

THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE NORTH AND SOUTH

Coalition Politics and the Foundation of a Second Civil Rights Community in Detroit

“I think we overestimated the potential support of the trade union movement,” Coleman A. Young lamented years after the National Negro Labor Council had been hounded out of existence in the late 1950s, “and underestimated the necessity of rooting ourselves in the ghetto.” We needed,” Young continued with the clarity of hindsight,

in retrospect, it seems to me, a more even-handed approach . . . and we had an unrealistic concept of how far the trade union movement would go without organized pressure and support from the black community. We were “‘way out in front.” Life took care of that. When the man cracked down we didn’t have but one place to go and that’s back to the ghetto.¹

Young was not the only person to journey back to the ghetto. An entire cohort of Black activists felt it could no longer rely on a labor movement that was increasingly bureaucratic and recalcitrant about the racism in its own ranks. Nor could these operatives continue to rely on the Communist Party, which, along with most of its “front groups” (such as the Civil Rights Congress) had been driven underground by the anti-

communist crusade.² More broadly, Young's assessment also reflected some activists' growing skepticism about the viability of coalitions formed with leftist and liberal white allies.³

The events that unfolded in the South during the early years of the modern civil rights movement offered a model for collective action and self-determination within African American communities at large. There was a sense that what was being done in the South out of circumstance and necessity could be implemented in Detroit by design. It was this sense that fueled the rising popularity of Black nationalism in some Detroit activist circles during the late 1950s. In Detroit, Black nationalism came to stand for a "political return to the ghetto" and the principles of grassroots community organizing. But the idea itself, however defined, was not new. Detroit had a strong and vibrant chapter of Marcus Garvey's UNIA dating back to the 1920s and played host to the nascent Nation of Islam, whose Temple #1 was constructed there. Although Black nationalism was opposed by activists such as the Rev. Charles A. Hill, it eventually became, in a sense, Detroit's "other" social, political, and cultural tradition—one that younger activists would eagerly tap into.

Detroit's new articulation of Black nationalism was driven not only by the conservatism of the labor movement and the narrowing of political alternatives under McCarthyism but also by dramatic changes in the city's social and economic landscape. The 1950s were hard on the city and its residents. If there was any truth in the old saying that "as goes Ford, so goes Detroit," then things were not going well. After the loss of profitable defense contracts from the Korean War, area plants scaled back production and laid off thousands of workers. Smaller concerns, such as Hudson and Packard, were unable to compete in the new marketplace and ceased production altogether. It was not until the mid-1960s that the industry would experience an upswing in the bust-and-boom cycle. The processes of decentralization, implementation of new technologies, and suburbanization of the white workforce combined to transform the industry and the city.⁴ Industrial decentralization and the movement of plants to the suburbs and other areas of the country began in earnest in the 1950s. As an example, in 1941, the year of the crucial Ford strike, the automaker's massive River Rouge complex had employed eighty-five thousand workers. By 1957, due to automation and decentralization, only forty thousand workers remained.⁵

Automation was supposed to increase efficiency at the point of production, but it came at an enormous cost for unskilled workers. The jobs that had provided a point of entry into the industrial workforce for first-

generation Europeans and later for Black Americans were in short supply. African American workers were confined to unskilled positions during the twenty years from 1940 to 1960, not only in the automotive industry but in other occupations as well. Nearly two decades of struggle for fair employment practices had culminated in the Michigan Fair Employment Act of 1955. Yet in 1960 nearly 70 percent of all Black male laborers were *still* classified as unskilled factory operatives, service workers, or day laborers, exactly the same percentage as in 1940. In 1950, Black families' average income was 76 percent of that of white households; by 1960, the number had fallen to an even more dismal 52 percent.⁶

As contributors to family earnings, Black women continued to lag behind men. The employment opportunities for women were greatly diminished in general throughout the 1950s, as Black and white women were forced out of industrial jobs gained during World War II. Although the UAW had a special Women's Bureau to deal with issues of work and gender, the union was disinclined to fight for the retention of its female members.⁷ Wanita Allen, a young Black woman and former domestic worker, was hired at Ford's River Rouge plant during the war and then was laid off in 1945. "After a taste of a decent job," Allen later remarked, "to go back to housework [was] just almost impossible." Divorced and with a young daughter to provide for, she had few alternatives. Although women workers did make steady gains throughout the 1950s (33 percent of women age fourteen and older worked outside of the home by the end of the decade), six out of every ten Black women workers were, like Allen, employed in domestic and service jobs. Only 20 percent of Black women worked at the more profitable jobs available in industry, sales, or office work, compared to nearly 60 percent of white women.⁸ Detroit also suffered through four major periods of recession in the 1950s, further aggravating the effects of gender and race discrimination in the workplace and union halls. As a result, unemployment at the end of the decade hovered at 10.2 percent overall and 18.2 percent for African American men and women. The situation was even worse for young workers, with unemployment among those age sixteen to twenty-nine ranging from a high of 76 percent to a low of 21 percent, depending on whether the assessment was based solely on conditions in Detroit or in the entire metropolitan region.⁹

The construction of an extensive highway system around and through the city during the postwar period—unaccompanied as it was by the creation of a modern mass transit system (a deficit that plagues Detroit's workers to this day)—quickenened the suburbanization of the

city's native white and ethnic white population, which followed the industrial exodus. During the 1950s, over 350,000 white and white ethnic, mostly young families made the transition from city to suburb in pursuit of their own American Dream: home ownership, good schools, a nearby shopping mall, and racial and class homogeneity. Since most of Detroit's suburban areas initially barred Blacks, Latinos, and in some cases Jews, it was the non-white and multiracial poor who were left behind in the inner city. At the same time, more Blacks were making the transition from the South to urban areas such as Detroit. Black southern workers, who were pushed out of the rural South by the introduction of more efficient farming technologies and the transition to less labor-intensive crops such as timber and feed, were attracted to Detroit by the illusion of better employment opportunities and less systematic discrimination. The illusion proved powerful, even at this late stage; during the 1950s, 'Detroit's African American population grew from 303,000 to 487,000, or 29.1 percent of the city's total. White and white ethnic out-migrants and Black in-migrants effectively passed each other coming and going.¹⁰

Not everything associated with this transformation of the city was bad. In fact, an old joke circulates among some older Black Detroiters about standing at the city limits and waving a cheerful good-bye and good riddance to departing whites, especially the transplanted southerners. The numerical increase of the non-white population translated into impressive gains for Black politicians. Blacks were elected to the Detroit School Board, to other administrative positions, and, as was the case for attorney George Crockett, to key judgeships. By the mid-1960s, a total of ten Black state legislators had been elected, including Coleman A. Young, who had by now managed to rehabilitate his reputation in Democratic circles. Largely due to the existence of Detroit's two large Black congressional districts, Michigan was also the only state to send two African Americans to Washington as members of its congressional delegation. Finally, in 1957, Black attorney William T. Patrick Jr. broke the racial barrier to the city's Common Council—the goal that had eluded Reverend Hill for over a decade and the Black community for even longer.¹¹ Patrick was followed in 1965 by the Rev. Nicholas Hood, who always fully acknowledged the role of Hill, Reverend White, and others in laying the foundation for his achievement. Straddling the pulpit and the podium, Hood served as senior pastor of Plymouth Congregational until 1985 and maintained his council seat until he retired in 1993.¹²

Meanwhile, suburbanization reduced some of the city's racially based housing tensions, as primarily middle-class Blacks moved into the Twelfth Street area, which was previously occupied mostly by Jews. Blacks

also began to move into other parts of the city. The rate of Black home ownership, which was always relatively high in Detroit, nearly doubled, exceeding 40 percent by the mid-1960s. "Detroit was not unlike Chicago or Harlem where there was a concentration of Black people," observed a local activist. "But Detroit was unique in terms of the geographical patterns of how we lived—significantly homes, a basement, a back yard." It is no small matter, for instance, that Motown Records was founded in a privately owned residence on West Grand Boulevard: "Our homes were points of congregation. That gave us a certain control and development that likely triggered the later development of Motown," recalled the label's founder, Berry Gordy. The struggling young company's location gave its early recordings a distinctive flavor. "Motown was a family, right from the beginning," Gordy remembered, "living together, playing together, making music together, eating together."¹³

Still, the majority of Blacks suffered in inadequate housing. Many of the young artists who found a surrogate home and career at Hitsville, USA, had been raised in the city's deteriorating projects, and the majority of the private housing available to minorities remained substandard. Of the eighty-seven thousand new housing units built between 1940 and 1952, for instance, only 2 percent were available for Black residents. Restrictive covenants had been ruled unconstitutional in 1948, but the efforts of white residents to bar Blacks, coupled with the discriminatory policies of banks and the Federal Housing Administration, worked against African Americans' quest for better housing.¹⁴

The city instituted a series of slum clearance plans throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Initially, these programs, which were supposed to be offset by the construction of new, low-income housing, did not seem like a bad idea. "Raze the Slums," had been a liberal rallying cry since the early decades of the twentieth century. Reverend Hill had supported the idea in his 1940s Common Council campaigns, and the issue was a perpetually popular one within the city's Left community. In practice, however, the slum clearance program did more harm than good. By the 1950s, the Black population was finding out that "urban renewal," as the saying went, really meant "Negro removal." Across the country, urban renewal policies destroyed African American neighborhoods. Little or no effort was made to relocate the displaced. The Detroit Plan for urban renewal was conceived under Mayor Jeffries in 1946 but was implemented in 1950 under a new mayor, Albert Cobo, who actively opposed public housing.¹⁵

Although nearly two thousand Black families were quietly displaced in the clearance of some 129 acres of Black Bottom in the oldest core of

Paradise Valley, Cobo studiously ignored the plan's already vague requirement to replace the lost homes with new low-income dwellings. When the first housing project on the cleared land was finally erected in 1958, rents were four to ten times higher for the middle-class residents of the site's new Lafayette Park development than they had been when the area was still a slum. The same sequence was repeated throughout the city's older core areas, as urban neighborhoods gave way to luxury apartments, highways, industrial parks, and medical complexes. In the midst of this massive redevelopment drive, which spanned the period from 1956 to 1966, only 758 low-income units were constructed.¹⁶

The result was even more overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and vice in the few besieged neighborhoods that remained. In a broader sense, the city also lost its centers of culture and community. Black Bottom was, as Coleman Young put it, "a thrilling convergence of people, a wonderfully versatile and self-contained society. It was degenerate, but not without a lofty level of compassion. It was isolated, but sustained by its own passion. It was uneducated, but teeming with ideas. It was crowded, but clean. It was poor, for the most part, but it was fine."¹⁷ While readers might question Young's rather rosy memories, many older Detroiters would likely agree with his sense of loss over the reduction of a wide array of vital Black businesses, including jazz clubs, restaurants, and barbershops, as well as homes and churches, to piles of rubble. In the end, slum clearance, for the most part, merely reproduced what it was supposed to destroy.

Many Black Bottom refugees resettled in and around the Twelfth Street district (north of Grand Boulevard between Linwood and Hamilton Avenues), which had recently served as a haven for Black middle-class homeowners. Neat single-family homes with front lawns and backyards were arrayed along either side of Twelfth while the avenue itself was lined with crowded, increasingly dilapidated apartment buildings interspersed with mostly Jewish-owned stores and businesses. The neighborhood's Jewish population, which had been located in the Hastings Street area until World War I and the influx of African Americans into the city, once again found itself living on the front lines of a Black "invasion."

As older Jewish and other white residents fled the neighborhood, rents skyrocketed while maintenance and services declined. The area's very modest African American population in 1940 had grown by 1950 to over one-third non-white. By 1960 the area had become overwhelmingly Black, with only 3.8 percent white residency. Its density of over twenty-one thousand persons per square mile was more than twice that of the

city's other neighborhoods. Pimps, prostitutes, and numbers runners followed their lower-class Black clientele, and the Twelfth Street commercial strip from West Grand Boulevard to Clairmount Avenue soon replaced Hastings as the center of both high and low Black nightlife. This "east-side invasion" bred class resentment among middle-class residents struggling to maintain their hold on the neighborhood.¹⁸

The brutal processes of urban renewal also provoked the city's clergy, and especially the Rev. Nicholas Hood, to a new wave of activism. Hood was a newcomer to Detroit. Born in Terre Haute, Indiana, and educated at Purdue University and Yale Divinity School, he pastored New Orleans' Central Congregational Church from 1949 to 1958. During his tenure there he significantly improved the church's physical plant, installing central air-conditioning just before his departure to the relief and delight of his congregants. He also threw himself into the nascent civil rights movement, working with the local NAACP, helping to found the New Orleans Improvement Association (established on the model of Montgomery, Alabama's association), and participating in the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Council. Hood was called to Detroit in the fall of 1958 by the members of Plymouth Congregational as a replacement for the Rev. Horace White, who died in February of that year. The congregation was doubtless attracted by Hood's similarity to White. Both men were well educated and well spoken, and both were inspired to liberal activism by the dictates of the social gospel. In fact, as a divinity student at Yale, Hood had studied under Liston Pope and H. Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold Niebuhr's brother. And Hood found White's legacy a "natural fit." Taking after his predecessor, Reverend Hood was dedicated to the notion that "The soul cannot be saved without saving society."¹⁹

Plymouth, located at the intersection of Garfield and Beaubien Streets, was situated in the midst of the old decaying center of Paradise Valley, a society in need of a lot of saving. "It was right in the heart of the slums," Hood recalled. "There was prostitution; Hastings was right around the corner." And yet he also saw a great deal of potential. After praying about it and consulting with his wife and children, Hood agreed to relocate. Two years into his new ministry, Reverend Hood opened the pages of the local newspaper only to discover that Plymouth was part of a 450 acre plot to be cleared during a new wave of urban renewal. To make matters worse, the plans called for the removal of all the neighborhood's Black churches, while leaving white religious institutions intact. In response, Hood pulled together a coalition of clergymen, from the pastors of large established churches such as Plymouth to the minis-

ters of small storefront churches, and created, in 1961, the Fellowship of Urban Renewal Churches “for the purpose of trying to get the city to change its policy to allow Black institutions to remain in the neighborhood.” By then, the Cobo administration (1950–57) had been replaced with that of Mayor Louis C. Miriani (1957–62), who was not inclined to cut deals with the fellowship; several displaced churches were forced to sue for the right to buy land within the proposed renewal area.²⁰

The rebuff from the mayor’s office encouraged the fellowship’s ministers to unite with labor and civil rights activists against Miriani, who had never been popular among the Black population. This seems to have been one of the first times that storefront preachers, who lacked the class and social status of their more established counterparts, were included in any sort of political coalition. When the liberal Jerome P. Cavanagh was elected mayor in 1962, the fellowship justifiably claimed part of the credit. “Overnight,” remembers Hood, the policy was changed. “Well, that showed me the power of politics,” he reminisced. Impressed by this experience, Hood ran for Common Council, unsuccessfully, in a special election in 1964 and then successfully in 1965.²¹

His position at the pulpit, in the community, and on the council made Reverend Hood a prominent member of the city’s liberal coalition. He continued his housing ministry at Plymouth, eventually working directly with the office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to create the Medical Center Court, a twenty-acre, 230-unit development that was the first low- and moderate-income project built in the city since World War II. Unlike city-sponsored urban renewal programs, the Medical Center Court plan allowed some of the area’s displaced residents to return to the neighborhood after the complex was opened in 1963. The center was also one of the first housing projects to be sponsored by a church, at a cost of three million dollars. As part of his efforts to “humanize urban renewal,” Hood also arranged for Plymouth to be relocated to a spot just a few blocks from its original location (which became a parking lot for one of the area’s new hospitals). It was moved to the corner of Warren and St. Antoine, right across the street from Bethel AME, one of the oldest Black churches in the city, which was also able to remain in the area as a result of the protests.

Despite such important victories, local, state and federal governments were painfully slow in addressing the new realities in the inner city. In the expanding economy of the “Affluent Society,” poverty and structural racism were not supposed to exist outside of the “backward” South. Nicholas Lemann exaggerates only slightly when he points out that “anyone working, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, on the

assumption that a Northern racial crisis was on the way had ventured into daring, avant-garde intellectual territory."²² Although Detroit eventually played a large role in the nation's war on poverty, few of the city's mayors or the state's governors offered constructive plans to deal with urban decay or racial and socioeconomic inequalities until the 1960s. The UAW had failed in each of its attempts to elect one of its own as mayor, and the Common Council was severely polarized on racial issues. Cumulatively, political, spatial, social, and economic shifts forced activists to devise new strategies in pursuit of civil rights and social justice. These new strategies would be devised by men and women who formed a second civil rights community, the center of a new local movement in Detroit.

Although some of veterans of the old NNLC and the Civil Rights Congress were able to bridge the generational gap, the first- and second-wave communities had their own distinctive characters. They share certain "family" resemblances but were also characterized by important differences in context, organizational structure—particularly institutional and noninstitutional loci—and ideology. Yet, like its earlier counterpart, the later community found its moral center, to some degree, in Black churches that were hospitable to its movement culture. The Christian faith and the conservatism of certain clergymen were often subjected to scathing critiques, but some young activists did accept spiritual solace, and political direction, from one minister in particular, the Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr., whose Central Congregational Church (later the Shrine of the Black Madonna) was located on Linwood at Hogarth, near Twelfth Street. Here, again, the shift in the city's political geography from the east side to the northwest was evident. Central Congregational was just down the street and around the corner from New Bethel Baptist, which was pastored by the Rev. C. L. [Clarence LaVaughn] Franklin, yet another Black preacher who would soon leave his mark on Detroit.

By transforming Central Congregational into a "free space" for Black militants of diverse political persuasions, and by translating his own political theology into the language of the Black liberation movement, Cleage served a function in the later civil rights community similar to that provided by the Rev. Charles A. Hill in the earlier period. Indeed, Hill's relationship with Cleage offers one lens through which to view the relationship between the two communities. Their often-public theological and political disagreements helped to define the differences between two periods of Detroit activism and the role of religion in each.

The later community and its movement culture did not spring into existence fully formed, however. The two protest centers were separated

by a lull in the cold war, the rise of the southern civil rights movement, and continued negotiations among labor, liberal, and leftist activists in Detroit and across the nation. It was a period in which the labor-liberal coalition, having succeeded in marginalizing the Communist Party and its political milieu, dominated oppositional politics.

In the years between the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the passage of the Civil Rights Act, this often troubled coalition shaped the tenor of activism in northern centers such as Detroit. Although self-styled militants would eventually denounce the liberal coalition for its “gradualism” and “middle-class orientation,” it was an important point of reference for the development of those same militants’ political consciousness. It was also a significant force in its own right. As Reverend Hood put it, “I was not as ‘radical’ as Hill, White or Dade, and surely not Albert Cleage; but there are many ways in which to accomplish the goal of FREEDOM.” He continued,

I come out of the freedom movement in the South (New Orleans), and we used the method of the “good guys” and the “bad guys” all working to win the goal of desegregation. I was the one inside negotiating with the power structure and my friends were on the outside protesting. This method worked all over the South, so I brought this technique with me to Detroit, and in six years I was elected the second Black councilman in the modern history of Detroit.²³

Hood also worked with the NAACP, serving from time to time on its Executive Board, and was appointed to the Detroit Commission on Community Relations (DCCR). Like the stories of other individuals and organizations of the period, Reverend Hood’s experience offers insights into the strengths and shortcomings of a liberal coalition that felt it had the right to a seat at the negotiating table. Hood’s story also exemplifies some of the ways in which clergymen continued to struggle in search of a role in local activism.

ROSA PARKS, THE AFL-CIO, AND THE LIBERAL-LABOR COALITION

In retrospect, the divisions within the national liberal-labor coalition were due not only to strain in the alliance between African Americans and the CIO but also to timing and circumstance. On December 1, as the Congress of Industrial Organizations and its longtime rival the American Federation of Labor were meeting in separate conventions to put

the final touches on a merger agreement, a Black southern seamstress, Rosa Parks, was refusing to move to the “colored” section at the back of a Montgomery, Alabama, city bus. Her ensuing arrest was not Parks’s first act of political resistance but just the latest in a string of protests that had structured her entire political life. She had served as secretary of the local NAACP since 1943 and was a supporter of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Ms. Parks was arrested and jailed for her supposed offense on the bus. Five days later, as the CIO and the AFL were holding their first joint convention as the newly formed AFL-CIO, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was kicked off with a mass rally in one of the city’s Black churches.²⁴

The creation of the AFL-CIO and the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott naturally affected the course of civil rights activism in Detroit, as elsewhere. The National Negro Labor Council, with its strong Detroit council, approached the union merger cautiously while simultaneously celebrating the boycott. “December 5th will be an historic date for American Labor,” the NNLC wrote in an open letter to the AFL and the CIO.

In combining their 15 million members into a new labor organization, the AFL and CIO took a long and significant step toward the realization of one of labor’s most cherished objectives—the unity of all who labor under the banner of a single mighty union. But while the council “hail[ed] present developments toward labor unity because of these positive potentials . . . and because of the specific impetus that labor unity could give to the centuries old struggle for the Negro people in America for Full Freedom,” the new union’s commitment to racial equality within its own ranks was not, the council warned, “automatic or built-in.” “In fact, as the merger provisions now stand,” the NNLC suggested, “there is every reason for grave concern.” Contrasting the Supreme Court’s 1954 rejection of separate but equal in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the leaden pace of unionization in the South, the NNLC took great pains to demonstrate the weakness and inadequacy of the union’s “mealy mouthed language” on Black civil rights.²⁵

The AFL-CIO’s statement against racial discrimination was indeed mealy-mouthed. The leadership’s rhetoric opposed racism in its member unions but refused to bar AFL craft unions, some of which had a long and ongoing history of excluding Blacks. Moreover, the delicately brokered agreement contained no mechanism for sanctioning unions that continued their racist practices, whether formal or informal. The maintenance of unity between the relatively progressive CIO and the relatively conservative AFL required that such controversial issues be handled carefully. This sometimes meant minor concessions to Black

demands. A. Philip Randolph, of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, for instance, was elected to an AFL-CIO vice presidency; and a special Civil Rights Department was created with initial support from Randolph and the NAACP.²⁶ At the same time, the AFL-CIO's new Executive Board remained silent on the yearlong bus boycott in Montgomery. Even the boycott movement's public appeals to morality failed to prick the conscience of the board, whose members refused to endorse either the 1956 National Day of Prayer or the 1958 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom to the nation's capital to demand civil rights legislation. On issues of economic justice, the Executive Board's responses ran the gamut from silence to outright hostility.²⁷

Although such inconsistencies made it clear from the beginning that the newly merged union was going to be at best a diffident ally, the demand for economic justice—a central concern of Detroit's labor-based civil rights movement—united southern and northern struggles in the mid-1950s. Indeed, the Montgomery Bus Boycott (and Baton Rouge's bus boycott three years earlier) should be seen in the same light as urban Black boycott movements that had been used in such places as Detroit, New York, and Chicago since the 1930s. The old slogan "Don't buy where you can't work" was translated by Montgomery activists into "Don't ride."

In his first speech after he agreed to lead the bus boycott, and in his later assessment of the boycott in *Stride toward Freedom* (1958), Dr. Martin Luther King cited the historical precedent of the labor movement and its importance in his own efforts to secure economic justice. "Labor unions can play a tremendous role in making economic justice a reality for the Negro," King wrote. "Since the American Negro is virtually nonexistent as the owner and manager of mass production industry, he must depend upon the payment of wages for his economic survival." Nearly 1.3 million African Americans belonged to the member unions of the AFL-CIO, he pointed out, meaning that only "combined religious institutions" could claim greater Black membership. As such, King insisted that the labor movement take a leadership position in civil rights struggles. "The Negro then has a right to expect the resources of the American trade union movement to be used in assuring him—like all the rest of its members—of a proper place in American society. He has gained this right along with all the other workers whose mutual efforts have built this country's free and democratic unions."²⁸

The conjuncture of the civil rights and economic justice movements greatly influenced the early years of the modern civil rights movement in the South, which was overwhelmingly working class. The Highlander

Folk School, which was organized by southern labor activists in the 1930s (many of whom were rooted in the same spiritual and ideological soil as their comrade, Claude Williams), was dedicated to the education and mobilization of southern Blacks and whites. Seasoned activists such as Rosa Parks and Ella Baker had worked with Highlander for years, and the school became an important site of activism during the modern civil rights struggle. Meanwhile, King and other southern activists joined their northern counterparts, including A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, as well as leftists in the NNLC, in demanding that the AFL-CIO abolish discrimination in its member unions and shops.²⁹

The connections between race and economics were embodied in the presence of labor–civil rights activists such as Rosa Parks, E. D. Nixon, and Bayard Rustin, to name just a few of the most visible figures associated with the southern-based movement. Nixon, one of the organizers of the bus boycott, worked with Parks and members of the brotherhood, and was a local official of the old AFL. Rustin had been a member of the Young Communist League in the 1930s, a youth organizer for the 1941 March on Washington movement, and a cofounder of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE). He had successfully incorporated the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolent direct action into the first Freedom Rides staged by CORE in 1947, and when he got word of the Montgomery situation he traveled south to meet King and get in on the action.³⁰ A similar identity of interests was also at work in the North in cities such as Detroit. Much of Detroit's history of civil rights activism had been linked to labor and working-class issues. Furthermore, a number of Black workers had been involved in both northern and southern struggles, and for many of these workers the South was still home.

A sizable percentage of Detroit's African American population had migrated to the city from Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia; travel back and forth between home and adopted home was easy and consequently common. As a result, many Black Detroiters developed a transregional consciousness. Transplanted southern Blacks followed the southern struggles with great interest, contributing funds, favorable publicity, prayers, and in some cases direct action. When the brutal murder of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American youth from Chicago, hit the national press in 1955, complete with gruesome photographs, Blacks across the nation were outraged. Like their southern counterparts, northern Black politicians, including Detroit's Charles C. Diggs Jr., who had taken over his father's seat in the state legislature, traveled

south to witness the trial of Till's murderers. The Detroit community, like those of other cities, held rallies and fund-raisers in support of Till and his family.³¹ Snow Grigsby, whose career as a local activist stretched back to the early 1930s, had been making the North-South circuit since the 1940s, protesting southern injustices on behalf of the NAACP. Charles Denby, a Black auto worker who came to Detroit during World War I, developed relatively close ties to the small Detroit section of the Socialist Workers Party, and had been active in various aspects of the labor-civil rights struggle, returned home in 1955. "I decided to go to the South," he wrote in his autobiography, "when so many new developments were taking place among the Blacks." He went to offer his services as an activist and organizer, voicing his personal critique of Walter Reuther and members of the AFL-CIO hierarchy, who either openly opposed the boycott or remained silent.³²

The North-South connections worked in both directions. The promise of industrial employment and a better life had lured Ernest C. Dillard away from Alabama, and Dillard (not a blood relation to the author) arrived in Detroit in June 1938 with approximately five dollars, a borrowed suitcase full of possessions, and a supply of syrup sandwiches. "It was the next day after Joe Louis won from Jim Braddock. I left the night of the fight," he recalled. He celebrated the Brown Bomber's victory in Detroit "since down there we couldn't talk about black folks knocking out white folks, not even in a mixed group." His wife, Jessie Mae Dawson, whom he had married on Christmas Day, 1934, at the Hutchinson Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and their two children, Marilyn and Ernie Jr., joined him eleven months later.³³ Jessie Dillard became a central figure in her new city's block club organizations and in the local ACLU. Ernie Dillard shared his wife's interests and also became active in UAW politics (in Local 51 at the GM Fleetwood plant) and the NAACP's fight to break down restaurant discrimination.

Like Charles Denby (the pen name of Simon P. Owens), Dillard was active in the Socialist Workers Party until, as a member of the so-called Cochranite faction led by Bert Cochran, he broke with the party around 1953. Dillard later enjoyed a long career as a frequent contributor to the Cochranites' *American Socialist* magazine. Although he and his wife remained in Detroit for most of their adult lives, physical distance did not dissipate their ties to the region they still considered home. In 1956, Dillard organized a small committee to fund the publication of his anti-segregation pamphlet "An Open Letter to the White People of Mississippi." As a UAW local officer, he continued to insist that the nation's

“most progressive union” take a more aggressive stance in support of southern Blacks. In both direct and indirect ways, the southern struggle framed Dillard’s activism in Detroit.³⁴

TULC AND THE LIBERAL-LABOR COALITION

While Blacks in Detroit certainly supported the southern struggles, there was a recognition that Blacks in northern centers faced a different set of circumstances. Blacks in Detroit could vote, but they were still forced to contend with police brutality and discrimination in housing, employment, restaurants, and shops. “Black Detroiters,” as one observer put it, “didn’t compare their lot in life to Black Wattsites, Black Harlemites or Black anywhere else. Black Detroiters compared their lot in life to white Detroiters.”³⁵ And compared to those white neighbors African Americans in the city had worse jobs, worse homes, worse schools, more unemployment, less political representation on the local level, and a more circumscribed range of personal and collective freedoms. In response to these problems, the ongoing Black freedom struggle witnessed the growth and consolidation of two major focal points—or local centers—that directed and coordinated activism in the decade between 1957 and 1967.

The first of these centers of activism was the liberal-labor coalition, which had grown out of the Black-union alliance during and after World War II and whose history I have already begun to sketch around figures such as the Rev. Nicholas Hood and issues such as urban renewal. For the most part, this group was dominated by the generation of activists that had worked with, and then against, the old Left community. The UAW, widely regarded as one of the most progressive unions in the nation, was involved in the coalition along with the NAACP, Black churches, the Jewish Community Council, the ACLU, the Detroit Urban League, the Detroit ADA, the Michigan Committee on Civil Rights, and other civil rights organizations that had managed to survive the HUAC trials.

There were, however, observable generational differences. The new liberal-labor coalition had no core institution comparable to the Communist Party, which had once so effectively held together a wide network of organizations and individuals. The union, having lost some of its moral authority, fulfilled this function as best it could with assistance and prodding from the NAACP and Detroit CORE, both of which lacked a mass base. The Detroit NAACP had gone from being the largest and most aggressive branch in the country, with 25,000 members during

World War II, to only 5,162 members in 1952, partly as a result of the organization's adoption of a less confrontational approach. The Detroit branch of the Socialist Workers Party was relatively small and did not have the capacity to function in the same way the Michigan Division of the CP had at its height.³⁶ Once archenemies, the MDCP and the Detroit NAACP now found themselves in a simultaneous decline.

The massive drives to unionize Black, white, and white ethnic workers, which had given rise to the early civil rights community, were no more. It was the unique concentration of industry that had fostered a many-sided Left in the city in the first place. While industry's presence in Detroit continued to fuel labor activism, unions gradually became something to fight *against*. Activists often found themselves in search of other means through which to protest and apply pressure. At times they were forced to go over the heads of the unions (to federal agencies such as the U.S. Civil Rights Commission), to undercut them (by appealing directly to the rank and file), or to circumvent them (through contacts with the NAACP and other community-based organizations). At still other times, frustrated activists tried to blast right through the wall of union indifference by means of open confrontation. The situation was not without its ironies. For instance, Black unionists had once denounced the NAACP for not taking a strong stance on labor questions, but after the AFL-CIO merger it was the NAACP's Labor Committee, headed by Herbert Hill, that played a major role in critiquing the unions.

In 1957, Black unionists, including Horace Sheffield, Ernest Dillard, and Robert "Buddy" Battle (who, incidentally, was the second husband of Coleman Young's first wife), along with Willie Baxter and Nadine Brown of the then defunct NNLC, formed the Trade Union Leadership Council (TULC), which was intended to make up for the UAW and NAACP's failures to address the needs of Black workers. For the most part, the TULC, which later formed an affiliation with the Negro American Labor Council (NALC), A. Philip Randolph's new "Negro caucus" in the AFL-CIO, continued where the NNLC had left off, despite the groups' ideological differences.³⁷

These differences were of long standing. The TULC was formed around a core of longtime Reutherites, who had opposed the Addes-Thomas-Frankensteen caucus that was once been so supportive of Black demands. Some TULC members had ties to the SWP and harbored bitter memories of being denounced, as Sheffield put it, as "black fascists by these people." "Look," he continued, "every twist and turn that the Communist Party made, they made it too." Having survived and supported the Communist purges, such individuals were now forced to work within

the same kinds of constraints they had one imposed on their Communist colleagues.³⁸ The irony is that the TULC later launched campaigns on some of the very same issues—especially the need for a “Black seat” on the UAW’s International Executive Board—that the CP-backed factions had once fought for and that Reuther-aligned Black unionists had been called on to oppose.³⁹

The TULC described itself as “a non-partisan and non-profit organization devoted to the struggle of all people, for first class citizenship, full freedom, and unrestricted equality in every aspect of the political, economic, and social life of America.” Recognizing the historical affinity between African Americans and the unions, the TULC pledged itself to “create a better understanding and more wholesome relationship between the Negro people, and the labor movement.”⁴⁰ It worked, that is to say, within the existing paradigm of civil rights protest. The TULC was as cognizant as any other organization in the city of the significance of Black churches, and it incorporated a director of religious affairs into its leadership structure from the very beginning. The group was also active in a range of cultural activities, especially the promotion of Negro History Week, and in efforts to educate society about Negro history and culture in general. Its agenda did not, however, include a call for Black nationalism.

Ernest Dillard, for one, was of the opinion that “the last thing blacks need to do [is] to go on a corner and start hollering, ‘Black! Black! Black!’” Similarly, Battle and Sheffield publicly disagreed with the Rev. Albert Cleage about the viability of an all-Black slate of candidates in the 1962 elections. Cleage “supported an all-black slate,” explained Sheffield, “and, hell, we said, ‘that’s crazy.’ We supported an integrated slate—we had a Polish candidate, we had a Jewish candidate. In that respect we were bound to be in conflict.” It was hardly the last time these men and their organizations would clash.⁴¹

While the TULC was not terribly different, ideologically, from the NAACP, it did provide a more congenial home to unionists. The TULC’s Freedom House became the center of social life in certain activist circles. Although the organization’s inner sanctum was accessible only to members and their guests, an array of leftists and liberals frequented its popular bar area. “There is a discussion of ideas,” Sheffield explained at the time, “and we have the price of drinks as low as we can. Every Saturday we have 400 to 500 people here that socialize, dance, have drinks, etc—this is how we keep the doors open.”⁴² Coleman Young, for example, did not have a very good political relationship with the TULC but could often be found at the Freedom House bar drinking and swapping sto-

ries. After he regained his status in the Wayne County AFL-CIO and ran for elective office, he often relied on the grudging support of TULC members. Other older leftists, such as the CP's Christopher Alston and Ernest and Jessie Dillard, who were associated with the SWP and its splinter groups, also participated in the social life of the TULC and contributed to its activities. If people knew about Dillard's SWP affiliations, and certainly many did, no one ever harped on the matter publicly.⁴³ "Party lines" were often blurred in the social circles of Detroit activists.

The TULC considered itself a militant organization, especially where racial discrimination in the unions and the building trades was concerned, and its members often worked with the NAACP and the liberal-labor coalition to achieve its goals. Both organizations participated in a series of confrontational boycotts and picket lines that benefited their middle-class and working-class constituencies. Given the lack of opportunities for training and career advancement in the Black community, both groups focused on creating opportunities for skilled workers.⁴⁴ They shared many objectives and even some of their members. Willie Baxter, for instance, was the head of TULC's Civil Rights Department and also served on the Executive Board of the Detroit NAACP. TULC members Horace Sheffield and Ernest Dillard had worked with the NAACP for decades. The two groups grew even closer once the TULC decided to drop its policy of excluding nonunionists.

One of the most successful (nonunion) joint activities conducted by members of the TULC, the NAACP, and others was a protest against restaurant discrimination. In the mid-1950s, Ernest and Jessie Dillard, along with James Boggs, yet another transplanted southerner with ties to the SWP, helped to form the Discrimination Action Committee within the NAACP. It was the first organized group to systematically deal with the widespread discrimination in the city's restaurants. Dillard wanted "to do a little something" in Detroit, as he said a few years earlier when he addressed a SWP meeting on the "Negro Question." During that forum, he spoke of the need to reassess the NAACP. It was not so much the NAACP that "had changed," he said, but the nature of civil rights struggles, especially in the South. "If we got a good ear to the ground we might be able to do a little something," he told his audience, "in connection to making friends and influencing people. That is, in direct contact." As Boggs recalls it, he and Dillard "called ourselves infiltrating the NAACP."⁴⁵

Dillard sought to revitalize the organization's Detroit office by embracing direct-action techniques. The Discrimination Action Committee's principal mission had been to target restaurants, but its scope

was later broadened to include roller rinks, bowling alleys, bars, hotels, and other entertainment and recreational venues.⁴⁶ The committee's style was simple. Members met every Friday night to identify restaurants with histories of discrimination against Black patrons; "sandwiched" or interracial teams of volunteers then entered these establishments and sought to be served. "We didn't have any money," recalled Arthur Johnson, who became the executive secretary of the NAACP in 1949, "so we got the cheapest thing on the menu."⁴⁷ If service was denied—thereby violating the Diggs Law, which prohibited racial discrimination—the police would be called and charges brought. The courts were a last resort if no agreement could be reached through other means.

Much of this activity involved local union officials—Black, white, and Jewish—and rank-and-file members, who often drew a direct, albeit imperfect, analogy between picketing and sit-downs in restaurants, on the one hand, and the sit-down strikes during the early years of the CIO on the other. Oscar and Dolores Paskal, both of whom were unionists, secular Jewish socialists, and members of Detroit's CORE, related much of their early involvement in breaking down restaurant discrimination to the workplace, principally the need to lunch near downtown offices. Similarly, Ernest Dillard recalled loosely organized "attacks" on restaurants and bars around the plants where he and James Boggs worked involving coworkers: "you know, just ordinary folks offended by overt racism."⁴⁸ Ethel Schwartz, a Jewish office worker, says that "she merely went to lunch with some colleagues from the Office Professional Employees Union." The interracial group just "happened" to go to Sero, a restaurant in downtown Detroit that did not serve African Americans. Schwartz, who had been involved with the Unemployed Council in the 1930s, downplayed her involvement. But as Black worker Dave Moore, who met her in the 1940s, notes, "Ethel led the fight. . . . She organized a picket line right around the restaurant. The picket line grew and grew. After a couple of days, it just got so that no one went in there."⁴⁹

This activism was often countered by restaurant owners' efforts to make their food and beverages inedible to their interracial would-be clients. And neither the police department nor the courts always fulfilled their obligations under the state Civil Rights Law. "All that shit is true," concurred Marilynn Adams, a young Black woman who worked at the law firm started by Ernest Goodman and George Crockett and who became the first TULC secretary. Adams remembers bouts of physical illness after being served tainted food and being chased by policemen hostile to their activities. Adams, whose family had been members of Reverend Hill's Hartford Avenue Baptist Church since the 1920s, was not

“risking her life,” as young people were in the South. But she was “deeply moved” by the southern struggles and wanted to get involved with similar activities in Detroit. She was just one of the innumerable young people whose political lives were structured around the NAACP, their churches, and organizations such as the TULC—and later groups such as CORE, which was revitalized in the early 1960s.⁵⁰

Marilynn Adams’s position in the TULC office also introduced her to a broad range of labor issues. Her father had been employed in the automobile industry since the Depression, but her knowledge of union politics had until then been primarily secondhand. For Adams and others her age, the introduction to union politics was not marked by the optimism of the 1930s and early 1940s but by resentment bred by the often strained relationship between the UAW and minority workers. After nearly twenty years, Black workers were still not being upgraded and trained in skilled trades, and the UAW had yet to elect a Black representative to its International Executive Board. The demand for a Black member on the board, which was once dismissed as a communist ploy, was now dismissed as “reverse Jim Crow.” African American workers had gotten a foot on the bottom rung of the ladder but in the majority of cases were unable to climb any higher.

When the U.S. Civil Rights Commission held hearings in Detroit in 1960, the UAW was confronted with hard facts about its failure to address the hopes and aspirations of its Black membership. According to testimony given before the commission, much of it by Horace Sheffield, only 1 percent of tool and die makers were Black, 1 percent of structural workers were minorities, 1 percent of carpenters, 2.1 percent of electricians, and 5.2 percent of mechanics or job setters were non-white. The numbers were not much better in city plants. There were only 341 Black workers in skilled positions at the Big Three automakers’ plants out of a total skilled work force of 15,550. Few young Black workers were allowed into apprenticeship programs, and Blacks in management were almost nonexistent.⁵¹

When Herbert Hill, the Jewish head of the national NAACP’s Labor Committee, released his assessment of the first five years of the AFL-CIO, it revealed the same pattern nationwide. Hill’s report charged that the union was more concerned with creating “a liberal public relations image” than attacking internal and external discrimination. The testimony of unionists such as Sheffield and Battle before the Civil Rights Commission, alongside Hill’s report on internal racism among AFL-CIO member unions, expanded the already substantial rift between Blacks and the union.⁵² The TULC’s mild critique of the UAW’s racial practices

gave way to angry demands. In 1957, the TULC could praise the labor movement for being “far in advance of the rest of the community in the fight against discrimination” while noting that some of its member unions had barely begun to take up the struggle. But by 1962 their criticisms took on a harsher tone, focusing on the movement’s duplicity and paternalism. “The old clichés, the syrupy sentiments are no longer saleable. The pious platitudes about patience and fortitude we leave to the Uncle Toms,” read an open letter printed in the *Vanguard*, the TULC’s official publication, edited by Ernest Dillard. “A man either has full equality or he doesn’t—there is no satisfactory twilight zone between.”⁵³

The union met these criticisms with hostility. Although its Executive Board had never seemed rankled by the existence of the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists and the Jewish Labor Committee, the TULC and NALC were denounced in the old anticommunist language of “dual unionism” as threats to movement unity. When A. Philip Randolph insisted that the color line be eliminated in member unions—a position wholly consistent with the AFL-CIO’s statement against discrimination—George Meany, long-time head of the AFL and subsequent president of the newly merged union, personally accused him of arrogance in presuming to speak for all Black workers.⁵⁴ Back in the 1940s, the Rev. Horace A. White had complained that the union movement, particularly the UAW, had usurped the Black church’s moral authority in the flowering of civil rights activism; by the 1960s, it was patently clear that the unions had ceded the high ground.⁵⁵

The political alliance between Blacks and labor, which extended back to 1943, also showed signs of strain when the TULC flexed its independent political muscles by backing an unknown—Jerome P. Cavanagh—in the mayoral election against the UAW-supported incumbent, Louis C. Miriani. Like his predecessors, Miriani had lost favor in the Black community by insisting that all of the city’s problems could be solved through increased law and more order and by sanctioning a police crackdown in African American neighborhoods. The police department, which was 96 percent white, declared open season on “suspicious” minorities, and its efforts resulted in mass arrests, legally questionable detentions, and beatings. While the ACLU and the NAACP, whose executive secretary, Arthur Johnson, had been stopped and searched without cause, protested Miriani’s crackdown, the real upheaval came during the mayoral campaign. Executives within the TULC, who, like Horace Sheffield, were also UAW staff officials, found

themselves in a tight spot: their allegiance to the union (and their jobs) required them to support Miriani, but their allegiance to the city's African American communities required that they oppose him.

The TULC directorate chose to oppose the union. Marilyn Adams recalls Black unionists dropping off boxes of Miriani campaign literature in one part of the TULC's Freedom House and taking Cavanagh literature out the back door. Launching a "5 plus 1" campaign, they held massive voter registration drives and fund-raisers for Cavanagh and five Common Council candidates, including Black attorney William T. Patrick, an incumbent, and block club organizer and Wayne State University sociology professor Mel Ravitz, a newcomer. With the help of the TULC and the Black community's anger at Miriani, Cavanagh, the thirty-one-year-old longshot, staged the greatest political upset in many decades of Michigan politics. He carried 85 percent of the Black vote and 56 percent of the total; William T. Patrick, Mel Ravitz, and three other TULC-supported liberals were also either elected or reelected to the council.⁵⁶ Horace Sheffield reaped praise for helping to engineer the victory, as did Black ministers led by the Rev. Stephen Spottswood, pastor of the Metropolitan AME Church and a relative newcomer to the city. As chairman of the Political Affairs Committee of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, Reverend Spottswood prevailed upon other ministers, including Reverend Hill (with whom he had worked closely), to support Cavanagh. Spottswood's decision to campaign vigorously for the young challenger grew out of a conversation with Sheffield after the two men had watched Cavanagh make his initial bid on television.⁵⁷ It was merely the first of many joint electoral partnerships between the TULC and the ministerial alliance.

Anyone fond of historical parallels would appreciate the basic similarities between Cavanagh's victory and the victory of Frank Murphy nearly thirty years earlier. Both men appealed to and won support from similar social groups—Blacks, the poor, and ethnic workers. Both men were also Catholics who supported the church's more progressive positions on social action. Murphy promised a "new era in the Tabernacle" of city government, while Cavanagh advocated a heightened sense of decency, especially with regard to race relations. Both mayors also insisted that the federal government play a central role in finding solutions to urban problems. Frank Murphy was pro-New Deal before there was a New Deal, and Cavanagh spearheaded the federally financed War on Poverty programs in Detroit. Between July 1, 1962, and August 1, 1967, Detroit received more than \$230,422,000 from the government's

coffers. Even with the infusion of government monies, Cavanagh, much like Murphy, found that the city's financial woes impeded his efforts to make good on his campaign promises.

Cavanagh did, however, appoint more African Americans to administrative positions than had any previous mayor, and he won the gratitude of Black Detroiters by appointing George Edwards, a former UAW organizer, city councilman, and Michigan Supreme Court justice, to be the city's new police commissioner. Together Cavanagh and Edwards promised to revamp the Detroit Police Department and "teach the police they didn't have a constitutional right to automatically beat up Negroes on arrest."⁵⁸ After the riots in 1943, Edwards had pointed to the "open warfare" between the police and Blacks as one of the city's leading sources of unrest. In 1961, he still believed that "Detroit was the leading candidate in the United States for a race riot."⁵⁹

Thus, the 1960s opened on a relatively optimistic note for the liberal civil rights coalition. The TULC was just reaching what would prove to be its peak of thirteen thousand registered members, and many civil rights activists felt that the new mayor was willing to take progressive action to alleviate the city's tensions. Southern sit-ins and Freedom Rides were attracting national attention and galvanized northern communities into action. Residents of Detroit participated in the southern struggle in a number of ways. Some, such as Walter Bergman, a teacher, union activist, and member of CORE, participated in Freedom Rides; others such as Viola Liuzzo, the wife of a Michigan Teamster official and member of the local SWP, joined in the voter registration projects. Their involvement came at a high price, though. Bergman was nearly beaten to death, and Liuzzo was killed in Alabama by the Ku Klux Klan.⁶⁰

Less dramatically, Detroit took part in a series of boycotts against national chain stores such as Woolworth, whose regional southern outlets practiced racial discrimination. Picket lines, "manned by 100 students, trade unionists, and sympathizers," were set up around Woolworth stores downtown, as well as on the city's east side and in the university towns of Ann Arbor and East Lansing, in a show of solidarity "with southern Negro students who sparked a wide-spread movement against Jim Crow practices in Dixie lunch counters operated by Woolworth Corp."⁶¹ The TULC orchestrated the collection of funds, food, and clothing to ship south for distribution in its own version of "strike relief." The southern struggle was invoked time and time again as a way to mobilize support for hometown political projects. "No one in their right mind would deny that had Dr. Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Bus boycotters failed in their historic struggle," read a represen-

tative TULC flyer urging support for William T. Patrick and Mel Ravitz in the 1961 Common Council elections, “the cause of freedom in America would have been seriously retarded.” The elections themselves became part of Detroit’s new “Operation Freedom.”⁶²

This overwhelming sense of optimism was propelled by the pulse of the upbeat Motown sound. “The trappings of a new age were all around the city,” wrote Coleman Young, with Motown’s recordings “tapping into the indigenous rhythms and prodigious resources [and] remaking the image of the Motor City with sweet and funky urban music by the likes of the Supremes and the Temptations and the Four Tops and Marvin Gaye.”⁶³ “I was influenced by the Motown sound,” says JoAnn Watson, longtime executive director of the Detroit NAACP. “Much of the music was a real anthem for many of us.”⁶⁴ But Motown’s musical optimism was also cited by the national media in their efforts to create a falsely harmonious image of the city. Almost overnight, Detroit became a “model city.” According to the *National Observer*, earnings were up, unemployment was down, and slum clearance had made Detroit a more livable city. In the realm of race relations, a reporter for *Fortune* was positively effusive.

Detroit has acquired freshness and vitality. . . . Accustomed to years of adversity, to decades of drabness and civic immobility, Detroiters are naturally exhilarated. . . . Of all the accomplishments in the recent history of the city, the most significant is the progress Detroit has made in race relations. The grim specter of the 1943 riots never quite fades from the minds of the city leaders. As much as anything else, that specter has enabled the power structure to overcome tenacious prejudice and give the Negro community a role in the consensus probably unparalleled in any major American city. . . . Negroes are sufficiently well organized socially and politically to have elected a member of the Detroit common council in a city-wide election. They have also elected three local judges, ten state legislators, and two congressmen (Michigan is the only congressional delegation in Washington with two Negroes.)⁶⁵

These were important gains. But the focus on high rates of home ownership, employment gains, and the number of Blacks elected to public office obscured the deep structural problems still plaguing the city’s working-class and lower-class residents. Activists critical of the liberal coalition felt that these economic and racial improvements were not enough. This feeling was particularly strong among a number of young

activists who eventually joined forces and went “back to the ghetto,” as Coleman Young once phrased it. This group was to form the core of the second of the city’s new movement centers.

BACK TO THE GHETTO

Opposition to the labor-liberal coalition prompted the development of an alternative center of protest in early-1960s Detroit. This center is harder to define than the liberal-labor coalition that coalesced around the TULC and NAACP, but is in some ways more dynamic and intriguing for its fluidity. Unlike the liberal coalition, this second group did not automatically regard the trade union movement as an ally and was relatively uninvested in the specifics of liberal anticommunism. Moreover, its institutional loci were more dispersed and community based. Like the early civil rights community, this alternative center was interracial, though less so by the end of the 1960s than in its early days. For many young people coming of age at the time, neither the TULC nor the NAACP or CORE seemed quite radical enough; they felt a need to seek out alternatives. It was among these young activists that Black nationalism, linked to the class struggle in Detroit, the nation, and the world, would find its most receptive audience.

The nascent Black nationalist center was comprised of young workers and students who were as invested in the southern struggle as were their older counterparts. Many were the sons and daughters of unionists. Some gravitated toward individual members of the SWP and the party’s Friday evening Labor Forums. Others were greatly influenced by independent Marxist thinkers such as Grace Lee and James Boggs. Still others were high school and college students disaffected with the status quo but who had yet to gravitate toward any particular ideological position. As one of these activists, Mike Hamlin, put it: “During the period from 1957 to about 1965 many young blacks, black workers in particular, in northern cities like Detroit found themselves greatly frustrated, alienated and disaffected by the conditions facing us.”⁶⁶ For all of their diversity of background and experience, Hamlin’s portrait is broadly accurate. Certain themes emerge again and again from group members’ biographies: a working-class background, involvement in the southern civil rights movement, a sense of alienation, and a desire to act.

“My family,” said Dan Georgakas, a Greek American activist who later chronicled the struggles of his friends and allies in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, “was horse collar, New Deal Democrat and very pro-union, in Detroit mostly meaning the UAW.” The UAW was so

prominent in Detroit that “even as a child you were drawn into union politics at family picnics on Labor Day,” recalled General Baker, whose family migrated to Detroit from rural Georgia in 1941. The Bakers made a home in the east-side ghetto of Black Bottom and “lived on the ups and downs of the auto industry like most working-class families in Detroit.”⁶⁷ Like the Bakers, Mike Hamlin’s family was composed of southern sharecroppers who migrated to Detroit during World War II. While working on the loading docks at the *Detroit News*, Hamlin met two other future activists: John Watson, one of the hundreds of Black students at Wayne University (renamed Wayne State University in 1956); and Ken Cockrel, who went on to become one of the city’s leading radical attorneys. Hamlin credits Watson with helping him channel his anger into constructive outlets. “I was angry,” recalls Hamlin, “when I came back to Detroit in 1960 from the army.”

I was interested in terrorist kind of activity. It was a response to frustration. A lot of people at that time talked about kamikaze or suicidal attacks. You would end your pain and strike a blow. But then I met John Watson. . . . And [I felt] maybe there could be a greater impact by organizing people and focusing on the working class. It was through him that I began to understand classes and class society.⁶⁸

Ken Cockrel also cited his friendship with Watson, along with his experiences at Wayne State, as important factors in the development of his political identity. Indeed, Wayne, which by the mid-1960s had more African American students than all of the Ivy League and Big Ten schools combined, was a central site of congregation and political education. Like the families of so many from his cohort, Cockrel’s relatives worked in the auto industry and the service sector. When times got hard, they went on public assistance. As a result of two separate accidents only months apart, Cockrel had lost both of his parents when he was twelve years old. He lived with relatives until he dropped out of high school in his junior year and joined the armed services. After three years of army life and an honorable discharge, he decided to return to school. Although he lacked a high school diploma, administrators at Wayne allowed him to take an entrance examination, which he passed, and to enroll as a political science major. Cockrel became involved in Left political circles at Wayne, worked a number of odd jobs, and managed to complete both a bachelor’s degree in political science and a law degree.⁶⁹

Some of these young seekers, like Luke Tripp, another African Amer-

ican student at Wayne who entertained a youthful desire to blow up Mississippi, felt that religion was relatively unimportant to their political identity. Tripp was baptized a Catholic but preferred to think of himself as “a free thinker.”⁷⁰ But, as in the early civil rights community, many of the new generation felt the need to translate their religious faith into political commitments and a more secular morality. This process of translation often involved leaving the institutionalized church in favor of a “revolutionary morality.” “When I was eighteen I left the church,” remarked Charleen Johnson, who became involved in community organizing and welfare issues. She left because she felt that the church inculcated a sense of powerlessness in its members’ lives. For Johnson and others, religion was the “opiate of the masses,” part of the system that must be opposed. “At the time we were entering into the sixties, the civil rights movement, and I got involved in the revolution. I was looking to overthrow the system.”⁷¹

There was nothing novel about this tendency. Some segments of the clergy, particularly those disposed to a social gospel perspective, had long chastised the church for being insufficiently engaged in addressing social ills. It was certainly the nationalist-minded Rev. Albert Cleage’s position that Black urban churches had failed to keep pace with the needs of their congregants and that these churches needed revitalization lest they become totally marginal to the life of the urban communities they were supposed to serve. The Black church, insisted an African American clergyman writing in the pages of the radical journal *Freedomways*, had been lax in its “moral responsibility” to set standards. “It is no secret,” he wrote, “that the church has allowed the labor movement, NAACP, CORE, the entertainment world, and the world of sports to push ahead of it, all too often, in the struggle for freedom and equality.”⁷²

An impulse to leave the church was common among members of the city’s second civil rights community. But it was far from universal. Socially concerned Catholics, for instance, found the climate in some parishes more hospitable to their ideas when Vatican II opened the church to the winds of change in the late 1950s and 1960s. This change built on Detroit’s long tradition of Catholic activism, especially around the Catholic worker movement of the 1930s. Some priests, such as Fr. Clement Kern, had actually worked with the old civil rights community. While the second-generation movement was taking shape, Catholic activists, young and old, were taking steps to revitalize the church’s Left, particularly around issues of racism and economic marginalization. “The

Catholic church did a good job on me," recalls Eleanor Josaitis, another young woman involved in community organizing. "Feed the hungry meant something to me even as a kid. I was always trying to figure out a way to translate the gospel message into my life. . . . [Then] came the civil rights confusion of our time. I became a follower of Dr. Martin Luther King."⁷³ Sheila Murphy Cockrel, the wife of Ken Cockrel, was also influenced by her Catholic background. "I grew up in the Detroit Catholic Worker movement," she reminisced. While she accepted her parent's religious values, she rejected their pacifism. Civil disobedience was for her an important political tool, but "not a stance about life." "I began working in '66 for the WCO [West Central Organization]," she continues, "which was the first citywide attempt at community organization that was rooted in the concept of self-determination, using the Alinsky model." Her parents were also active in the formation of WCO and served on its Board of Directors. It was during her WCO days that she met and married Ken Cockrel.⁷⁴

Peggy Posa, a Protestant, also insisted that her "first introduction to the social-issue arena came from a strong religious background. The first issues I was actively involved in were the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War activities." Posa worked with Ken and Sheila Cockrel and Mel Ravitz, who was a leading figure in the city's block club movement, in which religious institutions were often central.⁷⁵ Ravitz was born in New York City in 1924 but raised in Detroit. He had worked with the liberal coalition since the 1950s in organizations such as the NAACP, the TULC, and the small local chapter of CORE. In 1961 he, along with William T. Patrick, became one of the most liberal voices on the city's Common Council. Trained as a sociologist, he got his start in city politics in 1953 when he went to work for the City Planning Commission's crime prevention and neighborhood preservation program.⁷⁶

In this capacity, Ravitz helped to lay the foundation for later groups such as the more militant and confrontational WCO. Organizing block by block in homogeneous areas, as well as interracial and interethnic ones, Ravitz, and later much of Detroit's block club movement as a whole, "made the alley the focus of our first action efforts to consolidate the thinking of the people of the neighborhood."⁷⁷ He also understood that churches, as social institutions rooted in the life of the surrounding community, were important sites for organizing block clubs and community associations. Throughout the 1960s, religious organizations remained a major source of funds for community activists. The WCO's first director, the Rev. Richard Venus, was a white clergyman, and reli-

gious bodies, including the Archdiocesan Solidarity Foundation and the Detroit Catholic Worker, as well as area churches and parishes, all contributed to the cause.⁷⁸

While block clubs, made up primarily of home owners, were initially viewed as conservative, middle-class organizations, some did take on a more political bent. The change was supported and encouraged by the local NAACP and the Detroit Urban League,⁷⁹ which published their own newspapers and collectively defined problems and solutions. Eventually, a number of block clubs participated in the formation of greater neighborhood councils and transneighborhood associations. City officials witnessed the creation of a monster, as block clubs began to challenge urban renewal policies, contest the power of the school board, and oppose unpopular candidates for elected positions. Officials tried to have the block club program dismantled, but they failed; instead, the clubs became a fixture throughout the city and a frequent source of headaches for the local political establishment. The clubs' potential to effect social change attracted older activists such as Ravitz, Ernest and Jessie Dillard, and Reverend Cleage. Some future community activists, such as Rosa Sims, got their start within these same associations: "I owe a lot to my father. He was active in the community and was an officer in the block clubs. . . . I got directly involved in community work. I was president of the junior block club."⁸⁰

Activists such as the Dillards considered their work with the block clubs to be one of the more concrete expressions of their socialism. Younger activists, inspired by Saul Alinsky and his "Back-of-the-Yards" crusade in Chicago, attempted to push the clubs in a more militant direction—one with a pronounced class basis. In Chicago Alinsky had developed a distinctive style of organizing groups once thought to be unorganizable. Consciously adapting the methods of the labor movement in the 1930s, Alinsky's own method was based on creating as much tension as possible and forcing city administrators to meet the demands of the disadvantaged. It is easy to see the youthful appeal of such a method, and generational dynamics produced both conflict and cooperation within block-club and community-based groups. As Sheila Murphy Cockrel put it, "As I grew older I began to see that my parents didn't fully understand that they had created a family with the inherent idea of class conflict."⁸¹ Cockrel's assessment of the class and generational tensions within her family holds true, to a certain extent, for the entire civil rights community. Younger activists developed different ideas, strategies, and goals but were not fully divorced from the older generation of

activists that had paved their way. When large segments of the city's New Left turned to community organizing in the mid- to late 1960s, the basic structure was already in place. The new cohort introduced its own methods and strategies, but it did not have to start from scratch.

Block clubs, and later community organizations such as WCO, were also central to women's activism. "In the block clubs," notes General Baker, "when you do alley cleanup, ain't but two men and all the rest is women."⁸² The women who tell their tales tend to mention religion far more often than their male counterparts, and those who turned toward community organizing at the grassroots level were overwhelmingly female. While Baker, along with Luke Tripp, Mike Hamlin, John Watson, and others, got more involved in labor organizing during the late 1960s, creating the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, their female counterparts tended to focus on welfare rights, tenants' rights, and antipoverty campaigns. Marian Kramer, who was married to General Baker, worked with block clubs, the WCO, and the Westside Mothers, a welfare-rights group initially organized by the Detroit CORE. "A lot of social struggles were right there in the community," notes Kramer, who had been influenced by her work in the South with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. "Women had developed a lot of skills and were becoming central in the organizations."⁸³

This is not to suggest that gender roles were carved in stone. Women were also active in male-dominated groups such as GOAL, the Freedom Now Party, and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. On the other side of the equation, some men certainly participated in the block club movement. Waymon Dunn, an older Black resident, served as the head of one of the city's largest confederations of block clubs, and younger male activists such as Baker and Cockrel organized and directed neighborhood clubs. Male activists were also involved in the activities of the WCO and similar groups. Yet gender roles were a source of tension within the movement. "We were forceful, but we were played down," insists Kramer. "There were people like Arleen, Gracie, Cass Smith, myself, Edna Watson," she continues.

We endured a lot of name calling and had to fight male supremacy. Some would call us the IWW: Ignorant Women of the World. I was thought of as one of the grouchiest women. In meetings, we attempted to form a Black Liberation party, there was debate [about] where the struggle had to be. One faction said that the forces should

be in the plants, at the point of production. I said, "Yes, but all those men got to come back into the community; they live somewhere. We've got to be organizing in both places."⁸⁴

The articulation of a firm position on gender and class by women activists differentiated the later movement center from its earlier civil rights predecessor. Although the earlier movement recognized the necessity of "organizing in both places," there was a qualitative generational difference. Certainly women were involved in the early movement. Rose Billups, Geraldine Bledsoe, Eleanor Maki, Vera Vanderberg of the NNC, Zaio Woodford of the League of Women Voters, and the women of the NNLC, among others, often marched on the front lines of political mobilization, but "women's issues" never achieved the centrality they obtained in later years. While there was a great deal of women's activism around the edges of the early movement—meat boycotts, the activities of the Housewives League of the Booker T. Washington Trade Association, sit-down strikes and walkouts in traditionally female industries such as cigar making—the core organizations tended to be male dominated. The National Negro Labor Council was really the only earlier group to demonstrate a clear understanding of the relationships among class, race, and gender and to take account of these interlocking forms of oppression in their protests.

But by the 1960s a new pattern was emerging. The political consciousness of this new generation of young men and women had been formed in the matrix of a new set of familial experiences, by the violence that menaced the southern struggle, and by their exposure to changing cultural trends. This consciousness crystallized in myriad small discussion groups and associations. Interpersonal ties were crucial. "We would gather in each other's homes and talk about what kind of activity we could develop in Detroit around the edges of the civil rights movement," remembered Mike Hamlin. Recognizing a debt to people outside of their own modest ranks, the newcomers turned to older activists such as James and Grace Lee Boggs. "Jimmy taught and reached a lot of people," says General Baker. "Early on, if you wanted to deal with problems as an auto worker, you were separated from history. Unless someone gave you continuity, some history, you were on your own. Jimmy tried to give us that direction."⁸⁵

If cross-generational influence was indeed key to the development of political radicalism in 1960s Detroit, Grace Lee and James Boggs personified that influence. Married in 1954, they were a dynamic team grounded in leftist politics. James Boggs had come to Detroit from Besse-

mer, Alabama, in 1937 after hoboeing around the country. He landed a job as a production worker at Chrysler and became a union organizer. Actually, he recalls with a grin, he became a "union thug": "We used to say we went out and recruited people into the union, but we really just used to beat them up until they joined."⁸⁶ His position at the Chrysler plant brought him into contact with the small group of Trotskyists active in and around the Socialist Workers Party. Through his association with the SWP, he was able to study at the party's Third Layer School in New York City, where he also met his future wife, Grace Lee.

Born in Providence, Rhode Island, Grace Lee was the daughter of Chinese immigrants. She had earned a doctorate in philosophy at Bryn Mawr in 1940 and became interested in radical politics and the Black struggle after leaving Philadelphia for Chicago. There she organized tenant groups and lectured for socialist and communist groups throughout the city's Black communities. She also worked as a local organizer for A. Philip Randolph's 1941 March on Washington movement.⁸⁷ It was in Chicago that Lee first became aware of the Trotskyists and one of the movement's leading theoreticians, West Indian Marxist C. L. R. James. She became a close friend of James and collaborated with him on a number of scholarly works. Although they parted company in the early 1960s, the Boggses played an important role in introducing their mentor to young radicals in Detroit.

Born in Trinidad in 1901, C. L. R. James had risen through Marxist and Pan-Africanist circles in Britain to become an important figure in international Trotskyism. Traveling to the United States in 1938 for a short speaking tour, the young activist wound up staying for fifteen years. During his residence in the States, which included time spent in Detroit during World War II, James moved in and out of the Socialist Workers Party and eventually formed his own wing of the movement,⁸⁸ the so-called Johnson-Forest tendency, which was led by James (whose party name was Johnson), Raya Dunayevskaya (whose party name was Forest), and Grace Lee.

Like their movement's founder, Leon Trotsky, the members of the Johnson-Forest tendency were bitterly anti-Stalinist and critical of oppressive conditions within the Soviet Union.⁸⁹ But whereas Trotsky, and much of the SWP hierarchy, held that the Soviet Union had devolved into a "degenerated" worker's state due to the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy and could be reformed by a political revolution, other segments of the movement put forth a much harsher critique. For the members of the Johnson-Forest tendency, Stalinism was not an aberration or a devolution from a more authentic bolshevism. Instead, it was

the logical outcome of the revolutionary vanguard party's transformation into an all-encompassing power fused with the state. Soviet workers were no better off under this system of "state capitalism" than their Western comrades were under "private-property capitalism."⁹⁰

The opposition of an evolutionary understanding of Soviet development against Trotsky's de-evolutionary one held important implications for revolutionary parties outside of the Soviet Union. Drawing inspiration from the American scene, as well as his own studies of anticolonial struggles in Africa and the West Indies, James and his group cautioned against any vanguard party that promised to provide "enlightened leadership" to the "backward masses." According to James and others in the Johnson-Forrest tendency, the opposite was true: even in the Russian revolution, the proletariat "taught and disciplined Lenin and the Bolsheviks not only indirectly but directly."

The Bolsheviks learned to understand the vitality and creative power of the proletariat in revolution. . . . The proletariat repeatedly led the Bolsheviks and gave Lenin courage and wisdom. Between 1890 and 1921 the interrelation between leader, party, class and nation was indivisible. . . . With the proletariat or against it, that is the future of every modern nation. What was the secret of Lenin's greatness is that he saw this so clearly because this choice was the inescapable product of the whole Russian past.⁹¹

The upshot of this reformulated Leninism was that no revolutionary party could hope to lead the masses without taking part in a dialectical interaction recognizing the creative power and dynamic spontaneity of the proletariat. Without a flexible and democratic interaction, vanguard parties, regardless of their good intentions, risked the danger of limiting the working class's revolutionary potential and distorting their own goals.

Most important, James and the members of the Johnson-Forrest tendency located the sources of American revolutionary potential in the social and cultural milieu of the working class, as well as in the particular struggles of women and African Americans. In his studies of African American history and culture, James attempted to incorporate the perspectives of these groups, and of other diasporic peoples, into a more humanistic theory of revolutionary Marxism. Because he saw race and class as part of the same dynamic, James was able to make significant contributions to Marxist thought in this area. "Let us not forget," he cautioned fellow party members,

that in the Negro people there sleep and are now awakening passions of a violence exceeding, perhaps, as far as these things can be compared, anything among the tremendous forces that capitalism has created. Anyone who knows them, who knows their history, is able to talk to them intimately, watches them in their churches, reads their press with a discerning eye, must recognize that although their social force may not be able to compare with the social force of a corresponding number of organized workers, the hatred of the bourgeois society and the readiness to destroy it when the opportunity should present itself, rest among them to a degree greater than in any other section of the population in the United States.⁹²

Although he was not then well known in Detroit or indeed in the United States, James's ideas and writings trickled down to American radicals through his associates and ex-associates. James did not, however, give much sustained attention to African American and working-class religious sensibilities; he did not see religion as a factor in the vitality and creative power of these communities. In fact, in a later essay he noted that while living in the United States he had "no idea that this kind of community could be built in the southern Black Churches; but of course, this was the source of Dr. King's power." He went on to suggest that a similar inattention to religion's potential among "certain people who are revolutionaries" was a major problem for revolutionary parties. Although there was nothing in James's approach, particularly toward the cultural realm, that actually precluded the incorporation of oppositional religious ideas and practices, it was left to his followers, especially Grace Lee and James Boggs, to write about religion's potentially revolutionary role in movements such as Albert Cleage's Black Christian nationalism.⁹³

After ten years of working with the SWP, C. L. R. James could claim that he and other members of the Johnson-Forrest tendency "always found [ourselves] closest in theory and practice to rank and file workers" and that their 1951 break with the party had freed them "to make this social milieu the basis of our whole existence."⁹⁴ Unfortunately, James's deportation from the United States as an undesirable alien in 1953 hampered the group's development. For a time he did manage to keep in close contact with Dunayevskaya, the Boggses, and others, and he continued to contribute essays to the group's newspaper, *Correspondence*, edited by James Boggs, which was published in Detroit after the group left the SWP. He also contributed to a number of the tendency's ancillary projects such as the publication of Charles Denby's *Indignant Heart* and a series of inexpensive and accessible paperbacks on topics ranging

from the reflections of working women to student rebellions and factory life. Many of these small books, along with political tracts, newsletters, and pamphlets, were sold or given away in Black and working-class neighborhoods.⁹⁵ Meanwhile the group strove to increase the level of intellectual debate and exploration within Marxist circles, for example, by publishing the first American edition of Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in which themes of alienation and consciousness loom large.⁹⁶

Yet, because of internal disputes and the pressures of McCarthyism, the small group eventually broke apart. In 1955, Raya Dunayevskaya led her own breakaway faction organized around the philosophy of Marxist-humanism and the publication *News and Letters*.⁹⁷ By 1961, James and Grace Lee Boggs had also broken with C. L. R. James, depleting the ranks of the old Johnson-Forrest tendency.⁹⁸ The Boggses rejected James's view that the proletariat was the only group able to create the impetus for social reorganization and argued instead that the bulk of the U.S. working class was not only "backward and bourgeoisified" but also a "vanishing herd" diminished by the technological transformations of capitalism. While the Boggses maintained their belief in the revolutionary potential of African American workers, they increasingly focused on third world revolutions as the force that would destroy capitalism. Their emphasis on revolutionary and anticolonial struggles in Africa, China, and Cuba—which were also a focus of the SWP—placed them closer, ideologically, to younger, New Left radicals, whose interests the Boggses encouraged.⁹⁹ But the couple's rejection of the working class as the primary revolutionary agent drove a wedge between them and C. L. R. James. The deported radical retorted with a warning to anyone who disagreed with his view of the proletariat, declaring that "we are enemies, outspoken and relentless."¹⁰⁰

Given James's affinity for American Black nationalism and pan-Africanism, his harsh critique of his former colleagues is a bit puzzling. Indeed, James, more than anyone else, was responsible for the Socialist Workers Party's efforts to support Black workers' entry into the vanguard of revolutionary struggle, and even after he broke with the party his ideas on the subject continued to exert a great deal of influence.¹⁰¹ For example, in his early defense of the Nation of Islam, George Breitman, a white American Marxist, continuously referenced the SWP's statement "Negro Work," which was written in part by James. Guided by James's example, Breitman produced some of the earliest favorable articles on Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam to appear in almost any national publication.¹⁰²

Like James and Grace Lee Boggs, Breitman was an important link in

Detroit's pattern of cross-generational connections. He had been a member of the SWP since the mid-1930s and was sent to reorganize the Detroit affiliate in 1953 after nearly 40 percent of its membership was expelled for disregarding party discipline. James and Grace Lee Boggs had already broken with the local SWP, and internal splits and external political repression had left the group with no more than ten members. Working closely with his wife Dorothea, along with Frank and Sarah Lovell and Evelyn Sell, Breitman converted the group's Friday Night Forum into a tool for discussion and recruitment, and he continued to oversee the forum from 1954 until he left Detroit in 1967. A former editor of the SWP's *Militant*, Breitman was largely responsible for giving the paper the distinction of being the only white publication to embrace the Nation of Islam and its brand of Black nationalism. Although African Americans did not join the SWP in large numbers, the *Militant*, along with publications produced by the Boggses, was fairly widely read. Indeed, the forum and the *Militant* deeply influenced a number of young activists.¹⁰³

In retrospect, attendance at the forum appears to have been something of a prerequisite for later activism, and it is important to acknowledge this non-CP Left tradition in the city's radical history. The forum had been bringing together activists and intellectuals from throughout the city and across the nation since 1954. Ernest Dillard often presented lectures there, as did older Detroiters such as the Black communist Christopher Alston. There is even reason to believe that the Rev. Charles A. Hill may have attended a few of the sessions.¹⁰⁴ The forum was, as one observer put it, "a real institution in Detroit." Young Detroiters such as General Baker, Mike Hamlin, Dan Georgakas, Edna Watson, and Luke Tripp all attended the Friday sessions. Through the influence of the forum and their own small discussion groups, as well as the guidance of local radicals such as James and Grace Lee Boggs, these young activists became engaged by the early 1960s in a number of philosophical and ideological debates about national and international political struggles. At least three issues seem to have been foremost in the thinking of these nascent militants: nonviolence as a strategy in the civil rights struggle; the importance of Black nationalism; and the revolutions in Cuba, Africa, China, and elsewhere.

The debates over nonviolence were particularly heated. General Baker noted that the "polarity" of violence or self-defense and nonviolence was "constantly debated" in the Black community. Although we have come to portray this debate, somewhat generically, as a dispute between Reverend King and Minister Malcolm X, it is more properly

defined in places such as Detroit as between Reverend King and southern self-defense advocate Robert Williams. While it is not clear whether Williams's experiences as a worker at Detroit's River Rouge plant and as a member of Local 600 during World War II were well known on the national level, he was embraced as an important local figure. Whereas King understood nonviolence as philosophically necessary and tactically desirable—a choice, almost a religious calling, that entailed inner transformation and physical commitment—Williams advocated a more “flexible” approach that incorporated self-defense. He wrote:

My only difference with Dr. King is that I believe in flexibility in the freedom struggle. This means that I believe in non-violent tactics where feasible. . . . In civilized society the law serves as a deterrent against lawless forces that would destroy the democratic process. But when there is a breakdown of the law, the individual citizen has a right to protect his person, his family, his home, and his property. To me this is so simple and proper that it is self-evident.¹⁰⁵

Williams was not advocating random acts of violence but individual acts of resistance, which, when coupled with mass mobilizations in North and South alike, would boldly challenge the white power structure. Williams was concerned, moreover, that pure nonviolence was too much to ask, that it would, by necessity, exclude all those unwilling or unable to practice the necessary discipline of body and spirit.

Williams organized “rifle clubs” during the 1950s, for which he was forced out of his post as head of the Monroe, North Carolina, NAACP. If his call for armed self-defense irritated the national hierarchy of the NAACP, his sympathies for the Nation of Islam and the Cuban revolutionaries made his relationship with the organization all the more tense. As historian Van Gosse points out in his study of Cuba, the cold war, and the rise of the New Left, Williams was one of the earliest Black American supporters of Castro and the revolutionary struggles in Cuba, and his “partisanship for Castro helped insert the Cuban revolution into the black political debate.” Drawing on religious symbolism, perhaps to rival his political adversary, Reverend King, Williams characterized Cuba's example as “the new Sermon on the Mount . . . a pilgrimage to the shrine of hope.”¹⁰⁶ Williams's support of the Cuban revolution and his critique of the dominant philosophy of the southern civil rights movement placed him, albeit uneasily, in league with Left organizations such as the Socialist Workers Party. The SWP was supportive of Williams's philosophy, and the party's paper carried highly favorable reviews of his activi-

ties.¹⁰⁷ When Williams was forced to flee the United States after being charged with kidnapping a white couple during a particularly violent confrontation between Freedom Riders and local whites in Monroe in 1961, the SWP aided his escape through Mexico to Cuba, where he was given asylum.

“The Socialist Workers Party had played a major role in the events in Monroe, North Carolina,” writes Conrad Lynn, a Black attorney and former Communist Party member with complicated ties to the SWP.¹⁰⁸ Lynn, who had been a close friend of Williams for years, acted as his legal counsel and assisted the SWP in forming defense committees for him across the country. From his self-imposed exile in Cuba, Williams published his *Negroes with Guns* and an occasional newsletter—all of which won converts among young activists suffering from a sense of alienation. Williams’s book was “popular early reading” for a number of young radicals in Detroit: “We were able to get our hands on *The Crusader*, a publication that Robert Williams printed from Cuba. . . . He had a shortwave radio program on Friday nights called ‘Radio Free Dixie,’ that you could pick up from Havana.”¹⁰⁹

The SWP’s association with Black activists such as Robert Williams, Conrad Lynn, and journalist William Worthy (who defied U.S. travel bans first to China and then to Cuba) should be viewed as part of the party’s effort to link international revolutionary struggles with the fight for African American liberation. If the defense of the Cuban revolution represented one axis of party activity, then the defense of Williams and the party’s growing interests in the revolutionary potential of Black nationalism represented another. Indeed, the party’s support for Williams was reinforced by an increasing interest in the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X. Lynn notes that “the SWP had begun to see the revolutionary implications of the Black Muslim movement with the rise of its latest spokesperson, Malcolm X.”¹¹⁰ All of these connections, which were being made on a national and international level, filtered down to local activists in Detroit in myriad ways. This is not to suggest that young Black nationalists necessarily needed the SWP, but the party did manage to pull together a number of diverse ideological tendencies.

Black nationalism was definitely “in the air” in Detroit and other Black communities throughout the nation; the SWP was simply a contributing factor to its popularity. General Baker had just enrolled at Highland Park Junior College in 1959 when he “discovered” Malcolm X. “I was hit,” he recalls, “with the question of how the Black Muslims existed all this time and I didn’t know about it,” especially since they were “fathered” in Detroit and Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad were

very much in the news. Herb Boyd, who had graduated from high school in that same year, was also becoming interested in the Nation of Islam. For Boyd, the acquaintance came through a combination of (white) media hysteria over the NOI and local Black Muslims selling copies of its chief organ, *Muhammad Speaks*, door-to-door. Boyd was invited to the local mosque and later became a “stone Malcolmite.” His involvement in the Nation of Islam, along with his love of jazz and his reading of Black writers such as Richard Wright, gave Boyd a cultural perspective on Black life and struggle; his association with James and Grace Lee Boggs, as well as with local Black nationalists such as Richard and Milton Henry, who would go on to found the Republic of New Africa, helped to shape his “first political perspective.”¹¹¹ This blending of political trends was far from unique; any number of activists could have told a similar story.

The SWP’s forums, along with its informal discussion groups, gave young militants a social space where they could hash out their views on Robert Williams and Cuba, Black nationalism and the Nation of Islam, and a range of other issues. The explosive combination of personal experiences and political ideas fueled the search, as General Baker put it, for “something to do around the edges of the civil rights movement.”¹¹² This movement in the United States would also come to be suffused with an international perspective. If Black nationalism was in the air, then so was worldwide revolution. Although Mike Hamlin and others eventually found that they had to go beyond the SWP and “create a new method of dealing with exploitation and oppression,” the forum, and the influence of the Boggses, did help to advance a broader perspective on political struggle. The Soviet Union had a place in the hearts and minds of many activists from the old Left community, but among this new generation the Soviet Union was displaced by an interest in Cuba, China, Africa, and of course Vietnam.

Meetings and discussion forums on the status of the Cuban revolution were held throughout the city. Many of them were sponsored by the SWP, whose local paper, the *Michigan Militant*, carried a series of articles under banner headlines such as “Cuba—a Happy Land” and “Hands off Cuba.” Moreover, the party was a key player in the organization of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, the major pro-Cuba political group in the United States.¹¹³ In a sense, Cuba was this generation’s Spanish Civil War—an international event opposed by the U.S. government with both national and international implications. Cuba’s guerrilla warriors had the same sort of romantic appeal that Spain’s partisans offered nearly three decades earlier. This appeal was heightened by Castro’s apparent

success (even after he admitted that he had not established a workers' state) and the U.S. government's fear of communism. Supporters of the Cuban revolution and opponents of U.S. foreign policy led delegations to Cuba in defiance of the government's travel ban. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. led one such group; General Baker, Luke Tripp, Charles Simmons, and Charles "Mao" Johnson, another young Black activist, were part of a local contingent that made the same journey. "I had read Che Guevara, Fidel Castro's *History Will Absolve Me*, and Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*," recalled Baker, "but I still went to Cuba with a half-baked outlook and no set theory. . . . Going to Cuba was a real sobering experience and a real turning point in my life."¹¹⁴ "Cuba," says Gloria House, who worked for years with SNCC in Alabama before she returned to Detroit, "was a major turning point for me, or more of an affirmation of my vision of what life could be about."¹¹⁵ The Cuban revolution, along with the Cultural Revolution in China and the anticolonial uprisings in Africa, would continue to exert influence on the tenor of radicalism in Detroit for many years to come.

By the mid-1960s, all of these diverse ideological trends were beginning to converge in a heterogeneous community of young activists who were as inspired by revolution in Cuba and other parts of the world as they were by the southern and northern civil rights movements. It was not always an easy fit, and by the end of the decade irreconcilable differences would manifest themselves. In the meantime, though, they looked for intellectual and personal guidance wherever they could find it: in the SWP, in the writings of Robert Williams, in the Nation of Islam, and in the ideas and activism of local figures such as James and Grace Lee Boggs and the Rev. Albert B. Cleage. What many of these intellectual and political approaches had in common was a shift away from, or rather beyond, the conventional understanding of rights and justice. By expanding the language of rights to include both personal and social transformation, their efforts laid the intellectual foundation for a far greater challenge to American society.

Reverend Cleage's activism and his distinctive political theology, which was in itself a redefinition of the social gospel, were an important part of this trend. By the mid-1960s, Cleage had emerged as a leading figure within radical circles, voicing a Left, and decidedly Black nationalist, critique of Detroit's liberal-labor coalition. Cleage, whose denunciations of the philosophy and strategy of nonviolence grew louder every year, had ties to the local SWP, the Nation of Islam, and the general collective of opponents to America's Cuban policy. As such, he managed to attract a fairly large following among the city's young militants, as well as

among members of the old Left. Cleage's personal transformation from a middle-class NAACP activist to a middle-class radical mixing Christianity with Black nationalism is an intriguing story in its own right. Given his high profile within the movement, it is well worth exploring the details of his political biography before considering his role within the new civil rights community.