

Black and White and Red All Over: Racial Equality in the Early American Communist Party

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When the Communist Party of America formed in 1919, its members faced numerous challenges, both internal and external. In the midst of the Palmer Raids and the Red Scare, the party also had to overcome the challenges of establishing a cohesive platform and the necessary processes to achieve that platform. Perhaps the most controversial, and the most uniquely American, obstacle concerned the black population. The majority of party members accepted the inclusion of African-Americans, a substantial portion of the working-class, as a step toward proletarian consciousness and the eventual overthrow of capitalism. However, members could not agree on how to approach the “negro question.” The debate essentially boiled down to whether the Communist Party should recognize the peculiarities of African-Americans' struggles or treat them as if they were no different from white workers. This issue officially ended in 1928 with the “Resolution on the Negro Question,” which proposed black self-determination in the South and full social and political equality. Although the Communists presented a formal stance, both the realities of race relations within the party and on the ground proved contentious with the new platform. This included not only differences in thought between whites and blacks, but discord among various black leaders and organizations. Despite the difficulties, the Communist Party proceeded to campaign for civil rights throughout the 1920s and 1930s in an attempt to recruit black workers to their ranks.

African-Americans had a long history of radical thought before the creation of the Communist Party in 1919. Numerous black labor organizations arose in the mid-nineteenth century, and after the Civil War, as northern industry rapidly expanded, so too did these unions. White counterparts also grew in size during this time, and in 1866 workers formed the National Labor Union. As part of its agenda, the organization aimed to unite white and black workers in a single front against unfair work conditions. However, discrimination and exclusion within the National Labor Union stifled any actual biracial class solidarity. Black workers pressed on with new organizations catering to their specific needs, but neither these unions, nor the prior efforts, possessed any true sense of radicalism. The closest black workers came was in cooperative labor ventures, such as the Chesapeake Marine Railway and Dry Dock Company in Baltimore, which operated from 1865 to 1883. Other similar black-owned cooperative business appeared,

and these enterprises, plus the long-standing tradition of black labor unions, marked the beginning of a black working-class consciousness, one that socialists would soon attempt to espouse.¹

As American socialism developed in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, the plight of black workers was almost wholly left out of the discourse. There existed only a handful of instances in which blacks and reds commingled. The American section of the International Workingmen's Association created a committee to organize black workers, but had little results. Blacks also participated with their socialist counterparts in various eight-hour day demonstrations; in a September 1871 parade in New York City, African-Americans marched alongside IWA members under a banner proclaiming "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity." Similarly, the Skidmore Light Guard, a black militia unit, rallied with the IWA in December 1871 to honor the martyrs of the failed Paris Commune.² However, these cases proved to be outliers. The fact that the IWA in America had not a single black member in its ranks exemplifies the true nature of separation between socialists and black workers. The radicals' disinterest in the black struggle, according to one historian, stemmed from the German-American Marxists' isolationist perspective and the lack of counsel on the black issue by the theoretical leaders of socialism.³ Such a chasm would narrow in the post-Reconstruction era, not because of shifts in socialists' perspectives, but due in large part to the activities of prominent African-Americans.

Peter H. Clark emerged in the 1870s as the pioneer black socialist. As a career educator in the Cincinnati area, Clark's spirit of advocacy started within the school system, where he campaigned for blacks' right to proper education, but he also committed himself to abolitionism in the antebellum years. After growing disenchanted with the Republican Party, Clark renounced his membership and publicly proclaimed his support for the Workingmen's Party in March 1877.⁴ Foreshadowing the rhetoric of future radicals, Clark characterized the black struggle as a consequence of capitalism. "Go to the South and see the capitalists banded together over the poor whites," Clark said in a speech to his new political party. "They carefully calculate how much, and no more, it will require to feed the black laborer and keep him alive from one year to another.... Not a foot of land will they sell to the oppressed race who

¹ Earl Ofari, "Black Activists and 19th Century Radicalism," *The Black Scholar* 5, no. 5 (February, 1974): 19-20.

² Philip S. Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 37.

³ Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 44.

⁴ Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 46-48.

are trying to crowd out the degradation into which capital has plunged them.”⁵

Clark became an activist for the Workingmen's Party, giving numerous speeches at party functions and trade union congregations, but his breakthrough came with the 1877 railroad strike. At a mass meeting in Cincinnati, Clark spoke out against the railroad companies who cut wages and the federal troops who attempted to break the strike. Clark went on to suggest socialism would be the solution to working-class struggles, declaring, “Capital has been challenged to the contest . . . the American people will sit as judges, and just as surely as we stand here, their decision will be against monopolists and in favor of the workingmen.... The miserable condition into which society has fallen has but one remedy, and that is to be found in Socialism.”⁶ Historians have cited Clark's speech as the first time a black American proposed the tenets of socialism on such a public scale. Likewise, *The Emancipator's* remarks on the speech constitute the first time a popular socialist publication acknowledged the contributions of blacks to the radical cause.⁷ This recognition alone affirms Clark's inclusion in the history of relations between African-Americans and socialists. Clark continued his radical activism, eventually joining the Socialist Labor Party when it formed in 1877. The following year Clark unsuccessfully ran for Congress on the SLP's ticket (the first black socialists to do so), but by 1879 Clark became disillusioned with the party and left, blaming internal factionalism and a decrease in discussion on black issues within the party.⁸ This argument would be repeated by other black socialists in the years to come.

After the turn of the century, a West Indies immigrant took to both the African-American and socialist causes, and fathered what would be known as the Harlem Renaissance and the “New Negro” Movement. Settling in the US in 1900, Hubert Harrison became a political activist against myriad institutions, from organized religion to Booker T. Washington and his “Tuskegee Machine,” all of which Harrison believed exacerbated black oppression. By the 1910s, Harrison grew to be a leading African-American in the Socialist Party, and undoubtedly the premier black socialist in New York City. Harrison organized the Colored Socialist Club in 1912, the first socialist organization aimed at recruiting African-Americans. That same year Harrison published two

⁵ *Cincinnati Commercial*, March 27, 1877.

⁶ Peter H. Clark, “Socialism: The Remedy for the Evils of Society,” *Cincinnati Commercial*, July 23, 1877.

⁷ Foner, *Socialism and Black Americans*, 51.

⁸ Foner, *Socialism and Black Americans*, 59.

influential articles, "The Black Man's Burden" and "Socialism and the Negro," for the *International Socialist Review*.

Harrison believed the duty of the Socialist Party was to combat racial prejudice: "the Socialist party will do this because it cannot do otherwise and live as the Socialist party . . . Socialism is here to put an end to the exploitation of one group by another, whether that group be social, economic or racial."⁹ However, just as Peter H. Clark became resentful toward the Socialist Party's policies on blacks, so too did Hubert Harrison, claiming white socialists "have all along insisted on Race First and class after when you didn't need our help."¹⁰ Harrison responded to his white comrades' prejudice by developing his own "race first" perspective in which he placed his black heritage before his class. Harrison's philosophy took hold, especially in New York, and although he remained a radical, he continued to use this new view against the Socialist Party: "You will find a Negro Harlem reborn, with business enterprises and cultural arrangements. And these things have been established without any help from you or those who eat your bread.... All of these things are the recent products of the principle of 'race first'...some day, perhaps you will know enough to put Socialism's cause in the hands of those who will refrain from using your party's organ for purposes of personal pique, spite and venom."¹¹ Although Harrison's radicalism never faltered in the ensuing decades, his break with the Socialist Party left it without its most prominent African-American spokesman and in conflict with a growing black pride movement.

Through this brief history of interactions between socialists and African-Americans (which included other notable figures, such as A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen) one can extrapolate common themes in the decades preceding the creation of the Communist Party. The established socialist organizations of the era made very few attempts to woo African-Americans, especially in the early years, with any progress coming mostly from blacks themselves. These black socialists often framed racial injustice as a result of capitalism. When African-Americans became more involved in socialist activities, however, they witnessed the hypocrisy of the formal organizations, which were controlled by white men who placed their race before class interests. Although African-Americans had come to embrace socialism

⁹ Hubert Harrison, "The Duty of the Socialist Party," in *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, ed. Jeffrey B. Perry (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 59.

¹⁰ Hubert Harrison, "Race First versus Class First," in *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, ed. Jeffrey B. Perry (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 109.

¹¹ Hubert Harrison, "An Open Letter to the Socialist Party of New York City," in *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, ed. Jeffrey B. Perry (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 115-116.

more than they ever had previously, they still faced an uphill battle. Prominent black socialists would continue to fuel changing racial perspectives within their movements and organizations, but they would soon be accompanied by internal policy shifts in their favor.

Two years after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, American socialists formed the Communist Party of the United States of America.¹² By definition, the CPUSA aimed to unite the working class in a revolution against capitalism, resulting in a socialist state. Simply given the size of the black population, most of which was working-class, the Communist Party knew they would need black support to attain their radical objectives. The early Communist leaders, like socialists before them, linked racial tensions with those of economy and class, claiming the social oppression of blacks resulted from capitalists: "The Negro problem is a political and economic problem. The racial oppression of the Negro is simply the expression of his economic bondage and oppression, each intensifying the other. This complicates the Negro problem, but does not alter its proletarian character. The Communist Party will carry on agitation among the Negro workers to unite them with all the class conscious workers."¹³ Despite this last claim, the CPUSA made few attempts to unite black workers with their white counterparts in the early years of the party.

Since its inception, the CPUSA debated the status of African-American proletarians. The party recognized the inclusion of black workers in the revolution, but the racial discrimination throughout the country, and especially in the Jim Crow South, put them in a unique position. In essence, black workers were doubly oppressed, as both racial minorities and proletariats. Most Communists believed capitalism to be the cause of both forms of oppression, but the question remained on how to approach, and ultimately recruit, black workers. Various growing black nationalist movements, like that headed by Marcus Garvey, fueled the debate, for now the Communists had an ideological

¹² In 1919, the Socialist Party of American joined the Comintern. Debate within the party leadership led to two other factions splitting and forming their own organizations, the Communist Labor Party and the Communist Party of America. The Comintern would not allow separate Communist parties in the US and ordered them to merge. Most did so, but factionalism continued until the CPUSA was finally made whole in 1921. The party was forced underground during the Palmer Raids, but sponsored a legal party called the Workers Party of America. Membership and policies overlapped between the secret CPUSA and the WPA. The WPA formally renamed itself the Communist Party USA. For the sake of clarity, all of these groups shall be referred to as the Communist Party USA in this paper.

¹³ Convention of the Communist Party, "The Program of the Party," in *The Communist*, September 27, 1919.

opponent that stressed race and disregarded class as a byproduct. A lack of guidance from Marx himself compounded this problem further; although he thoroughly opposed the antebellum slavocracy of the South, and viewed its demise as a necessity for revolution, Marx made no definitive stance on post-Civil War African-Americans. Thus the CPUSA had to rely on its own perspectives and interpretations. Many party members followed the view of John Reed, who addressed the issue as a delegate at the Second Congress of the Comintern: "The only proper policy for the American Communists to follow is to consider the negro first of all as a laborer . . . In both the northern and southern parts of the country the one aim must be to unite the negro and the white laborer in common labor unions; this is the best and the quickest way to destroy race prejudice and to develop class solidarity."¹⁴ This sort of rhetoric counteracted the "race first" perspective experienced by previous black socialists like Hubert Harrison, but a true disregard for color in exchange for class solidarity did not emerge immediately.

The dominant theory among the CPUSA of class over race did not completely discourage blacks from joining the party. Much of the initial black membership came from the breakup of the African Blood Brotherhood. While only active for a few years in the early 1920s, journalist Cyril Briggs founded the ABB as a black liberation group for self-defense against racial violence. The socialist leadership of the ABB, though, also focused on the economic well-being of blacks, aiming to better working conditions and "establish fellowship and coordination of action within the dark masses and between these masses and the truly class-conscious White Workers who seek the abolition of human exploitation."¹⁵ Although the success of the ABBA remains debatable, Communists commended the group over other black liberation movements: "It is the only Negro organization that the capitalists view with any degree of alarm . . . because the ABBA recognizes the capitalist-imperialist system as the cause of the Negro people . . . It seeks to imbue the Negro workers with a sense of the necessity of working class solidarity to the success of the struggle against the capitalist-imperialist system, which it asks Negroes to wage both as Negroes and as workers."¹⁶ The ABBA supplied most of the early Communist Party's black leadership, including Cyril Briggs himself.

¹⁴ John Reed, "Speech by John Reed at 2nd Congress of Communist International on Negro Question," *The 2nd Congress of the Communist International* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1920), 154.

¹⁵ "Summary of the Program and Aims of the African Blood Brotherhood (1920)," Early American Marxism Archive. www.marxisthistory.org.

¹⁶ C. Lorenzo, "The Negro Liberation Movement," *The Toiler* IV, no. 200, December 10, 1921.

The first CPUSA effort on an organizational level to address the “negro question” resulted from its 1922 convention. Reacting in part to pressures from the Communist International to curtail ethnic factions and issues on African-Americans, the American Communists admitted the differences in treatment of black workers, and that this more severe oppression resulted in blacks developing purely racial goals. Such a statement appeared to be a rebuttal to Garveyism and other black nationalist movements. However, the party still gave no concrete plans for assisting black workers. The convention did not end the “negro question,” and some Communists even at this early stage spoke out in favor of social equality, which would be the core of the party's Negro resolution years later. In 1923, Israel Amter, a white party member, published an article detailing imperialism's oppression of blacks. As “the most docile, inexpensive form of labour imaginable,” blacks (Southern blacks specifically) would be used by capitalists to lower white wages and break strikes. The only solution: “the white workers, in their own interest, throw down the bars, and admit the negroes to their unions. More, in fact: they must make a special effort to overcome the justified prejudice that the negroes feel toward them and induce them to join the unions.”¹⁷ Naturally, Amter blamed racial tensions on capitalism, writing, “Otherwise, we shall have bloody repetitions of, race riots, shootings, rapes and burnings at the stake—fomented on some slight pretext, but always having an economic basis.”¹⁸ Although some CPUSA members believed in an expanded perspective on the “negro question” and the 1922 convention acknowledged the unique dual oppression of blacks, nothing of substance manifested in terms of actually aiding African-Americans. Instead the party turned its attention to established black organizations.¹⁹

In March 1923, an “All Race Assembly,” led by the NAACP and the National Equal Rights League, congregated in New York. Sixty-one black organizations participated in the “Negro Sanhedrin,” including delegates from the Communist Party. The point of the meeting concerned the development of a civil rights and equal opportunity program. However, the assembly quickly turned into a political debate over communism. The CPUSA largely brought it on themselves, proposing resolutions on nationalizing railroads and schools to promote integration, and suggesting the Sanhedrin send delegates to the Communist's Farmer-Labor Party convention, which would imply a

¹⁷ Israel Amter, “The Black Victims of Imperialism,” *The Communist International* 26-27 (1923), Marxists Internet Archive.

¹⁸ Israel Amter, “The Black Victims of Imperialism,” Marxists Internet Archive.

¹⁹ Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict, 1919-1920* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 13.

partisan recognition of a Communist-tied party. Obviously, the convention adopted none of these resolutions, and instead casted out the Communists. The Sanhedrin proved to be an ultimate disaster, and despite intentions, it never met again. Likewise, the events furthered tarnished the Communists' image in the minds of black organizations.²⁰

The CPUSA then turned its attention to the NAACP, the biggest and most influential black organization in America at the time. The party sent James Ford, a rising black Communist, to speak at the NAACP's 1926 conference. Ford's mission involved gaining the NAACP's cooperation in unionizing black industrial workers to combat the racial discrimination of established unions, specifically the American Federation of Labor. Although the NAACP had openly battled against the AFL, the organization did not want to be connected to the Communist Party, and thus quietly rejected Ford's proposals. Again, the fault can be placed on the CPUSA itself: it did not take into account the varying opinions of the members of such a multifaceted organization, and it underestimated the NAACP's pragmatism with regards to its focus on racial justice.²¹ This defeat not only foreshadowed the conflict between the NAACP and the Communist party, but also proved to be the last effort to appeal to established black organizations.

The Communist Party decided to take matters into its own hands, and established the American Negro Labor Congress in 1925. The ANLC aimed to eradicate industrial discrimination in all sectors of the labor market. The Communist Party was careful to distance itself from the ANLC, knowing full well the public distaste for radicalism. The ANLC would act as a union for black workers of all stripes, and it succeeded in recruiting delegates from numerous labor associations, unions, community organizations, and even international movements. Such diversity did indeed reduce the connection to Communism, and ultimately led to the Congress declaring race, not class, caused black oppression.²² By placing race before class, the ANLC found some gains: in two years the Congress had grown to include forty-five local chapters. However, overall membership remained relatively low. In addition to general disinterest on the part of rank-and-file workers, the ANLC took blows when it began attacking Christianity as an oppressor of the black people, and after Marcus Garvey emphasized the congress's Communist links. In the end, the ANLC became an explicit arm of the Communist Party and continued on its downward trajectory, ultimately disbanding in 1930.²³

²⁰ Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict, 1919-1920*, 16-20.

²¹ Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict, 1919-1920*, 22-24.

²² Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict, 1919-1920*, 29-31.

²³ Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict, 1919-1920*, 35-38.

With a series of failures on its record, and an expanding Garveyist movement stealing its momentum, the CPUSA officially altered its position in 1926. The party recognized both black and whites workers suffered the same exploitation by capital, but African-Americans also fell victim to racial discrimination. Therefore, the party decided, “the workers and farmers must fight for the repeal of all laws discriminating against the Negro and for complete political, industrial, educational—in a word, complete social equality for the Negro.”²⁴ This new platform had been advocated by black Communists like Cyril Briggs, Lovett Fort-Whiteman, and Harry Haywood for some years, but only when other possibilities proved futile and external forces gained strength did the party start to fully accept the change. Despite the new policy, nothing materialized on the ground. Part of the problem came again from the Garvey movement, which gave blacks self-assertion. Likewise, after decades of racial prejudice, blacks simply wanted to conquer injustice with their own organization. This also tied into the suspicion blacks generally held toward whites. Such skepticism was expected given rampant racism, even within the Communist Party itself.²⁵

The actual watershed moment came with a decision by the Comintern's Sixth World Congress in 1928. The International had been pressuring the American party since its inception to curtail ethnic factions among Communists and develop a solid African-American policy. Apparently the Comintern had enough of the Americans' vagueness. The Executive Committee created a Negro Commission to address the issue and released the “Resolution on the US Negro Question.” The resolution defined African-Americans as a distinct “nation within a nation,” one who's growth had been stifled by capitalist, racist Southern society.

Now that the status of African-Americans had been clearly defined, the “Resolution on the US Negro Question” then laid out the foundations for policy. First, the party advocated “the right of the oppressed Negro race for full emancipation.” The “central slogan” of the party would remain “full social and political equality for the Negroes,” while also championing “the right of Negroes to national self-determination in the southern states, where the Negroes form a majority of the population.”²⁶ The resolution relayed little on the actual mechanisms of black self-determination, but such advocacy, as well as

²⁴ Workers' Party of America, “Workers' (Communist) Party Congressional Program,” in *American Labor Yearbook* (New York: Rand School of Social Sciences, 1927), 130.

²⁵ Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict*, 47.

²⁶ Communist International, “Resolution on Negro Questions in U.S.,” *The Communist* (January 1930): 49.

the call for social and political equality, would have a lasting impact on future Communist policies.

Additionally, the party recognized the widespread racism within its own ranks, and aimed to diminish it: "The time is ripe to begin within the Party a courageous campaign of self-criticism concerning the work among the Negroes. Penetrating self-criticism is the necessary preliminary condition for directing the Negro work along new lines. . . . The Party must bear in mind that white chauvinism, which is the expression of the ideological influence of American imperialism among the workers, not only prevails among different strata of the white workers in the U. S. A., but is even reflected in various forms in the Party itself."²⁷ The fight against internal racial prejudice would have to coincide with a "widespread and thorough educational campaign in the spirit of internationalism within the Party . . . This educational work should be conducted simultaneously with a campaign to draw the white workers and the poor farmers into the struggle for the support of the demands of the Negro workers."²⁸

The Communist Party's tactics of both attempting to work with existing black organizations and establishing their own should continue, the Comintern declared, although the Americans should focus solely on working-class groups. This exclusive approach would be of "much greater importance than the work in bourgeois and petty-bourgeois organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Pan-African Congress, etc."²⁹ The failure of the CPUSA to coordinate with such organizations had been duly noted, and the Comintern suggested the party stick to what it knew best: the working-class.

The Comintern heavily emphasized the role black workers would play in the Communist Party's policies in the future. "The Party must link up the struggle on behalf of the Negroes with the general campaigns of the Party," the resolution stated. "The Negro problem must be part and parcel of all and every campaign conducted by the Party."³⁰ The commitment to black workers would have to transcend mere rhetoric: "It must be borne in mind that the Negro masses will not be won for the revolutionary struggles until such time as the most conscious section of the white workers show, by action, that they are fighting with the Negroes, against all racial discrimination and persecution."³¹ As always, despite any level of grandstanding, the

²⁷ Communist International, "Resolution on Negro Questions in U.S.," 52.

²⁸ Communist International, "Resolution on Negro Questions in U.S.," 52.

²⁹ Communist International, "Resolution on Negro Questions in U.S.," 51.

³⁰ Communist International, "Resolution on Negro Questions in U.S.," 53.

³¹ Communist International, "Resolution on Negro Questions in U.S.," 53-54.

success of the resolution's objectives would have to be won on the ground.

Given that "the agrarian problem lies at the root of the Negro national movement,"³² the resolution focused largely on the South. "The Party must consider the beginning of systematic work in the south as one of its main tasks," the Comintern declared, "having regard for the fact that the bringing together of the workers and toiling masses of all nationalities for a joint struggle against the land-owners and the bourgeoisie is one of the most important aims of the Communist International."³³ In keeping with the new outlook, the Comintern not only approached the issue from an economic and class angle, but also looked to fight civil rights abuses rampant in the South: "Special stress must be laid upon organizing active resistance against lynching, Jim Crowism, segregation and all other forms of oppression of the Negro population."³⁴ Acting on the resolution's call, the CPUSA achieved much success from campaigns sympathetic to the plight of Southern African-Americans.

Now with a formal stance on the issue, the CPUSA sought to implement new programs. As mentioned, the resolution emphasized the need for self-reflection within the party to purge white chauvinism from its ranks, and beginning in 1929, the CPUSA did just that. The party expelled white Communists accused of racism in Seattle, Washington; Norfolk Virginia; Youngstown, Ohio; and Greenville, South Carolina, among other cities.³⁵ Most of the accusations involved whites prohibiting blacks from joining the local branches or disturbances at newly created interracial dances, which were ironically designed to foster camaraderie and show the public the party's commitment to the black cause. The expulsions may have impressed black members, but they also helped ignite resentment among some white Communists who came to believe African-Americans received special treatment from party leaders. Some members also feared the reform could be used as a witch hunt for the purposes of disruption or factional conflict.³⁶ One historian attributed the backlash and general white chauvinism to the prevalence of ethnics in the Communist Party. Most immigrant workers desired to be American, and thus tried to adopt American behaviors, which they believed included anti-black sentiment. At the same time, excluding blacks from the party helped protect the ethnic factions that

³² Communist International, "Resolution on Negro Questions in U.S.," 49.

³³ Communist International, "Resolution on Negro Questions in U.S.," 49.

³⁴ Communist International, "Resolution on Negro Questions in U.S.," 49.

³⁵ Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African-Americans, 1917-1936* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 132-137.

³⁶ Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 134, 136.

ruled many of the local branches.³⁷ Nevertheless, the CPUSA leadership maintained its support for racial equality, and amped up its program of self-criticism in the following decade.

Beginning in January 1931, the CPUSA held a series of show trials to display its seriousness through grandiosity. These trials were filled with Communist party members and held as if for major violations, despite how relatively insignificant the accusation may have been. Most importantly, however, they were not internal affairs like previous expulsions—these trials were public attempts at showboating. The first, and perhaps most influential, took place in Harlem. August Yokinen, a Finnish immigrant and Communist Party member, was a janitor at the Finnish Workers Club. When three black men came to the club for a dance, Yokinen and/or other white men (sources vary in interpretation) made derogatory remarks, forcing the black men to leave. Unfortunately for Yokinen, the black men were card-carrying Communist Party members. They informed the higher-ups, who ordered an investigation. The other white men admitted their transgressions, but Yokinen stubbornly stood by his actions and was thusly brought before a CPUSA trial. More than 2,000 people attended the trial, five hundred of whom were black. With a confession on the record, the interracial jury of fellow Communists found Yokinen guilty of betraying the tenants of the party and expelled him. Of course, the jury did not blame Yokinen's racism on his personality or character, but claimed it stemmed from American imperialism and capitalism, which artificially separated workers by race and nationality to pit them against each other.³⁸ They allowed Yokinen to reenter the CPUSA if he proved himself reformed by participating in other racial equality organizations.³⁹ According to Harry Haywood, one of the most prominent black Communists, Yokinen returned to the party after six months “as one of the staunchest fighters for its program of Negro liberation.”⁴⁰ Whether the trial succeeded in rehabilitating Yokinen or the party merely wanted its members to believe so remains unclear. Either way, the trial, as a reflection of Communist leaders' commitment to its racial program, held great significance for the future of the party.

The CPUSA tried other members accused of white chauvinism until 1933. These trials, like that of Yokinen, were widely publicized in both

³⁷ Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 138.

³⁸ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 253.

³⁹ Communist Party, U.S.A., *Race Hatred On Trial* (1931), in *American Communism and Black Americans: A Documentary History, 1930-1934* ed. Philip S. Foner and Herbert Shapiro (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 176.

⁴⁰ Harry Haywood, “The Struggle for the Leninist Position on the Negro Question in the U.S.A.,” *The Communist* 12, no. 9 (September 1933), 893.

party publications and the mainstream media. While many journalists commended the CPUSA for its efforts, the effect on black recruitment proved vague. That said, the Communists dwelled on any success they achieved. Explaining why the press latched on to the Yokinen story, one party member claimed, "because all America was interested in a public challenge dramatically flung into the face of a basic bourgeois principle of social relationships in America . . . the result was a big wave of sympathy and approval, in the first place among the Negro masses, but also among the white workers."⁴¹ The trials did, however, stir up a sense of caution and self-reflection within the white rank-and-file of the party. Members knew they would be held accountable for any behavior deemed racist. Party leaders viewed the stronger sense of self-criticism, plus a growing number of whites in the street demonstrating against Jim Crow and mob violence, as progress in their campaign to rid the CPUSA of white chauvinism and induce interracial solidarity.⁴²

While Communist Party leaders believed purging its ranks of white chauvinism would help the party appeal to blacks, it also began proactively addressing the grievances of black workers. First, the party established a National Negro Department in 1928 to develop initiatives and manage all activities regarding black affairs. Some early efforts to support black proletarians proved successful: that year, 200 blacks led a rent strike in Harlem, black Communist leader Otto Hall's national tour resulted in 300 membership applications from blacks, and numerous strikes involving black workers aroused under the CPUSA banner.⁴³ With the Great Depression looming, the party decided to focus on bread-and-butter issues most important to black workers. In 1930, the CPUSA formed the International Workers' Order Mutual Benefit Society. The organization allocated aid to dues-paying members, providing funds for groceries, health care, funerals, and other benefits. The IWO also reformed standard CPUSA meeting structure. Instead of long lectures on highbrow Marxist ideology, meetings scheduled entertainment such as movies and plays. The informal atmosphere, plus the aid in a time of need, attracted many black workers to the IWO. By 1936, the IWO's roster included over 31,000 members in 700 branches throughout the country. According to Samuel Patterson, Field Organizer of the New York IWO, who took a four-month nationwide trip to build support, blacks were more likely to join those branches in which white members fought actively for black rights, such as Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland,

⁴¹ Earl Browder, "For National Liberation of the Negroes! War Against White Chauvinism!," *The Communist* 11, no. 4 (April 1932), 298.

⁴² Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict*, 67.

⁴³ Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 97.

and Philadelphia.⁴⁴ The central IWO, too, sponsored racial equality programs, including a Conference for Constitutional Rights for Negroes in 1937, a segregation protest at a Pennsylvania theater, a resolution calling for the National Baseball League to open its doors to black athletes, and a request that President Franklin D. Roosevelt strengthen the Social Security and the Old Age Pension Acts.⁴⁵ The IWO remained a prominent benefit organization until the McCarthyism era of the 1950s.

As noted earlier, the Comintern Resolution emphasized the South as a particular area of interest, and the CPUSA focused much of its efforts there. In 1930 the Communist Party appointed James S. Allen to the editorship of the party's first Southern newspaper, the *Southern Worker*. From that appointment, Allen became one of the most prominent Communist organizers in the South. Among the various economic and labor troubles of the South, Allen also concerned himself greatly with civil rights. "The *Southern Worker* stands unalterably for full social, economic and political equality for the Negro workers and farmers," the newspaper's credo declared. "This is one of its chief planks."⁴⁶ Indeed, the paper focused mostly on the struggles of black workers. While racial equality was a party mandate, not all members—especially in the Deep South—came on board. One frustrated white Communist wrote to the *Southern Worker* editors that he could not sell the publication because "it was nothing but a Negro paper . . . a paper that devotes 90 of its news to Negroes and 10 percent to the whites . . . when you approach a white worker who still has the race hatred in them, they won't take it."⁴⁷ The editors took half a page to meticulously refute the "misled" worker's arguments.

Although the CPUSA had established some outposts in the South, the party began to push hard in early 1930. The Communists centered their organizing activities in Birmingham, Alabama, though it soon spread. Being a workers' party, the CPUSA sought to unionize proletarians, both black and white, but they always brought in racial equality as well: "The Party emphasized the fight for unemployment relief and social insurance, militant industrial unionism, and the organization of sharecroppers, other farm tenants, and small landowners. A central theme in all these endeavors was the need to fight Jim Crow and racism in order to meet even minimum demands."⁴⁸ Most

⁴⁴ Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict*, 75.

⁴⁵ Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict*, 76.

⁴⁶ James S. Allen, *Organizing in the Depression South: A Communist's Memoir* (Minneapolis: MEP Publications, 2001), 135.

⁴⁷ *Southern Worker* 1, no. 13 (November 15, 1930).

⁴⁸ Allen, *Organizing in the Depression South*, 51.

of party activities, however, lacked a sense of self-determination as proposed by the Comintern Resolution of 1928. Allen's own experiences with suggesting self-determination to black workers resulted in little interest: "the croppers were most concerned with how they were going to get through the winter. I can only conjecture that they probably felt Black self-government was utopian, and in any case, far off... Obviously, this was not then considered a suitable agitational theme in the daily work of the Party, at least in the South."⁴⁹

James Allen, as did other Southern Communists, devoted much energy to fighting lynchings. With this sentiment strong among radicals and other black advocates, the American Negro Labor Congress held an All-Southern Anti-Lynching Conference in Chattanooga, Tennessee on November 9, 1930. Fourteen organizations and three churches from three states sent a total of fifty-four delegates to the convention. The final resolutions passed by the congress proved to be a radical departure from previous anti-lynching organizations: the Chattanooga congregation demanded the death penalty for convicted lynchers. The congress also supported a resolution claiming "lynching will only be finally done away with in the South when the Negro masses have won for themselves the right of self-determination, the right to set up an independent Negro state if they so choose."⁵⁰ The argument was widely accepted among the conference, despite Allen's pessimism about blacks' acceptance of self-determination. With resolutions on the books, the congress aimed to implement its ideas in the South and on a wider scale, sending nine delegates to a national anti-lynching convention in St. Louis. The national congress expanded upon its Southern counterpart, and called for mass violation of Jim Crow, the liquidation Negro farmers' of debts and mortgages, and the confiscation of white lands to solve the lynching and oppression of Southern African-Americans.⁵¹

Another important group in the Communists' equal rights campaign emerged in 1930. From the ashes of the American Negro Labor Congress, which had been slowly dying away the past few years, arose the League of Struggle for Negro Rights. Like its predecessor, the League aimed to organize black workers and eradicate prejudice within established labor unions, but also took on broader social goals. Although not confined to one geographical area, the League put a great deal of effort into its Southern activities. For one, the League prescribed to black self-determination, blatantly declaring the organization "stands for the complete right of self-determination for the Negro people in the

⁴⁹ Allen, *Organizing in the Depression South*, 51-52.

⁵⁰ *Southern Worker* 1, no. 13 (November 15, 1930).

⁵¹ *Southern Worker* 1, no. 15 (November 29, 1930).

Black Belt with full rights for the toiling white minority.”⁵² To realize this goal of an independent African-American state, the League advocated the confiscation without compensation of large landholdings to be redistributed among blacks and small white farmers and sharecroppers.⁵³ Additionally, the League fought “Jim-Crowism, and discrimination in all forms...all forms of forced labor...all ideas of 'white supremacy' and 'superiority'...[and] lynching and all forms of terror, violence and abuse against negroes.”⁵⁴ It also supported the All-Southern Anti-Lynching Congress's resolution calling for the death penalty for lynchers. Although the League organized public demonstrations and pickets, published their newspaper the *Liberator*, and held numerous rallies and anti-lynching conferences, it never gained strong momentum independent of the Communist Party. Part of the reasons was the compartmentalization of the party's black programs: the International Labor Defense had become active in lynching cases and various unemployment councils fought eviction and hunger. With these and other CPUSA-tied organizations fighting for blacks, the League was left without a niche. Also, the party gave the League little authority in manifesting black self-determination in the South and demanded the League not hide its Communist ties. Although the League had some successes, it ultimately faded out by 1936.⁵⁵

While it still existed, the League contributed to one of the most successful Communist campaigns regarding African-American rights. Alabama's Scottsboro Boys case exploded in early April 1931. Police charged nine black youths, ages twelve to nineteen, with the rape of two white women while they all were hoboing on a train. A lynch mob formed at the jail where the boys were held, but no violence ensued. After a quick trial without proper legal representation, and despite shoddy evidence which would later point to their innocence, all of the boys except the youngest were convicted and sentenced to death. As soon as word came, the Communist Party mobilized support for Scottsboro Boys. The *Southern Worker* quickly began to publicize and criticize the injustice, printing numerous articles that gave updates on the events and probed the bias of the all-white jury. The newspaper also advocated the boys' safety, declaring, “To prevent a certain lynching on April 6, the white workers and farmers of Scottsboro will have to get

⁵² League of Struggle for Negro Rights, “Draft Program of The League of Struggle for Negro Rights,” in *Equality, Land, and Freedom: A Program for Negro Liberation* (New York: League of Struggle for Negro Rights, 1933), 11.

⁵³ League of Struggle for Negro Rights, “Draft Program of The League of Struggle for Negro Rights,” 10.

⁵⁴ League of Struggle for Negro Rights, “Draft Program of The League of Struggle for Negro Rights,” 18-19.

⁵⁵ Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 190-191.

together with the Negroes and defend the nine youths.”⁵⁶ The central CPUSA, too, issued statements in support of the boys: “The Communist Party demands...the immediate release of the nine innocent Negro lads framed up and sentenced to death at Scottsboro!”⁵⁷ The party held conferences and protests around the country, and even organized demonstrations internationally.⁵⁸ The League of Struggle for Negro Rights organized anti-lynching rallies throughout the country to protest the Scottsboro Boys case and others.⁵⁹ Just a year after the initial round of trials, the League published a pamphlet on the Scottsboro case. While retelling events in a particularly extravagant manner, the pamphlet also acted as a Communist tool: “the Scottsboro case is a symbol of the bloody reign of American white ruling class perspective of the Negroes.... It lays bare the fact that the barbarous oppression of the Negroes is a link in the chain of American capitalist exploitation and plunder of the entire working class.”⁶⁰

The CPUSA also provided practical support. In addition to raising money, the party ordered two International Labor Defense lawyers to represent the Scottsboro Boys. The lawyers began a series of appeals and retrials, which reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 1932. The court reversed the convictions, and sent the case back to Alabama for a retrial. The CPUSA remained the backers of the Scottsboro Boys, but also brought New York attorney Samuel Leibowitz on board. Though one of the white female victims recanted her story, by 1937 judges convicted the Scottsboro Boys in individual courts and sentenced all but two to prison.⁶¹

The Communist Party proved unsuccessful in completely freeing the boys, but their aid prevented their lynching and brought constitutional issues to the U.S. Supreme Court. These victories, and the Communists' efforts in general, boosted the party's image among blacks nationally.⁶² Some within the Communist Party believed the Scottsboro case pushed the party into new territory. The “Negro petty-bourgeois leaders” involved in the case turned against the Communists, creating a

⁵⁶ *Southern Worker* 1, no. 33 (April 4, 1931).

⁵⁷ Central Committee, Communist Party of the United States of America, “Stop Reign of Terror Against Alabama Negroes,” *Daily Worker* (December 21, 1932).

⁵⁸ Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 196-197.

⁵⁹ *Southern Worker* 1, no. 33 (April 4, 1931).

⁶⁰ League of Struggle for Negro Rights, *They Shall Not Die!: The Story of Scottsboro in Pictures* (New York: Workers' Library Publishers, 1932), 3.

⁶¹ Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 195-206.

⁶² Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict*, 69.

chasm in the black community⁶³. But, some Communists favored this distinction: “Here we begin to see the slogan of unity of white and black workers, taking on its full political significance, while the masses begin to understand that the Communists are quite different from the liberal humanitarians who speak of 'human brotherhood' and 'class peace,' but tolerate and actively support the machinery of legal and extralegal lynchings and jim-crowism.”⁶⁴ While the mainstream media portrayed the Communist Party as exploiters of the Scottsboro Boys, the mere fact the national press was covering the case displayed the party's influence.⁶⁵ Lynchings occurred frequently in the South, and while some were mentioned in the media, none matched the massive exposure of the Scottsboro case. Part of this resulted from the Communist Party raising awareness of the case, which helped bring it to the forefront of national news.

The Communist Party's campaign for African-American rights dwindled with the onset of the Popular Front era and World War II. Despite efforts in later decades to revive a strong push for racial equality, the CPUSA's heyday in this regard ended by the late 1930s. The party spent its first twenty years of existence trying to gain a foothold in the African-American community, and after much debate and failures, finally developed a policy in 1928 that addressed the unique position of black workers in America. With this new platform, the Communist Party began a genuine movement to end racial discrimination, segregation, and violence. Their efforts often aroused suspicion, and the party did not recruit a substantial amount of African-Americans (the party did not recruit a substantial amount of Americans in general), but the Communists did find much success in their various organizations and campaigns. Many blacks could not wholly dismiss a party who fought on the ground for racial equality. Perhaps it was the party's ultimate goal—socialist revolution—that prevented African-Americans from joining the party en masse.

⁶³ The NAACP attempted to have its lawyers represent the Scottsboro Boys; a debate ensued between the NAACP and CPUSA, with the Communists coming out victorious.

⁶⁴ Earl Browder, “For National Liberation of the Negroes! War Against White Chauvinism!,” *The Communist* 11, no. 4 (April 1932), 299.

⁶⁵ A survey of the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times* reveals nothing but suspicion about and contempt for the Communists' actions involving the Scottsboro Boys case.