, he had little respect for this type of cultural politics. During the riot he had had a run-in with the jitterbugs in the form of a rock thrown at his head through a car window. “Oh my God, we got the wrong man,” the youths are reported as saying—evidently because of his light complexion they thought he was white. The young men apologized profusely and offered to drive him home. Hill was fine except for “a great big hickey on the back of his head about the size of an orange.” “A peculiar thing,” he recalled, is that “when I came on the [white] area, they threw rocks at me; so I got them from both sides.”<sup>117</sup>

Thousands of stories make up what historian Dominic J. Capeci Jr. calls the “layered violence” that affected the city and its residents in myriad ways. In one small but interesting footnote to African American radical history, one of the young men caught on the bridge between the island and the city was a Black southern migrant and autoworker (and Local 600 member) named Robert F. Williams. Inspired by the militancy of Black UAW members, he penned a piece for the *Daily Worker* in which he promised to one day return to the South and launch a movement for Black freedom and dignity. Years later, he would do precisely that as head of the Monroe, North Carolina, NAACP and an advocate of armed self-defense. In an instance of at least this little corner of history coming full circle, his uncompromising example, his 1962 book *Negroes with Guns*, and articles published in his *Crusader* magazine would inspire a generation of Black radicals in Detroit in the early 1960s.<sup>118</sup>

On a larger level, the riot changed everything and nothing. In an effort to stem the tide of criticism, Mayor Jeffries hastily organized an interracial committee on race relations, to which Hill was appointed, although it had little real power. This maneuver became yet another reason for the civil rights community to work for Jeffries’s defeat in the upcoming elections. Since his election in 1939 Jeffries had maintained strong support within the Black community, but his handling of the riot,

as well as his order against interracial housing, had tarnished his reputation and encouraged African American voters to back the labor slate. "We shall support the labor slate because we believe that the Negro people and organized labor are committed in theory and practice to democratic ideals which must be upheld at all costs," wrote Louis Martin.<sup>119</sup> Unfortunately, this strategy backfired and Jeffries was able to turn the animus of the Blacks and the civil rights community to his advantage.

Throughout the campaign, Jeffries attacked the "un-American" cabal of union officials and their Black allies and was widely accused of opening the door "for the Klan, for pro-fascists, the Smithites, and all other reactionary elements in the population."<sup>120</sup> Nonetheless, Jeffries painted his political opponent, Judge Frank Fitzgerald, as a puppet of the UAW and repeatedly used the alliance between Blacks and the UAW to ignite racial fears. "Arrayed against me," Jeffries proclaimed, "are groups demanding mixed housing—the mingling of Negroes and whites in the same neighborhoods. . . . The Negroes of Detroit, in the primary, voted against me almost unanimously. I take it, therefore, that my opponent must have promised to make mixed housing the policy of his administration if elected."<sup>121</sup> The Jeffries campaign set a pattern in municipal politics that was to endure for the next two decades. On the one hand, his negative attacks brought the identity of interests between African Americans and union officials into clearer focus. In 1943 and thereafter, Black districts voted overwhelmingly for the labor slate. Such levels of support had not been the norm previously. On the other hand, the politics of race, labor, and Red baiting proved successful in unifying conservatives and reactionaries while splitting the vote of the union's white rank and file.

All the elements of what would emerge as a pattern dominating post-war politics in the city were in place on November 4 as nearly four hundred thousand citizens went to the polls. Jeffries was reelected by a comfortable margin of thirty-five thousand votes. Fitzgerald carried all of the African American districts, as well as the city's west side, where a number of UAW members resided, while Jeffries racked up landslide victories in outlying, low-income white districts, which were also heavily populated with UAW members. For the union and the civil rights community, the election was both the embodiment of Detroit's postriot problems and an important political lesson. The need to obtain political power and representation within municipal government became a leading priority, especially for the Black community. All prior attempts to get an African American elected to the Common Council had failed, including the 1943 campaign of attorney Edward Simmons. Renewed efforts to do so

became more pressing than ever, and the man chosen for the job would be none other than Reverend Hill. As World War II drew to a close, the civil rights community could only look forward and wonder and fret and hope and pray about the future. It was already clear, however, that Red and race baiting would become a key factor in the ongoing struggle between the two American traditions.