

# The Making and Breaking of a Popular Front: The Case of the National Negro Congress

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## Introduction

With its launch as an organization in February 1936, the National Negro Congress (NNC) captured the imagination of countless African Americans for what it would stand for and promised to accomplish. The founding Chicago conference “is the most potent and promising gathering of its kind ever held in the United States,” concluded the Black weekly, the *St. Louis American*.<sup>1</sup> Encomiums flowed freely. William Hastie, an assistant solicitor in the Department of the Interior and an old Harvard friend of NNC organizer John P. Davis, declared the Congress to be “the most significant gathering ever witnessed,” one that had “more potentialities for co-ordinative action than any effort ever attempted heretofore.”<sup>2</sup> To the editor of the *Indianapolis Recorder*, “No more significant event has been recorded in the post-Emancipation history of the Negro in America,”<sup>3</sup> while the Communists’ *Sunday Worker* suggested that the Congress “stands out as one of the greatest events of the last half century.”<sup>4</sup> The new organization, based on what it claimed was the broadest united front of progressive forces, burst onto the political scene committed to pursuing militant activism against racial inequality, critiquing the inadequacies of the New Deal, supporting interracial trade unionism, combating segregation, and opposing fascism. Its 1936 gathering evinced “such enthusiasm, such sustained interest,” the National Urban League’s Lester Granger explained, “indicative of a deep rooted and nationwide dissatisfaction of Negroes that rapidly mounts into a flaming resentment.”<sup>5</sup> When dele-

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1. “Race Conference Launches Program for Group Interest,” *St. Louis American*, February 19, 1936.
2. “What Right Wing Delegates Think of the Congress,” *Omaha Guide*, February 22, 1936.
3. “The Awakening,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, February 22, 1936.
4. “Negro America Marches,” *Sunday Worker*, February 23, 1936.
5. Granger, “The National Negro Congress.”

gates left Chicago, the young writer Richard Wright concluded, “they took with them this new hope” and “laid the basis for building unity, for augmenting their power and their strength.”<sup>6</sup> With socialist labor leader A. Philip Randolph as president and Communist Party ally John P. Davis as executive director responsible for day-to-day operations, the NNC stood as a visible and successful example of the Popular Front in action, effectively drawing together leftists in the orbit of the Communist Party (CP) and non-Communist progressives committed to racial equality, labor rights, and antifascism.

Just over four years later, it appeared to some that the promise of the National Negro Congress had not been fulfilled. Horace Cayton, reviewing the organization’s early history, later contended that the “Congress never became an organization supported by a membership but remained pretty much a paper front” whose policies were determined by the Communists and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).<sup>7</sup> Ralph Bunche, a founder of the NNC, agreed. He now concluded that it had “no mass following,” though it “maintained local councils in some of the North, South and Southwest urban centers.”<sup>8</sup> In the aftermath of the 1940 NNC convention, Charlotta Bass, the *California Eagle* editor who would soon become a close ally of the Communist Party, noted the NNC’s “failure to achieve any outstanding accomplishment helpful to racial progress.” This was striking “in the face of the consistent and unprecedented procession of victories piled up by the ‘reactionary’ NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. . . . For all its shouting, its ‘liberalism,’ its progressivism, the NNC could not nearly duplicate such a record.”<sup>9</sup> Decades later, historians August Meier and Elliot Rudwick drew a similar conclusion: the NNC “failed to obtain the depth of support it needed, and functioned both nationally and locally largely as a paper organization.”<sup>10</sup>

Those critical assessments have not been shared by historians in recent decades. In an influential essay reassessing the NNC in 1970, Lawrence Wittner initiated a historiographical transformation in the organization’s reputation. Two fatal flaws marked earlier scholarship on the Congress, he argued. The first was an excessive focus on the issue of Communist domination, allowing critics to dismiss the body’s accomplishments by casting the NNC merely as a front organization. The second was the failure of those dismissing the NNC to “delve into the work” of its seventy-plus local councils; “none” who had weighed in on the NNC up to that point had actually “bothered to study the activities” of the Congress.<sup>11</sup> In recent years, a

6. Wright, “Two Million Black Voices.”

7. Horace R. Cayton, “Negro Congress Doomed,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 6, 1941.

8. Ralph J. Bunche, “Extended Memorandum on the Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations,” memorandum 2, June 7, 1940, p. 84, in *Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro in America Research Memoranda Collection*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, microfilm, reel 1.

9. Charlotta A. Bass, “On the Sidewalk,” *California Eagle*, May 2, 1940.

10. Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 29.

11. Wittner, “The National Negro Congress,” 883.

small number of historians have taken Wittner's critique to heart, filling in his reassessment with detail and passion. The result is a portrait of a grassroots organization in which Communists generally participated but did not dominate and whose record of accomplishment deserves recognition and praise. The NNC "was the leading African-American organization in the global anti-fascist movement," Clayton Vaughn-Roberson argues.<sup>12</sup> It became the "black vanguard of the Popular Front," helped to "launch the first successful industrial labor movement" in the United States, and "remade urban politics and culture in America," Erik Gellman insists.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the carping by the organization's contemporaries and the scholars who followed their lead, today the NNC's reputation has been rehabilitated, its accomplishments trumpeted and treated as substantial.

This article draws on and at times challenges the newer literature on the NNC by exploring three related questions. First, what made it possible for radicals and some non-Communist progressives to join an ecumenical alliance that held from 1935 to 1940? It argues uncontroversially that the building of a "united front" required Communists to modify their earlier hypersectarianism *and* required non-Communists to see value in aligning with their former adversaries. This learning process took place over the course of 1935—prior to the party line change announced at the Comintern's Seventh World Congress—a year that witnessed the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, a riot in New York City, and the successful unionization campaign of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP).<sup>14</sup> Non-Communists, in their various struggles, concluded that they *needed* Communists, who were proving themselves to be effective agitators who themselves were actively seeking out new allies. The alliance, for a time, served the needs of both camps.

Second, what weight should be placed on the Communists' contribution to the formation and operation of the NNC? A great deal, this article argues. While agreeing that Communists did not control the NNC directly—at least initially—it maintains that Communists were, in fact, *the* driving force in the NNC during its early years. Indeed, by invoking "the NNC" as something of an autonomous force in union and community campaigns, recent scholarship downplays the Communists' genuine contributions, withholding credit that actually belongs to party members who worked tirelessly under its banner. Communists themselves established this practice: although they trumpeted their active role to themselves in internal deliberations, to the larger world they worked diligently to obscure—or erase—their fingerprints on the organization's campaigns. Often representing themselves as NNC activists rather than Communists, they assumed leadership positions, energetically spearheaded many of its initiatives, and kept in the headlines the issues that the party, as well as those of non-Communist progressives, prioritized. Staunch anti-Communists were hardly fooled, but their argu-

12. Vaughn-Roberson, "Fascism with a Jim Crow Face," 6, and "Grassroots Anti-fascism," 4–15.

13. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*, 6. See also Gellman, "'Carthage Must Be Destroyed.'"

14. On the shift in Communist activities toward a Popular Front prior to the Comintern meeting, see Cherny, "Prelude to the Popular Front"; Storch, *Red Chicago*.

ments gained relatively little traction during the Popular Front years. Casting themselves as NNC activists proved to be a successful strategy, allowing party members to achieve a greater degree of legitimacy and access within Black communities.

Third, to what extent is it possible to disentangle the organization's transformation in 1940 from the issue of Communist influence? While the NNC's history "cannot be understood solely by reference to Communism,"<sup>15</sup> downplaying communism—as many scholars have done—makes it harder to understand the organization's abrupt and dramatic change in ideological direction, on the one hand, and the widespread defection of non-Communist Black activists, on the other. As many scholars have shown, the unexpected signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in August 1939 marked the rapid demise of the Popular Front as Communists repudiated earlier positions that had attracted political support across the broad left—like support for the New Deal and antifascism. Their new program, which included unrelenting hostility to the Roosevelt administration and an antiwar stance at odds with their earlier antifascism, instantly alienated many of their erstwhile allies on the non-Communist left. The NNC experienced the same internal strains as CP-oriented activists put the body on record favoring the CP's new line. Rather than constituting a "hand grenade in debates about the Communist Party's role in the black freedom movements,"<sup>16</sup> as Erik Gellman has put it, Communists and their actual relationship to the NNC are necessary components of any understanding of the organization's rise and fall—or at least its rise and transformation into an organization whose membership and ideological orientation were indistinguishable from that of the CP.

### 1935: Building a United Front

At the start of 1935, few on the American left could have predicted the emergence and flowering of a genuine Popular Front that effectively allied formerly warring political factions. The insistent cry of the sectarian and strident Communists for a "united front" of popular forces was nothing new, but until mid-decade *that* united front essentially meant an alliance on the Communists' terms, guaranteeing skepticism or hostility from many of those who might have shared a campaign's specific aims but found the party's rhetoric and behavior grating and its motives suspicious. Why were Communists "so insistent upon a united front?" asked the Christian pacifist Kirby Page of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in March 1935. "For the simple reason that it affords them maximum opportunities for boring from within and of making converts for their cause."<sup>17</sup> He had this on good authority, for CP leader Earl Browder in 1933 made it clear that the "united front is not a peace pact with the reformists" but, rather, a "method of struggle against the reformists, against the social-fascists, for the possession of the masses."<sup>18</sup> Holding out one hand of friendship, party leaders

15. Wittner, "The National Negro Congress," 901.

16. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*, 3.

17. Page, "The United Front," 6.

18. Earl Browder, "Why an Open Letter to the Party Membership: Excerpts from the Report to the Extraordinary Party Conference, New York City, July 7, 1933," in Browder, *Communism in the United States*, 149.

used the other to slap down those who refused to fall in line behind them. African American socialists knew this from personal experience. A meeting to “make Harlem labor conscious”<sup>19</sup> at Harlem’s Rockland Palace—convened by socialist Frank Crosswaith and addressed by fellow socialist A. Philip Randolph—descended into chaos in early January 1935 when Communists interrupted the proceedings and then stormed the platform; some three thousand in attendance witnessed or participated in a free-for-all that involved heckling and chair throwing, a melee that ended only with the arrival of the police. Crosswaith had no illusions when he returned to the Rockland Palace just over a week later to participate in what was billed as the “Debate of the Year” with the CP’s former vice presidential candidate, James W. Ford—one of the disrupters of Crosswaith’s meeting—and Chicago’s Republican congressman, Oscar DePriest, on the question “Whither the Negro—Communism, Socialism, Democracy?” Crosswaith was a familiar target of Communist criticism; the previous December the party had denounced “our goody-goody Negro socialist” for “demagogy,” and the *Negro Liberator*, edited by Black Communist Ben Davis Jr. (another disrupter at Crosswaith’s meeting), had included him on its list of recipients of the “order of the Bandanna,” given to “Loyal Uncle Tom[s],” “High-Class Bootlicker[s],” “Professional Kisser[s] of Ruling-Class Fee,” and “Hat-in-Hand Clown[s] to His Majesty, the White Boss.”<sup>20</sup> The Communists who packed the hall predictably gave Ford a respectful hearing; just as predictably, they withheld any respect when it was DePriest’s and Crosswaith’s turn to speak. DePriest defended capitalism, hard work, democracy, and free speech before inflaming his audience by suggesting he would be “in front of a firing squad by tomorrow night” if he should “speak in Russia against Russia, as Mr. Ford has spoken against America tonight.”<sup>21</sup> The crowd stamped, heckled, and interrupted, but DePriest’s reception, as a *Baltimore Afro-American* reporter put it, was “tame in comparison” with that which greeted Crosswaith.<sup>22</sup> Neither the social-

19. “Reds Start Fight at Trade Union Drive,” *Amsterdam News* (New York, NY), January 12, 1935; “Riot Squad Called to Bring Quiet to N.Y. Labor Rally,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 12, 1935; “Scottsboro Mother Roughed by Thug at Socialist Labor Committee Meet,” *Negro Liberator*, January 15, 1935, 8; “Negro Workers Rally,” *Socialist Action*, January 19, 1935, in box 4, Frank Crosswaith Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (hereafter cited as Crosswaith Papers).

20. Tim Holmes, “Crosswaith Upholds Jim Crow Locals in ILGWU as ‘Solving’ Negro Problems,” *Daily Worker*, December 12, 1934, in box 4, Crosswaith Papers; “Liberator Awards Bandannas to Best Uncle Toms,” *Negro Liberator*, December 29, 1934, 8.

21. “Reds Drown Out Crosswaith and DePriest in N.Y.,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 26, 1935. See also “Debate Merits of Three Major Social Codes,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 24, 1935; “Two Radicals Stage Battle,” *Amsterdam News*, January 26, 1935; Dan Pope, “De Priest Tells Negroes to ‘Buy Stock’ to Win Freedom as Audience Guffaws, Ford Wins Three Cornered Debate,” *Negro Liberator*, February 1, 1935, 8; “Reds Only Party Fighting for Masses, Asserts Ford,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 9, 1935; “Debate Is Set on Way out for Negroes,” *Daily Worker*, January 17, 1935. See also “Crosswaith to Debate Oscar de Priest,” *New Leader*, January 12, 1935; “Ford to Meet Oscar De Priest, Crosswaith in Harlem Symposium,” *Negro Liberator*, January 15, 1935, 2; “Ex-Solon Set to Face Foes,” *Amsterdam News*, January 19, 1935.

22. “Reds Drown Out Crosswaith and DePriest in N.Y.,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 26, 1935.

ist's depictions of Communists as modern-day carpetbaggers, his scathing critique of the CP's handling of the Scottsboro case, nor his charge that Communists fetishized "action" and fighting was appreciated by party members, who booed, hooted, and otherwise registered their disapproval through heckling.<sup>23</sup> As for winners and losers, Roi Ottley, journalist and observer of all things Harlem, found Ford to be tired, uninspired, but ultimately victorious on the merits; DePriest was the "clown of the evening" and was treated with good humor by the audience; and the gentleman and scholar Crosswaith "struggled courageously in an antagonistic environment," disappointingly offering more heat than logic.<sup>24</sup>

Ottley may have given the win to the Communists, but he offered the comrades sage advice: because they remained a minority group in this country, "it should be the party's purpose to make friends." Their debate behavior was "not in good taste and will hardly bring converts to the cause."<sup>25</sup> Communists would not concede the point, but they eventually heeded Ottley's words. In the months ahead Ford continued to heap opprobrium on the "despicable treachery of the Negro reformists"—men like Crosswaith—but he recognized the need to forge ahead "with a broader united front of action,"<sup>26</sup> given the growing ferment in Harlem that the party had not yet been able to harness. The reformists retained considerable strength in "the mass organizations, lodges, and churches," where the Communists had "not even scratched the surface."<sup>27</sup> Recent experiences with Scottsboro and Angelo Herndon committees and a National Congress for Unemployment and Social Insurance suggested that under certain conditions, liberals and socialists were willing to sit down with Communists on an issue-by-issue basis, while scattered protest gatherings in Harlem, as well as demonstrations that summer against "war and fascism," offered evidence that a united front in which Communists played a role but did not totally dominate had potential.<sup>28</sup> Communists had tremendous success in building a united front, Party secretary Earl Browder informed his Central Committee in late May, but advances were spotty because of the party's "inability to work correctly." The problem was "sectarianism, a sectarian distrust of the masses," he concluded. If the party was on the road to mass work and had "broken the paralysis of sectarianism," it had only broken through sectarianism's shell, with its "fragments sticking to our back" constituting a barrier

23. Crosswaith's remarks may have been "demagogic and reactionary," one rank-and-file Red conceded, but his efforts to speak were "interrupted so many times by the comrades" that only the debate chair's intervention allowed him to continue. "I left the meeting with the conviction that our Party, the Communist Party, had not been able to most effectively set forth the fundamental correctness of its position on the Negro question because of the actions of the audience," he concluded. M. W., "Criticizes Behavior of Symposium Audience," *Daily Worker*, January 24, 1935, 6; M. B. T., "Says DePriest Speech Provoked Hostility," *Daily Worker*, January 31, 1935, 6.

24. Roi Ottley, "This Hectic Harley," *Amsterdam News*, January 26, 1935.

25. Ottley, "This Hectic Harley."

26. Ford, "The United Front in the Field of Negro Work," 162, 158.

27. Ford and Sass, "Development of Work in the Harlem Section," 316.

28. "Fraternal Groups to Hold Public Trial," *Negro Liberator*, June 1, 1935, 8; "Youth throughout Nation March against War and Fascism," *Daily Worker*, June 1, 1935.

between the masses and the party.<sup>29</sup> That had to change. Even before the formal policy shift toward the Popular Front that came at the Comintern's Seventh World Congress in August, American Communists were feeling their way, experimenting—often with party officials' approval—with a less strident approach identified by Otley as making friends and winning converts. That approach would be on full display with what Browder called the “next big step in the struggle for Negro rights”—the formation of a National Negro Congress.<sup>30</sup>

For his part, A. Philip Randolph had little reason to predict a rapprochement that would turn political enemies on the left into allies. A member of the Socialist Party since 1917, Randolph steered clear of the new Communist parties after the Great War, rejecting the Bolshevik model and the “obedience to the edict of Moscow” it required.<sup>31</sup> When he called off a threatened strike by the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1928, Communists, who had previously expressed excitement over the prospects for a militant Pullman Porters' union, denounced its leader as a “labor faker” and “Negro traitor.”<sup>32</sup> Randolph returned invective with invective, dismissing his left-wing critics at times as “crack-brained fanatics or low-grade morons.”<sup>33</sup> Insults continued to fly over the years, and Communists occasionally broke up Brotherhood meetings. As the Great Depression deepened and Black unemployment soared, the various groups on the fractured left sniped at their rivals and advanced their own agendas. While Communists garnered credit from some African Americans for their leadership in Unemployed Councils and their defense of the Scottsboro defendants, Randolph kept his BSCP intact, pursued a strategy of litigation and legislation, and ultimately, in June 1935, prevailed over the Pullman company in a government-sponsored representation election. For his efforts, he was treated as a political celebrity in Black America.<sup>34</sup>

Just as the Communists were beginning to reevaluate the sectarianism that belied their calls for a united front, events in Harlem brought them into regular and productive contact with their longtime nemesis, Randolph. The Harlem riot

29. Earl Browder, “Browder Says United Front Is Key Question of Day,” *Daily Worker*, June 8, 1935.

30. Browder, “Browder Says United Front Is Key Question of Day”; Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*, 169.

31. “The Sanhedrin,” 830.

32. “Green in Plea for Pullman Co.,” *Daily Worker*, July 2, 1929; “The Trade Unity Convention and the Negro Masses,” *Daily Worker*, August 27, 1929. See also Richard B. Moore, “An Open Letter to Mr. A. Philip Randolph,” *Negro Champion*, August 8, 1928, 11; “Score Pullman Strike Betrayal: Statement of the Central Executive Committee of the Workers (Communist) Party,” *Daily Worker*, June 12, 1928; O. B. N., “Is Phillip [sic] Randolph Trying to Fool Pullman Porters, Correspondent Wants to Know,” *Daily Worker*, August 6, 1928.

33. A. Philip Randolph, “Why Pullman Porters Strike Was Postponed,” June 15, 1928, *Papers of the NAACP*, part 10, reel 22.

34. “Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Affiliated with Federation of Labor,” *Northwest Enterprise*, July 24, 1936; “Moses,” *Minneapolis Spokesman*, September 10, 1937; Ashfield, “St. Philip of the Pullman Porters.” On Randolph's life and politics, see Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph*; Kersten and Lang, *Reframing Randolph*; Arnesen, “A. Philip Randolph”; Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights*.

of March 19, 1935, was triggered by the attempted shoplifting of a ten-cent pocket watch at the S. H. Kress five-and-dime on West 125th Street. Sixteen-year-old Lino Rivera was apprehended by store employees and ultimately released without arrest on the afternoon of March 19. This “relatively unimportant case of juvenile pilfering,” as it was later called, became the “spark that set aflame the smoldering resentments of the people of Harlem.”<sup>35</sup> A rumor quickly spread through the surrounding neighborhood that Rivera had been beaten and killed. Widespread violence ensued as crowds smashed storefront windows, looted, and jeered at white passersby while snipers on rooftops shot at police. By morning the “outbreak” had ended, with Harlem remaining in a state of “semi-siege,” occupied by hundreds of police armed with riot guns. Five people would eventually die from the night’s fighting, and over a hundred were injured.<sup>36</sup>

Why had Harlem exploded? Mayor Fiorello La Guardia initially lay the blame on “a few irresponsible individuals”—a “very small fraction of 1 per cent of the population,” the “overwhelming majority of the negro population” being “splendid, decent, law-abiding, American citizens.”<sup>37</sup> The white Uptown Chamber of Commerce placed blame on the “inflammatory speeches and false statements spread by Communists and other radicals who seized upon the unfortunate store incident to incite some Negroes to riot.”<sup>38</sup> To New York district attorney William Copeland Dodge, the instigators were in plain sight: “The reds have been boring into our institutions for a long time,” he announced. “When they begin to incite riots it is time to stop them.”<sup>39</sup> The Reds were indeed on the scene, arriving with leaflets that denounced the alleged murder of Rivera to “inflare thousands of colored citizens into a frenzied quest for revenge,” as one paper put it. “We will show these Communists who defy our laws, incite riots and inspire revolution that they can’t get away with it,” Dodge

35. The Mayor’s Commission on Conditions in Harlem, “The Negro in Harlem: A Report on Social and Economic Conditions Responsible for the Outbreak of March 19, 1935,” p. 1, *Papers of A. Philip Randolph*, reel 24.

36. “Snipers Fire on Police from Harlem Rooftop,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 20, 1935; “Harlem Riots Anger Mayor, Probe Begins,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, March 20, 1935; “Harlem Riots Feared Anew; 1 Dies, 40 Hurt,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, March 20, 1935; “The Harlem Outbreak,” *New York Post*, March 21, 1935; “Police Quell Harlem Race Riot,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, March 23, 1935; “12 Are Indicted for Part in Harlem Riot,” *New York Sun*, March 21, 1935; “Dodge on Trail of ‘Red Menace’ in Harlem Riot,” *New York Post*, March 21, 1935; Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode?*, 3–5.

37. Mayor to the People of New York City, March 20, 1935, reproduced in Toole, “The Mayor’s Commission on Conditions in Harlem”; “Harlem Riots Anger Mayor, Probe Begins,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, March 20, 1935.

38. Telegram from Eugene A. Walsh, President, Uptown Chamber of Commerce to Mayor F. H. La Guardia, March 20, 1935, box 167, La Guardia Papers, New York Municipal Archives (hereafter cited as La Guardia Papers). In less than forty-eight hours a grand jury heard testimony from thirty witnesses and handed down indictments for burglary, assault, rioting, and unlawful assemblage against twelve of those arrested. “Dodge on Trail of ‘Red Menace’ in Harlem Riot,” *New York Post*, March 21, 1935; “12 Are Indicted for Part in Harlem Riot.”

39. “Harlem Asks Albany to Probe Race Riot,” *New York Daily News*, March 22, 1935.

vowed.<sup>40</sup> With a warrant in hand, the city marshal descended on, ransacked, and then padlocked the office of the CP-led Young Liberators, and police raided the office of the Communist Party's Harlem section on Lennox Avenue.<sup>41</sup> The radicals immediately denounced "police terrorism against the Communist Party" and predicted that the "arresting of the 'agitators' will not stop these outbursts," so long as the "real agitators—HUNGER AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST NEGROES—stalks in Harlem."<sup>42</sup>

The politically astute Mayor La Guardia, following the advice of the NAACP's Walter White, established a biracial committee to conduct an independent investigation into the fundamental causes of the violence.<sup>43</sup> Randolph, a La Guardia ally appointed to the commission, set out what was quickly becoming a consensus: the events of March 19 constituted an "economic riot," a "revolt of the empty stomachs of people for bread and meat, and for milk for the babies." In the pages of the first issue of the BSCP's relaunched journal, the *Black Worker*, Randolph editorialized that the riot was a "protest against rags," an "uprising against a heartless and cruel landlordism," an "outcry against stark, flagrant and indescribably economic wrongs." What was needed were "more jobs and more pay for Negro workers, more and better houses, lower rents, more schools and fairer political representation." What would

40. "Police Quell Harlem Race Riot," *Indianapolis Recorder*, March 23, 1935; "Reds in Harlem Face Anarchists' Trial for Rioting," *Brooklyn Times Union*, March 25, 1935; "Dodge Plans War on Reds in Harlem," *New York Daily News*, March 24, 1935; "Dodge Threatens New Drive on Communists and Foreign-Born," *Daily Worker*, March 22, 1935.

41. "Second Victim Dies after Harlem Riot," *New York Daily News*, March 23, 1935; "Investigate Harlem 'Relief!'," *Daily Worker*, March 22, 1935; "12 Are Indicted for Part in Harlem Riot"; "Red Scare' Aims to Hide Negro Misery," *Daily Worker*, March 23, 1935; "LaGuardia Fights Communist Party to Hide Misery in Harlem," *Daily Worker*, March 23, 1935.

42. "LaGuardia Fights Communist Party to Hide Misery in Harlem"; "Who Is to Blame for the Riots in Harlem," *Worker's Voice of Washington Heights*, no. 1 (n.d., 1935), p. 1, in box 167, La Guardia Papers. See also Rose Pastor Stokes Branch of the International Labor Defense to Mayor F. La Guardia, March 26, 1935, box 167, La Guardia Papers. The charge of Red instigators found few takers among Black Harlemites. Most resented the attempt to displace blame onto outside agitators. "Reds, radicals and rowdies were only the foam on the top of the boiling water," insisted Reverend John H. Johnson, the rector of St. Martin's Church. "To make Communists the scapegoats for the riot is only to raise a smokescreen calculated to hide the fundamental causes of the outbreak. What happened actually was an economic revolt . . . the explosion of a suppressed people." "Leaders Comment on Riot," *New York Age*, March 30, 1935; Wilkins, "Races"; "Committee Will Conduct Probe of Harlem Riot," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 28, 1935. See also "Leaders Comment on Riot," *New York Age*, March 30, 1935; "Committee Will Conduct Probe of Harlem Riot," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 28, 1935; James Whittaker, "Rioting in Harlem Very Grave Problem, Nation Is Warned," *Daily Mirror*, April 1, 1935, *Papers of the NAACP*, part 7, series A, reel 15; "Harlem Jitters," *Socialist Call*, March 30, 1935.

43. Telegram from Walter White to Mayor F. H. La Guardia, March 20, 1935, reproduced in Toole, "The Mayor's Commission on Conditions in Harlem"; "Minutes of the Mayor's Committee to Investigate Conditions in Harlem," March 29, 1935, box 383, La Guardia Papers; "N.Y. Mayor Adopts N.A.A.C.P. Riot Probe Plan," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 30, 1935; "Dr. Charles H. Roberts Named Head of City's Investigating Group," *New York Age*, March 30, 1935; "Mayor's Committee under Fire," *Amsterdam News*, March 30, 1935; "Riot Probe Commission of LaGuardia Criticized," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 30, 1935; "Mayor Places Radicals' Foe on Riot Body," *Amsterdam News*, April 6, 1935.

not work as a remedy was a new Red Scare that made the Communists “the goats.” Negroes “don’t have to be told by Communists, or anybody else,” he noted, as did so many others, “when they are hungry, naked and homeless. They don’t have to be told to fight for bread, raiment and shelter.”<sup>44</sup>

Randolph and most of his fellow commissioners instinctively knew what the riot’s causes were, but the devil was in the details. And community members gave them an earful of details. Over the course of the following month and a half, commission subcommittees held public forums at municipal courthouses that attracted large, animated, and often angry audiences. The inaugural public session was marked by an “air of unrest and incipient disorder on the part of the crowd,” the Black weekly the *New York Age* reported, a characterization that would apply to many of the sessions that followed.<sup>45</sup> The approach the commissioners adopted gave considerable latitude to activists, who were allowed to interrogate witnesses and frame the issues. Present in considerable numbers among the hundreds of attendees were Communists and their sympathizers.<sup>46</sup> Louise Thompson, a thirty-four-year-old founder of the Harlem chapter of the Friends of the Soviet Union, a participant in the aborted enterprise in Moscow to make a film about Black life in Alabama, and the left-wing International Workers Order’s first Black employee,<sup>47</sup> took the stand to offer eyewitness testimony about the riot’s origins. With impeccable timing, Thompson had been at the right place at the right time: she had been walking by the Kress store just as Rivera had been apprehended.<sup>48</sup> Thompson made a positive impression, other witnesses less positive. The assistant district attorney was hissed when he concluded his testimony, while Harlem Communist James W. Ford received applause for protesting his remarks. White Communist Robert L. Minor harshly interrogated Acting Captain Conrad Rothengast of the 123rd Street Detective Squad, who made no friends in the audience when he blamed the disturbances on “hoodlums.” “The undercurrent of antagonism against police, noticeable throughout the day in the audience, surged to its height during Rothengast’s stay on the stand, culminating in numerous audible taunts and cat-calls just before the hearing ended for the day,” the *Age* reported.<sup>49</sup> That undercurrent of antagonism overflowed the banks of decorum regularly in the

44. “Harlem’s Economic Riot.”

45. “Inquiry on Harlem to Last Two Months,” *New York Times*, April 1, 1935; “Riot Deaths Mounting Daily as Fourth Victim Succumbs,” *New York Age*, March 30, 1935.

46. “Reds’ Handbills Are Cleared as ‘Chief Cause’ of Harlem Riot,” *New York Herald Tribune*, March 31, 1935.

47. Gilyard, *Louise Thompson Patterson*, 113–17; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 134–47; Horne, *Black Revolutionary*, 82–83.

48. “Riot Deaths Mounting Daily as Fourth Victim Succumbs,” *New York Age*, March 30, 1935; “Reds Foment Riot of 3,000 Negroes,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 20, 1935; “Disorder Marks Inquiry on Riots,” *New York Age*, May 11, 1935. Thompson offered several somewhat different versions of events. See “Admits Harlem Riot Needless, 4th Victim Dies,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, March 31, 1935; Thompson, “What Happened in Harlem.”

49. “Fifth Victim of Harlem Riot Dies in Hospital as Investigation by Mayor’s Committee Gets under Way,” *New York Age*, April 6, 1935.

weeks ahead as Communists like James W. Ford and Merrill C. Work, along with non-Communist activists, kept the crowd in a state of agitation with their uncompromising savaging of city officials.<sup>50</sup>

The civic tumult on display unsettled those whose political sympathies did not lie with the left. James H. Hubert, the head of the New York Urban League, had been quick to point to Reds as the match igniting Harlem's tinder, claiming just a day after the riot that the "unnecessary and unjustifiable" violence had unquestionably been brought about by "the agitation of radicals, both colored and white, who had been stirring up the unrest, using the lack of jobs as a slogan."<sup>51</sup> The sessions he witnessed did not change his mind. The public hearings were "a sort of Roman holiday for the soapbox orators who regard it as their outstanding opportunity to heckle and vilify publicly anyone and every organization that is attempting to deal with the problems at hand," he confided to the commission's secretary, the social worker Eunice Carter. "It was a most disgusting scene in that these agitators were injecting all sorts of silly and unrelated questions at a time when the Commission is dealing with one of the most serious problems that has challenged our community." Registering his protest, he concluded that the commission would not get very far unless it could "somehow control and direct the hearings in a more constructive channel."<sup>52</sup>

Later, when the commission completed its report, it concluded that its members found themselves "face to face with an aroused public which demanded that its grievances should be heard and that no technicalities of court procedure or rules or orders were to thwart its right to be heard."<sup>53</sup> Randolph himself appeared unfazed

50. "Negroes' Relief Called Swindle in Harlem Probe," *New York Post*, May 11, 1935; "Negro Discrimination in the E.H.R.B.," *Red Worker* 1, no. 1 (May 1935): 6-7, in box 167, La Guardia Papers; "Editor Talks on Scottsboro Case," *Columbia Spectator*, December 5, 1934; "Demand Edw. Corsi's Resignation as Head of Public Welfare Group," *New York Age*, May 18, 1935; "Women, Seeking Relief, Told to 'Walk Streets,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 18, 1935; "Probe Huge Thefts of Relief Food," *Daily News*, May 12, 1935. Socialists Frank Crosswaith and Norman Thomas contributed to the protests. Thomas elicited wild cheering for his testimony that "bitterly flayed" the city, state, and national governments for discrimination in PWA projects, scored labor unions for abetting that discrimination by barring Blacks from membership, and castigated large and small companies for denying employment to Black workers. The words of the "militant Socialist," the *Amsterdam News* reported, were "interrupted every few minutes by the tumultuous approbation of the audience." On this occasion, Communists did not heckle the Socialist. "The appearance of Mr. Thomas set up one of the strongest paradoxes since the Harlem commission began public hearings three weeks ago," the *Herald Tribune* noted. "A Socialist who has been almost as harsh in his condemnation of communism as he has of the incumbent order, Mr. Thomas was cheered so often and so vigorously by a crowd largely communistic that the chairman . . . had to shout for order after virtually every sentence." "Use Boycott, Picket Firms, Thomas Urges," *Amsterdam News*, April 20, 1935; "Thomas Pleads for End of Race Discrimination," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 14, 1935. See also "Cite Jim-Crowism at Riot Inquiry," *New York Age*, April 20, 1935.

51. James Jemal, "The Inquiring Photographer," *New York Daily News*, March 21, 1935. See also "12 Are Indicted for Part in Harlem Riot."

52. James H. Hubert to Eunice H. Carter, April 16, 1935, box 167, La Guardia Papers.

53. The Mayor's Commission on Conditions in Harlem, "The Negro in Harlem: A Report on Social and Economic Conditions Responsible for the Outbreak of March 19, 1935" (typescript, 1935), p. 9, *Papers of A. Philip Randolph*, reel 24.

by the tumult; behind the scenes he defended the rowdiness of those assembled and excoriated their critics. The “question of ‘orderly hearings,’” he complained, “goes deeper than it appears on the surface. It is a subtle but definite effort to limit free speech in these hearings.” He remained “unalterably opposed to any limitations being set upon the freedom of persons, whoever they are, to ask questions and give testimony in these hearings. If their answers don’t conform to a lawyer-like, letter-perfect, dignified and disciplined parliamentary-usage presentation of a brief, what of it?” His sympathy lay with those who at times disrupted the gatherings. “If the people’s pouring out their pent-up wrath and resentment against conditions of oppression, exploitation and discrimination in Harlem, in vivid and dramatic, if not accurate and precise language, takes the form of a ‘Roman Holiday,’” he ranted to Commission Secretary Eunice Carter, “then let them have it. The picture and significance of the spiritual and moral awakening on the part of the downtrodden Black workers, men and women, in these hearings are incomparably of much more value and importance to this community than any prim, polite, and pious, but timid policy, which may elicit the admiration of our critics.” Make no mistake, Randolph concluded:

We are standing before the majestic and authentic voice of a people whose soul is wounded, and they are bitter, without promptings or benefit of agitators; yes, they are bitter and why shouldn’t they be? The solemn task and mission, as I see it, of this Commission, is to hear and heed this voice, and not to stifle it, even though it may clash with some of our traditional concepts of routine and stereotyped conventions.<sup>54</sup>

Randolph’s willingness to cede the floor to his Communist opponents and defend their right to speak went unremarked. But his doing so signaled, at least in retrospect, the beginning of a shift in the relationship between the Party and one of its harshest Black critics on the left. Why Randolph opened himself to collaboration with those he had routinely clashed with remains a matter of speculation. The Communists’ grandstanding during commission hearings apparently did not bother him. The needs of the moment were too urgent to allow doctrinal differences or performative politics to stand in the way, Randolph perhaps concluded. In this instance, Communists seemed effective: they defined the issue as one of rampant discrimination in relief and employment, a stance that became widely accepted among other leftists, liberals, and community residents<sup>55</sup> and ultimately found expression in the commission’s final report, which offered a damning if unsurprising litany of abuse and suffering on the part of Harlem’s population. Adding to a sense of urgency were develop-

54. A. Philip Randolph to Mrs. Eunice H. Carter, May 29, 1935, box 167, La Guardia Papers.

55. See, for instance, Walter White, “Suggestions of Problems Which Might Be Investigated by the Commission Appointed by Mayor La Guardia to Inquire into the Rioting in Harlem on March 19–20, 1935,” March 26, 1935, box 167, La Guardia Papers; “The Harlem Riot” (*Crisis*); “The Harlem Riot” (*Opportunity*); Kiser, “Diminishing Family Income in Harlem”; “Riot Causes”; Channing H. Tobias, “Says Explosion of Riot Set Off by Spark of Unemployment and Relief; Police Lauded for Work with Crowd,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, April 13, 1935; “Semi-starvation Justified Harlem Riot, Says Gordon,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 6, 1935; Miller, “Harlem without Make-Up”; Locke, “Harlem.”

ments abroad. The rise of fascism in Germany and Italy, and especially Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, weighed on the minds of African American activists and leftists alike. The spring and summer of 1935 witnessed angry protest meetings and street parades in support of Ethiopia that drew support from numerous Harlem-based groups.<sup>56</sup> That July, Randolph explained at the founding meeting of the non-Communist Harlem Labor Committee that the "forces of Fascism are developing with remarkable speed" in England and the United States, a theme he amplified at year's end when he warned that "without eternal vigilance, Fascism will soon come if . . . it is not already here. If it prospers, labor will perish. Minority movements to abolish race hate, to express religious convictions and promote the common weal against the foes of freedom and justice, will be crushed in blood and buried in a sea of oblivion."<sup>57</sup> That was an exaggeration, of course; the domestic scene in America was hardly as ominous as that in Europe. But many on the broad left feared that powerful forces of reaction were mobilizing and that a fascist right could well prevail in the United States. Randolph and the Communists shared that belief.

What made Randolph's openness to collaboration with Communists even conceivable was the gravitation of his former rivals toward a less antagonistic, more ecumenical approach to politics, a move that unfolded even before the Comintern—the Soviet Union's instrument of influence and control over the world's Communist Parties—had green-lighted the antifascist Popular Front. "If we would stop fighting amongst ourselves . . . long enough to unify our forces against our enemy," James W. Ford insisted at a gathering of the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church just days before the Harlem riot, "we would advance."<sup>58</sup> The fighting didn't stop entirely, but it diminished in intensity and its targets shifted. Randolph and the Communists, previously at odds on so many issues, put their past hostilities behind them. The resulting political marriage of convenience would upend Black politics and provide both Randolph and his newfound allies with a national platform for advancing an agenda that aggressively challenged racial and economic inequality.

### **Building a National Negro Congress**

The idea of a National Negro Congress may have first been circulated by Communists in 1935. Decades after the fact, Black Communist Abner Berry recalled that the Harlem party branch came up with the idea for a coalition of Black progressive

56. "Ethiopia Unity Rallies Harlem," *Negro Liberator*, March 15, 1935. See also "Italians to March in Anti-Mussolini Parade in Harlem," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 3, 1935; "'Respectable' Organizations Snub N.Y.'s Biggest Turn-Out," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 10, 1935; "20,000 Are in Protest Meeting," *Washington Tribune*, August 10, 1935; "Sidelights."

57. "Randolph's Founding Speech," July 20, 1935, reprinted in "Profile: 50 Plus One Year of the Negro Labor Committee, Its Past and Future Goals. Presented to the Friends of A. Philip Randolph High School, November 14, 1986," also reproduced in Foner and Lewis, *The Black Worker*, 6:557; Randolph, "The Spirit of Christmas."

58. "Ethiopia Unity Rallies Harlem," *Negro Liberator*, March 15, 1935.

organizations in late 1934.<sup>59</sup> In his debate with Crosswaith and DePriest, Ford publicly floated the notion and offered the support of the party's small League of Struggle for Negro Rights.<sup>60</sup> The party's *Negro Liberator* then promised that the league would extend "open arms to all those honest elements to join hands with it in a powerful united struggle on all fronts for Negro liberation."<sup>61</sup> By March Communists were insisting that the dismal state of affairs, with the "Roosevelt–Wall Street New Deal . . . driving the negro wage-earners further down to starvation levels" and new "'Scottsboros' . . . rising everywhere," made the formation of a "broad national movement" with the "widest representation" of Black organizations imperative.<sup>62</sup> But would a strictly Communist initiative, even with a toned-down sectarianism, now succeed, given past bad blood between the party and the reformist organizations it previously excoriated? With much at stake, the Communists didn't risk it.

The task, instead, fell to the indefatigable John P. Davis, already a formidable presence in Black protest politics on the East Coast. A graduate of Dunbar High School (the elite public institution for Black students in Washington, DC), Bates College, Harvard College, and then Harvard Law School, Davis was part of a cohort of remarkable Black academics and activists who came of age in the 1920s. His social and intellectual companions in segregated Cambridge included William Hastie, Robert C. Weaver, and Ralph Bunche, all of whom would go on to distinguished careers in public service, with whom he shared meals, played poker, and debated politics. Davis spent time in Harlem, traveling in literary and publishing circles, and taught unhappily at Fisk in Tennessee before returning to Harvard for law school. As the Great Depression deepened, he was unsuccessful in securing lasting employment in Harlem's literary realm and resigned himself to a job as a copywriter for the Capital News Service—in effect, becoming a political operative of the Republican Party in Washington. The future radical Davis devoted his energies toward the reelection of President Herbert Hoover in the 1932 campaign, administering the National Negro Republican League. Wrapping up his law school courses in 1933, Davis studied with Felix Frankfurter and James M. Landis, formative figures in debates over Democratic president Franklin D. Roosevelt's policies to handle the Great Depression in the early New Deal years. Davis, the former Hoover Republican, journalist Stanley High noted just a few years later, "was caught by the first fine fervor of the New Deal, and came to Washington as a free-lance idealist."<sup>63</sup> Or perhaps not so much an idealist as a budding progressive. According to some accounts, Davis shifted political gears at Harvard as the Scottsboro case became a cause célèbre, volunteering with the Commu-

59. Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*, 178.

60. "Reds Only Party Fighting for Masses, Asserts Ford," *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 9, 1935; Streater, "The National Negro Congress," 44.

61. "Dead Buddies," *Negro Liberator*, February 1, 1935, 4.

62. "Toward a Congress or Negro Rights!," *Negro Liberator*, March 15, 1935, 4. See also Loren Miller, "The Way Out!," *Negro Liberator*, April 1, 1935, 7.

63. High, "Black Omens," 34. On Davis's biography, see Mack, *Representing the Race*, 221, 227, 245.

nists' International Labor Defense.<sup>64</sup> By the time he resettled in the nation's capital, the former Republican was well versed in liberal and left-wing politics. But the one clear career pathway open to so many of his white Harvard classmates—a government job—remained firmly closed to him.

The New Deal nonetheless became his life. Or, rather, challenging the New Deal did. Davis zeroed in on the adverse impact of so many new government programs on African Americans. With the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act in June 1933, during the whirlwind of legislative action during Roosevelt's "First Hundred Days," he and Robert Weaver took upon themselves a role they saw no other Black organization assuming—scrutinizing New Deal legislation for its racial implications and, crucially, representing African American workers in the halls of government.<sup>65</sup> "The Negro Industrial League is a national organization which concerns itself with the bettering of the labor and economic conditions of Negroes as workers and consumers,"<sup>66</sup> Davis testified at an early hearing of the newly formed National Recovery Administration (NRA) on a code of fair competition for the textile industry. If the NRA was just two weeks old, the Negro Industrial League was of even more recent vintage, conjured into existence just days earlier by the two Harvard alums and, initially, composed of no others. But they hit a political nerve, their calls for nondiscrimination and the extension of labor protections to Black workers catching the attention of government officials, other Black leaders, and the press.<sup>67</sup> Davis's tireless self-promotion did not make the league any less a "paper organization," one that was no stronger than "Weaver's research and Davis's legal briefs," as one historian put it.<sup>68</sup> Then the two-man operation shrank by half with Weaver's departure to take up a post in the Interior Department. But Davis had a vehicle to make himself an indispensable figure in the new Black politics. His league soon morphed into the Joint Council for National Recovery, expanded its advisory staff, and plunged full steam ahead into the battle on behalf of Black labor.

64. Jensen, "The Rise," 297; Charles Hamilton Houston to Walter White, July 20, 1934, *Papers of the NAACP*, part 1, reel 16.

65. John P. Davis to Frances Williams, September 11, 1933, box I-C311, folder 8, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as NAACP Papers); Hughes, "Toward a Black United Front," 64–67.

66. "Statement of the Negro Industrial League Concerning the Code of Fair Competition for the Cotton Textile Industry," *Papers of the National Negro Congress* (hereafter cited as *NNC Papers*), reel 1; "The Negro Industrial League – J. P. Davis Ex Sec 1932–33," *NNC Papers*, reel 5; Ware, *William Hastie*, 34–36.

67. "Coal and Steel Next to Offer Industrial Fair Play Codes," *Baltimore Sun*, June 30, 1933; "Racial Equality Policy Urged at Textile Hearing," *New York Daily News*, June 30, 1933; Ruth Finney, "Seek Higher Negro Wages," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, July 14, 1933; Delilah L. Beasley, "Activities among Negroes," *Oakland Tribune*, July 23, 1933. See also "The Negro Industrial League" (n.d.), *NNC Papers*, reel 1; George Edmund Haynes, "The Negro and the National Recovery Act—the Hearing on the Iron and Steel Codes—about Negro Workers," *New York Age*, August 12, 1933; George Edmund Haynes, "The Negro and the National Recovery Act—Hearings on Bituminous Coal Codes," *New York Age*, August 19, 1933; Pritchett, *Robert Clifton Weaver and the American City*.

68. Griffler, *What Price Alliance?*, 133.

But waging battles took money—Davis needed a salary, travel for research required funding, and office rent had to be paid—and Davis had very little of that. The matter of financing, he conceded in September 1933, was a “heart-breaking one.”<sup>69</sup> His personality both helped and hurt. Those around him recognized his genius and, as his old friend Bill Hastie put it, his “unusual combination of skills and ability.” But his abrasiveness and treatment of women rubbed many the wrong way. “John’s nature” was a handicap, Hastie acknowledged, but there was little to be done about his “irritating and distasteful quirks.”<sup>70</sup> Efforts to rein him in proved futile. As Davis’s behavior continued to alienate some of his allies, an exasperated Charles Hamilton Houston asked Walter White, “Can we save John from himself?”<sup>71</sup>

The short answer was no. Davis did not want saving; besides, he was cultivating new friends who would wean him from dependence on the NAACP. By early 1935, Communists needed Davis—and Davis needed the Communists. His precise path to the united front and the possibilities of a National Negro Congress remains unclear, but it was likely smoothed by his persistent inability to secure stable funding from mainstream African American organizations and his difficulties with sponsoring organizations like the NAACP and YWCA. In Communist James Ford’s recounting of the NNC’s origins to the party’s Negro Commission, Davis had found inspiration at the National Congress for Unemployment and Social Insurance in January 1935, a CP-dominated gathering that attracted the support of some socialists and even the National Urban League.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps, but Davis had put forward the idea for a conference to assess the New Deal’s impact on Black America to the Joint Committee’s board of directors the previous December, and by early February preliminary negotiations were underway with faculty members in Howard University’s Social Science Division, who were willing to cosponsor and fund the

69. John P. Davis to Frances Williams, September 11, 1933, folder 8; Frances Williams to White/Dear Friend, February 13, 1934, folder 10; and Rose M. Coe to Walter White, November 24, 1933, folder 8, all in box I-C311, NAACP Papers. See also John P. Davis, “Report of the Executive Secretary, Joint Committee on National Recovery, March 30, 1937,” in *William H. Hastie Papers*, part 2, reel 37.

70. Francis Williams to Walter White, July 5, 1935, *Papers of the NAACP*, part 10, reel 9; Bill Hastie to Elizabeth Eastman, March 22, 1935, and Bill Hastie to Walter White, October 22, 1935, both in box I-C311, folder 11, NAACP Papers. On the YWCA’s dislike of Davis, see Walter White to Bill Hastie, February 9, 1934, folder 10, and Bill Hastie to Walter White, October 22, 1935, folder 11, both in box I-C311, NAACP Papers.

71. Walter White to Charles Hamilton Houston, July 5, 1935, box I-C311, folder 11, NAACP Papers.

72. “Special Meeting of Negro Commission of E.E.C. and the Section Committee, Harlem Section—June 19, 1935. Agenda: 1. The National Negro Congress (Ford),” RTsKhIDNI (Papers of the Russian Center for Preservation and Study of Documents of Contemporary History), 515/1/3775/42, microfilm, Library of Congress. Davis did more than speak at the conference; out-of-town delegates arriving for the Washington, DC, gathering were instructed by the *Daily Worker* to register at Davis’s Joint Committee office on Florida Avenue; neither his speaking nor his role in registering delegates were mentioned to the Joint Council’s board by Davis. “More Unions Send Delegates to First Session Tomorrow; Workers’ Groups in Capital,” *Daily Worker*, January 4, 1935. On the Congress, see Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, 285–86.

event.<sup>73</sup> The conference would be a means to an end, for at some point that winter, Ford and Davis met and “worked out together . . . how the idea of a National Negro Congress should be projected.”<sup>74</sup> The Howard conference would be the occasion to launch the initiative; in the months ahead, Ford later reported to the party’s Negro Commission that “Davis worked very closely with us to bring forward the idea of a National Negro Congress.”<sup>75</sup> In the NAACP’s monthly, *The Crisis*, Davis unveiled his plan: the time had come for “the Negro citizen of America to take inventory of the gains and losses which have come to him under the ‘New Deal,’” he began. Anyone familiar with Davis’s work over the past two years would know that his list was long on losses and short on gains, but in case they had missed his earlier efforts, he again lacerated New Deal programs and issued a call for a conference to be hosted by Howard University and the Joint Committee to assess the economic status of the Negro. “Perhaps a ‘National Negro Congress’ of delegates from thousands of Negro organizations (and white organizations willing to recognize their unity of interest) will furnish a vehicle for channeling public opinion of black America,” he argued.<sup>76</sup> James Ford must have been pleased, for the Congress, not the conference, was the goal. John P. Davis has “sounded the tocsin for a National Negro Congress,” the *Negro Liberator* declared with enthusiasm. “Such a Congress organized solely on a program of action” would be a “tremendous factor in Negro liberation struggles.”<sup>77</sup>

On May 18, 1935, some 250 delegates filled Howard University’s Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall to capacity to consider “the position of the Negro in our national economic crisis.”<sup>78</sup> New Deal social planning, the plight of Black agricultural workers, domestic labor, and unemployment were featured topics of discussion by academics and government officials, while a sampling of actual Black workers—sharecroppers, domestic servants, and industrial laborers—testified poignantly to the hardships they endured.<sup>79</sup> Davis struck an uncompromising tone, planting his flag

73. John P. Davis, “Report of the Executive Secretary, Joint Committee on National Recovery, December 14, 1934,” and “Report of the Executive Secretary, Joint Committee on National Recovery,” February 9, 1935, both in *William H. Hastie Papers*, part 2, reel 37. On the Howard Division of the Social Sciences and the conference, see Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 69–71.

74. “Special Meeting of Negro Commission of E.E.C. and the Section Committee”; James W. Ford, “James W. Ford Hails Proposals for a National Negro Congress,” *Daily Worker*, May 25, 1935.

75. “Special Meeting of Negro Commission of E.E.C. and the Section Committee.”

76. Davis, “A Black Inventory of the New Deal”; John P. Davis, “A Note on the Negro and the New Deal,” *Omaha Guide*, May 4, 1935; “John P. Davis Suggests ‘National Negro Congress’ in Crisis Article,” *Negro Liberator*, May 1, 1935, 1.

77. “Propose National Negro Conference,” *Negro Liberator*, May 15, 1935, 4.

78. John P. Davis to Friend, April 15, 1935, in *New Deal Agencies and Black America*, reel 14; “Social Science Division on National Recovery,” *Omaha Guide*, April 27, 1935; “Tentative Program for National Conference,” *NNC Papers*, reel 1; “Economic Status of Negro to be Topic of Nation-wide Confab,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 11, 1935.

79. “Oppressed Workers to Relate Own Experiences,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, May 4, 1935; “New Deal Scored as Hard Master,” *Cleveland Gazette*, May 19, 1935; “Workers Blame Race’s Plight on Oppression at Economic Conference,” *Washington Tribune*, May 25, 1935; Ryan, “Toward a National Negro Congress”; Marguerite Young, “Croppers Tell of Sufferings,” *Daily Worker*, May 20, 1935.

squarely on the left as he systematically denounced the New Deal and invited participants to consider all alternatives. “We are not limited to the scope of any present system of national economy,” he told the assemblage. “Capitalism is only a few hundred years old; as feudalism is dead so may it die.” The “inescapable” conclusion was that “there must be an immediate change in emphasis from protection of private property to protection of human beings from misery and poverty.”<sup>80</sup> The existing system had its supporters—this was, after all, a broad-based gathering, even if it skewed left. Unsurprisingly, government officials defended their employer, but they were, the *New Masses* later gloated, “from the start apologetically, even helplessly, on the defensive,” coming up with nothing that could answer the “numerous pointed questions and reminders concerning the Roosevelt Administration’s policy with regard to the Negro.”<sup>81</sup> Howard’s former dean, Kelly Miller, was a predictable voice of moderation.<sup>82</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois was in attendance—Davis had earlier pleaded with the senior scholar to put in an appearance, for “the type of conference we are planning could hardly be successful without your presence”<sup>83</sup>—and he took the unpopular view of rejecting integration outright and calling on Black America to turn inward. Alienated from the NAACP and back in academic life having resigned from the editorship of its journal, *The Crisis*, which he had founded decades before, the prickly civil rights legend declared that “if segregation will save us from starvation, let’s have it.”<sup>84</sup> That was a position he amplified in “A Negro Nation within the Nation,” an essay that hit the stands by the time of the Howard gathering. If he agreed with conference organizers that the plight of Black Americans was terrible, he offered a different solution: accept the fact that “most white Americans do not like them” and turn further to self-segregation as the “economic and cultural salvation of the American Negro” by organizing a “cooperative State within their own group.”<sup>85</sup> His apostasy, running against the grain of the NAACP’s liberal integrationism and the radicals’ interracial solidarity, won him no plaudits. “Strange to say,” James Ford concluded, “the ideas of Booker T. Washington and Dr. Du Bois coincide today,” with the latter

80. Davis, “A Survey of the Problems of the Negro under the New Deal”; Florence M. Collins, “Highlights of National Conference at Howard,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 25, 1935; “Position of the Negro”; “Negro Jurors Are Denied Their Rights,” *Kansas City Plaindealer*, May 31, 1935. Conference organizers published the Howard papers in the *Journal of Negro Education* the following January.

81. “A National Negro Conference.” “The problem with you,” the white former radical turned government employee Frank Tannenbaum allegedly charged the delegates, “is that you want the millennium. There isn’t any millennium. . . . You want justice. There isn’t any justice.” Or so Black communist Eleanor Ryan later recounted. Ryan, “Toward a National Negro Congress,” 15.

82. George E. Haynes to John P. Davis, April 27, 1935, box I-C311, NAACP Papers; “Integration Is Way Out Says Geo. Haynes,” *New York Age*, June 1, 1935.

83. John P. Davis to W. E. B. Du Bois, March 23, 1935, and W. E. B. Du Bois to John P. Davis, March 28, 1935, box 4, folder 4.2, W. E. B. Du Bois Collection, 1867–1963, Fisk University Archives.

84. The Flying Cavalier, “Carrying the Torch,” *New York Age*, June 1, 1935; Du Bois, “Social Planning for the Negro, Past and Present”; Marguerite Young, “Negro Rights Parley Urged,” *Daily Worker*, May 21, 1935.

85. Du Bois, “A Negro Nation within the Nation,” 266, 270.

“advocating the same policy, and twisting it around to the jim-crowing of our people,” while Howard’s left-wing but non-Communist radical faculty members Abram Harris and Emmett Dorsey “ripped the former *Crisis* editor’s program to pieces.”<sup>86</sup> One can imagine that discrediting any resurgent Black nationalism and humiliating Du Bois, who in years past had refused to extend employment to a hopeful Davis, was precisely the Joint Committee’s director’s purpose in subsidizing the old man’s travel from Atlanta to the nation’s capital.

The conference may have been open to those of all political perspectives, but it was the radicals’ hour. The Urban League’s Lester Granger and Howard’s Ralph Bunche, a conference co-convenor, excoriated white New Dealers while Granger’s colleague T. Arnold Hill announced that the present setup of the Black leadership group “has betrayed the Negro because it has failed to provide for those lowest down.”<sup>87</sup> White Socialist Norman Thomas couldn’t make it, but fellow Socialist John Hurling read his prepared remarks, insisting that “socialism offers to the Negro all the hope there is of a decent world” and plugging his Socialist Party as the “true and effective agent of socialism” and the “bearer of that hope.”<sup>88</sup> From the Trotskyist left Ernest Rice McKinney dismissed both Communists and Socialists, as well as the NAACP, pitching his Workers Party as the “way out for the Negro.”<sup>89</sup> James Ford, when not verbally lacerating Du Bois, Miller, and other reactionaries, asked and answered Lenin’s old “What is to be done?” question by insisting that the “only class in American society today that can change conditions is the American working class,” with the Negro people, for whom the “revolutionary way has not been strange” and with “rebellion and revolutionary struggle” glorifying their history, constituting the working class’s “most important ally.”<sup>90</sup> With fascism growing daily in the United States, it was imperative to reject “cringing, Uncle Tom, Judas methods,” raise “voices high in protest,” and refuse to accept sops, something that a new National Negro Congress would do.<sup>91</sup>

Randolph had left New York to join the assemblage at Howard during an intensely busy season focused on the Harlem riot commission hearings and the BSCP’s campaign for recognition. Although still a member of the Socialist Party (though hardly an active one), he restricted his remarks to discrimination in the labor movement and the imperative of Black working-class mobilization. “The record of the relation of the trade union movement to Negro workers has been and is an unhappy one,” he began. The AFL’s constituent bodies hardly welcomed Negro workers, excluding them by constitutional provision or practice or segregating them

86. Florence M. Collins, “Highlights of National Conference at Howard,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 25, 1935. See also The Flying Cavalier, “Carrying the Torch,” *New York Age*, June 1, 1935.

87. Collins, “Highlights of National Conference at Howard”; Bunche, “A Critique of New Deal Social Planning”; Hill, “The Plight of the Negro Industrial Worker.”

88. Thomas, “The Socialist’s Way Out for the Negro,” 100.

89. McKinney, “The Workers Party’s Way Out for the Negro,” 96.

90. “James W. Ford Hails Proposals for a National Negro Congress,” *Daily Worker*, May 25, 1935.

91. Ford, “The Communist’s Way Out for the Negro,” 94.

in separate locals. In either case, the trade union movement's discrimination was "doubtless the greatest challenge to its profession of democracy and its claim of representing a progressive force in American society." Supportive convention resolutions had not altered the policy of a single discriminatory union. "Something much more drastic" was needed. But the problem was that the AFL's member unions were "not essentially interested in increasing their membership, either among Negro or white workers, if such increase in membership may menace old policies that are encrusted with age-old trade union and racial dogmas." Labor progressives would have hardly disagreed. But Black workers themselves had come up short in the past by assuming the role of the strikebreaker, delivering serious blows to unions during stockyard, steel, and railroad shop strikes in the not-too-distant past. Strikebreaking was unjustifiable, he insisted, but it was "equally unjustifiable for one worker to discriminate against another worker by preventing him from joining a union because of difference in race or color, creed or nationality." The "trite and simple" solution he offered—the organization of Black workers into trade unions that would accept them and into independent unions to fight for admission to unions that excluded them—was the "only remedy for the problem." The "program of construction" was the organization of Black workers with the "spade and Jimmie Higgins' work" carried out by Black workers "of hand and brain" themselves. "Not only must the Negro workers organize themselves," Randolph intoned, but "they must pay the price in suffering, sacrifice, and struggle." Well-intentioned African Americans who suggested that the "only task of the Negro is to break down the color bar in the trade unions" were wrong to think that the organization of Black workers would "automatically follow." Most Blacks would not simply flood into the labor movement, just as most white workers had not flooded into a labor movement that had not excluded them. The paramount issue, Randolph concluded, was the development of a long-range program for Black workers, in and out of the AFL, to develop economic power and achieve "the larger objective of industrial and political democracy."<sup>92</sup>

Although government investigators later concluded that Randolph's talk on the plight of the Negro industrial worker "did not contain any remarks of a radical nature,"<sup>93</sup> that's not how left-leaning delegates interpreted his words. The focus on the Black working class and its self-mobilization resonated with the younger and progressive wing of the NAACP, whose own insurgents—Howard faculty members Abram Harris and Ralph Bunche, among others—had been unsuccessfully challenging the association from within, for the past two years, to adopt a more class-oriented approach.<sup>94</sup> Socialists could offer no objection, for Randolph was one of their own. As for the Communists, they had to have been satisfied. While Randolph had "failed to point out," in party reporter Marguerite Young's words, "that Negro and

92. Randolph, "The Trade Union Movement and the Negro"; "Chairman Harlem Labor Committee," *Omaha Guide*, April 6, 1935.

93. "Alleged Communistic Activities at Howard University."

94. Miller, *Born along the Color Line*; Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses*, 107–9.

white workers . . . already are uniting in spite of their officials," he had sufficiently critiqued the AFL and "reactionary Negro leaders"<sup>95</sup> and set forth the sensible common program that Communists had sought and that other radicals could embrace. Like-minded delegates intent on action, including Davis, his Harvard friends Bunche and Hastie, and the NAACP's Charles Hamilton Houston, set the organizational wheels in motion to create a National Negro Congress.<sup>96</sup>

But had the Howard conference set out a common program or a Communist program? Kelly Miller had suffered enough abuse from attendees to conclude that it was the latter. Branded as the "big bad wolf of the conference . . . representing the extreme right," he used his access to the Black press to exact revenge. "The mind of the young educated Negro is tinged with radicalism," he noted; the gathering was "unquestionably communistic in tone and red in hue," with participants largely belonging to the left wing. The New Deal was "criticized, denounced and condemned in toto. . . . In fact, nothing good was found in anything of Democracy and the existing political, economic and social procedure. The atmosphere was supercharged with a revolutionary spirit" and the "destruction of capitalism and the doing away with existing orders constituted the dominant mode." Worse, he charged, the "overthrow of existing orders by revolt, violence and bloodshed was openly advocated." The widely shared agreement that the Black worker would "fly into the arms of white labor if they could find a welcome" was off target; the only sector of white labor that welcomed "their black coworkers is Communistic and it would be suicidal for the Negro to join the ranks of the Communist."<sup>97</sup>

But while the Communists gloated over their humiliation of Miller, their institutional host—Howard University—took a public relations beating. Chicago's new Black Democratic congressman, Arthur W. Mitchell, condemned Howard's president, Mordecai Johnson, for presiding over a gathering that discussed revolution; the persistent rumors of communism at Howard, an institution that relied on federal funding, warranted a congressional investigation, he concluded.<sup>98</sup> When Maryland

95. Marguerite Young, "A Portrait of Today's American Negro Is Drawn in Washington," *Daily Worker*, June 1, 1935.

96. Davis, "John P. Davis Sees Need for National Organization to Aid Fight for Negro Employment," *Indianapolis Recorder*, June 8, 1935; "Negro and White Leaders Sponsor National Congress," *Negro Liberator*, June 1, 1935, 3.

97. Kelly Miller, "Turning to the Left," *New York Age*, June 1, 1935; "Kelly Miller Discusses Turning to the Left," *Washington Tribune*, June 1, 1935; "James W. Ford Hails Proposals for a National Negro Congress," *Daily Worker*, May 25, 1935.

98. "Teaching of Communism Charged, Howard University Faces Probe," *Baltimore Sun*, May 26, 1935; "Rash Preference," *Baltimore Sun*, May 27, 1935; "Mitchell Asks 'Red' Quiz for Howard," *Chicago Defender*, June 1, 1935; "Alleged Communistic Activities at Howard University"; "Congressional Visitors Laud Howard Univ." *The Hilltop*, June 5, 1935. Students at Howard were unimpressed with Miller's "scathing attack" on Johnson and Mitchell's "hysteria" about Reds. The very nonradical dean of Black journalism, the *Chicago Defender's* Robert Abbott, could not understand all the fuss about communism. "This American government has never been in danger of being overthrown by revolutionary forces, and is not now," he editorialized. "It isn't the Reds we should fear but those patriotic, Christian gentlemen of the South who advocate

senator Millard E. Tydings, a conservative Democrat and no friend of civil rights, insisted on an investigation of the matter by the Interior Department, under whose purview Howard fell, the otherwise liberal secretary of the interior, Harold Ickes, felt compelled to comply. Special agents fanned out to interview witnesses. Lawrence A. Oxley, a Black Department of Labor adviser and critic of Davis who attended every conference session, appeared happy to share his belief that the conference was “distinctly communistic in character.”<sup>99</sup> Kelly Miller submitted an affidavit calling for Johnson’s ouster for having converted Howard into “a forum for Red and radical propaganda.”<sup>100</sup> From the sidelines, John P. Davis claimed to know nothing about Howard’s internal affairs but dismissed Miller’s statements about his conference as wholly inaccurate, attributing them “not to his veracity but to his advanced old age,” while others testified to the benign character of the gathering.<sup>101</sup> That hardly put the matter to rest; the controversy carried into the new year, drawing the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee, whose chair, Texas congressman Martin Dies, was only too willing to air the charges against Howard University and its leader.<sup>102</sup> With Ickes’s backing, Mordecai Johnson successfully weathered the political storm; the talk about the Howard president “being a communist is all rubbish,” a special agent heard from a white Howard trustee.<sup>103</sup> But the dustup signaled clearly that Black conservatives still had enough fire in the belly to ensure that the left turn in Black politics would not go uncontested.

They were also not entirely wrong in their accusations. If they exaggerated the words of the Howard conference radicals, they did not misread the underlying

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mob violence, lynching and exploitation.” Editorial, *The Hilltop*, June 5, 1935; “Students at Howard Univ. Rebuke Solon,” *Chicago Defender*, July 20, 1935; Ralph Matthews, “Watching the Big Parade—the Howard University Muddle,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 15, 1935; “Mitchell and Negro Congress,” *Negro Liberator*, June 15, 1935; Loren Miller, “The Way Out!—Good Boy,” *Negro Liberator*, June 15, 1935, 5; “Mitchell and Negro Congress,” *Negro Liberator*, June 15, 1935, 4; Robert S. Abbott, “Howard University (An Editorial),” *Chicago Defender*, June 1, 1935.

99. Federal Investigators Again on Howard U. Campus,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 3, 1935; “Howard U. Probe Yet Incomplete,” *Washington Evening Star*, August 30, 1935; “Activity Charged to Howard U. Heard,” *Washington Evening Star*, September 1, 1935; “Red Inquiry at Howard,” *Washington Post*, September 1, 1935; “Alleged Communistic Activities at Howard University, Washington, D.C.,” 21, 43.

100. “Oust Johnson, Dean Emeritus Urges Howard,” *Washington Post*, September 1, 1935; Kelly Miller, “Communism among Negroes—an Open Letter to the President of Howard University,” *New York Age*, September 14, 1935.

101. “Federal Agents Again Investigating Howard University,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 7, 1935; Frederick S. Weaver, “Davis Challenges Dean Miller on Statement That HU Harbors Reds,” *Washington Tribune*, September 7, 1935; “Alleged Communistic Activities at Howard University,” 5–57.

102. “Kelly Miller and Ickes Battle over Communism at H.U.,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 28, 1935; “Congressman Hits Mordecai Johnson,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 5, 1935; “Negro College Head Accused of Communism,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 6, 1935; “Senate Probes Communism on Howard Campus,” *Chicago Defender*, May 9, 1936; “Oxley Attacks Dr. Johnson in Ickes’s Report,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 6, 1936; “Says HU Prexy Taught Tenets of Communism,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 12, 1938; “Ickes Backs H.U. Prexy,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 26, 1938.

103. Albert Bushnell Hart to Theodore Roosevelt Jr., October 2, 1935, in “Alleged Communistic Activities at Howard University,” 2.

sentiment or misjudge the role that Communists played in the conference and the subsequent promotion of a National Negro Congress. Davis hit the lecture circuit that summer and fall. "There is room for no black face in the promised land of the New Deal," he informed Chicagoans. "The time has come for us to unite our forces and win in action the liberation of which we speak."<sup>104</sup> While Davis remained the public face of the Congress idea, the party press exhorted its readers to make the NNC a "weapon for Negro rights,"<sup>105</sup> and his Communist colleagues worked diligently behind the scenes to promote his work, raising funds and generating publicity. "The Party did not mechanically dominate" the Howard conference, James Ford told party leaders, but its contribution "helped to bring more prestige to the party" and "more sympathy" for its programs. As for the sentiment that "the Congress must have the appearance of not being dominated by anyone [*sic*] political opinion," he agreed—with a caveat: "We know we are going to organize it."<sup>106</sup> Promoting the Congress while maintaining the appearance that Communists were not in control required tact, restraint, and no small degree of obfuscation. A report at the meeting of the Negro Commission and Harlem Section in November 1935 explained the strategy. Establishing the National Negro Congress had become a "paramount task" and "duty" of the party, particularly in light of the Comintern's Seventh World Congress that summer, which announced the Popular Front. Communists had to "utilize all sorts of methods," including the "widest possible use of all types of penetration of forms of negro life so we can really reach the Negro masses for the Congress," argued an unnamed source. "We are not afraid of 'control' of it. It is not a matter of maneuvering and getting communists in as officers, not to be the leaders of the Congress; but to do the real Bolshevik work to bring these broadest groups of Negro people, white and Negro intellectuals, etc. in this mass movement for Negro rights in this country." Unnamed in the Party's records, the speaker was likely none other than John P. Davis.<sup>107</sup> More than a few historians have noted that Davis gravitated

104. "Plans Heard for National Negro Parley," *Daily Worker*, August 3, 1935; "Davis Pleads for Economic Congress to Solve Labor Problems of American Negroes," *Black Dispatch*, August 8, 1935; "A Serious Situation," *Detroit Tribune Independent*, August 17, 1935. See also John P. Davis, "John P. Davis Sees Need for National Organization to Aid Fight for Negro Employment," *Indianapolis Recorder*, June 8, 1935; "It's Your Job Now," *Amsterdam News*, June 8, 1935; John P. Davis, "For a National Negro Congress," *Negro Liberator*, June 15, 1935; John P. Davis, "Davis Seeks Opinions on Proposed National Congress," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 15, 1935.

105. "For a National Congress!," *Negro Liberator*, June 1, 1935, 4. See also "Negro and White Leaders Sponsor National Congress," *Negro Liberator*, June 1, 1935, 3; "A National Negro Conference"; A. W. Berry, "Building the L.S.N.R.—Existing Groups and the National Negro Congress," *Negro Liberator*, July 1, 1935; A. W. Berry, "Building the L.S.N.R.—The Unorganized and the National Negro Congress," *Negro Liberator*, July 15, 1935; Loren Miller, "The Way Out," *Omaha Guide*, July 13, 1935; "Plans Heard for National Negro Parley," *Daily Worker*, August 3, 1935; "Chicago Supports Negro Congress," *Negro Liberator*, August 15, 1935.

106. "Special Meeting of Negro Commission of E.E.C. and the Section Committee, Harlem Section."

107. "Meeting of Negro Commission C.C. and Harlem Section Committee—Mon., Nov. 18, 1935," RTsKhIDNI, 515/1/3775/31, Library of Congress. That Davis was the unnamed speaker is suggested by the speaker's remark that the Howard conference was announced in an article he had published in the May issue of *The Crisis*. The only article on the conference in that issue was authored by Davis, who in 1935 was either a member of the CP or extremely close to it.

more closely to the Communist position in the late 1930s. But the “language and content of his report” to the Negro Commission “suggest that he had been a CP member for longer than generally believed,” Mark Solomon concludes.<sup>108</sup> If the NNC idea attracted broad support in the months leading up to its actual formation in early 1936, the bulk of the credit belongs to Communists, both visible and invisible.

### The Popular Front in Action

When hundreds of delegates representing over 150 organizations gathered for the founding meeting of the new National Negro Congress in February 1936, the energy of the assembled activists was palpable. Including the nondelegate audience members, “thousands throng[ed] [the] history making conference,” as the headline in the *New York Age* put it.<sup>109</sup> While Randolph had agreed to serve as the organization’s first president, it was universally recognized that the gathering was Davis’s brainchild. In the midst of the Great Depression, Davis announced, it was “eminently proper, timely, fitting and necessary, that a National Negro Congress, which will express the struggle of the Negro on all fronts, such as civil and political liberties, labor, social service, politics, fraternal and church interests . . . be held.”<sup>110</sup> To NNC cofounder Ralph Bunche, the body would foster a coalition of “trade unions, religious, civic and fraternal bodies” to “unite the masses of Negroes behind a definite program.”<sup>111</sup> The gathering, “if it accomplished nothing else,” Minnesota delegate Willa Eastman concluded, “was a stimulant to the Negro people,” awakening them “to the fact that they, as a people[,] possess intellect and grit.”<sup>112</sup> The NNC could “be the keynote to the American Negro’s battle for group recognition and solidarity on paramount issues,” the Seattle newspaper, the *Northwest Enterprise*, predicted, provided that it “does not degenerate . . . into a mutual admiration society and allows its leaders . . . to swing neither too far to the left nor too far to the right.”<sup>113</sup> As it turned out, the Congress would not degenerate into a mutual admiration society, but its leaders—some of them, at any rate—*did* swing further to the left than was initially evident.

108. Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 303. The Federal Bureau of Investigation suspected but could not conclusively prove that Davis was a Communist. See Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Survey of U.S. Racial Conditions,” section 3, folder 3, p. 649 (folder 016477-012-0602), in *FBI Reports of the Franklin D. Roosevelt White House* (ProQuest).

109. “203 Delegates at Congress Meeting,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 8, 1936; “Thousands Throng History Making Conference in Chicago,” *New York Age*, February 22, 1936; “600 Delegates Here Soon for Race Congress,” *Chicago Defender*, February 8, 1936; S. T. Holland, “Hundreds Attend Michigan Branch of the National Negro Congress,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 1, 1936. On Congress’s initial program, see “Call for National Negro Congress, February 14, 1936,” *NNC Papers*, part 1, reel 29; “The Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress, February 14, 15, 16, 1936,” *Papers of A. Philip Randolph*, reels 23 and 31.

110. A. Philip Randolph, “Introduction: Why a National Negro Congress?,” in John P. Davis, *Let Us Build a National Negro Congress* (pamphlet issued by National Sponsoring Committee, National Negro Congress), October 1935, 1.

111. Kirby, “Ralph J. Bunche and Black Radical Thought in the 1930s.”

112. Willa Eastman, “The Negro Congress,” *Minneapolis Spokesman*, February 28, 1936.

113. Editorial, “National Negro Congress,” *Northwest Enterprise*, February 28, 1936.

Just because activists across the ideological spectrum came together under one banner did not mean that all Black leaders endorsed the new initiative. From the start, clergymen and more conservative race leaders unhappy with any red tinge raised the charge of Communist domination. A group of Black bishops complained of “too much godlessness and Christlessness,” their exclusion from positions of influence and visibility, and the “treatment of the Race church,” while AME Zion bishop J. J. Walls later reported that the meeting was “wholly communistic.” (It was so “honeycombed with communist influence” that his fellow bishops thought it “wisest not to take our place on the program.”)<sup>114</sup> Lawrence Oxley, the government’s “official stool pigeon and labor spy,”<sup>115</sup> in the words of one Communist, reported that the “tone of the congress was radical. . . . The sectional group meetings presented an almost exact reproduction of Harlem . . . on a summer night with a variety of street corner orators expounding on the injustices of the present social and economic order, attacking everything and everybody.” The voices of more conservative Black leaders were “eloquent by their silence,” and “outspoken advocates of Socialism and Communism were apparently welcomed.” Conceding that the Congress brought together “the most worthwhile representation of the Negro in the past fifty years,” Oxley still felt it was “apparently planned that Mr. Davis should serve as a ‘front’ to cover the Communist Organization.”<sup>116</sup> Journalist T. L. Evans observed that the “question of politics hung over the congress like a smoke pall” from start to finish. “The burning question . . . was when the Communists would take the congress over.” If most of the delegates were “like lost sheep without a master,” he charged, “the numerically small number of Communists were neither without masters nor purpose”; this time, they relied on methods at “variance” with usual party tactics. “Ordinarily Communists pay little or no attention to average amenities of courtesy and consideration of time and place.” On this occasion, their methods “were more subtle,” and they “apparently proceeded on the theory that an exposure of the true conditions would make radicals out of most Negroes,” leading them to spare “neither tongue nor energy. . . . Missing entirely were chauvinism, proletariat and other familiar friends.”<sup>117</sup> The Congress

114. “National Race Congress Alleged ‘Snubbing’ of Bishops Scored by Group,” *Chicago Defender*, February 29, 1936; “Declares the Negro Church Faces New Tasks—Bishop W. J. Walls Decries Urge to Follow Isms,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 1, 1939. See also “Congress Shunted God, Three Bishops Complain,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 22, 1936; C. E. Chapman, “Negro Church Sidetracked Say Noted Religious Leaders Following Chicago Meeting,” *Black Dispatch*, February 27, 1936; Lena M. Wysinger, “Activities among Eastbay Negroes,” *Oakland Tribune*, March 1, 1936; Tuck, “The Doubts of Their Fathers”; and Dillard, *Faith in the City*, 85–86.

115. Herbert Newton, “The National Negro Congress (U.S.A.),” *Negro Worker* 6 (May–June 1936): 22–25, 27, reproduced in Foner and Lewis, *The Black Worker*, 6:452.

116. Memorandum: To the Secretary of Labor, from Mr. Oxley, March 9, 1936, in *New Deal Agencies and Black America*, reel 17. See also To the Secretary from A. F. Hinrichs, March 18, 1936, in *New Deal Agencies and Black America*, reel 17. See also “Sullinger Reports on Race Congress,” *New York Age*, February 29, 1936.

117. T. L. Evans, “What Was It All About, Ask Delegates Who Attended First National Negro Congress,” *Black Dispatch*, February 27, 1936.

may have been described as “strictly non-partisan,” a sympathetic journalist Frank Marshall Davis noted, but the “left-wing leaders were definitely in control.” (That was a plus in his eyes, for the older generation, “reactionary, for the most part,” could no longer advance the race while “inspired young radicals acting with intelligence will not surrender.”)<sup>118</sup> The presence of a small but significant number of whites, often in behind-the-scenes positions, raised more than a few eyebrows. “So many of those attending the congress were white and known to have Communistic leanings,” a *Chicago Defender* columnist joked, “that the gathering was described by one wiseacre as ‘a black gathering with red and white trimmings.’”<sup>119</sup>

The most prominent NNC skeptic was Kelly Miller, who, not surprisingly, remained uneasy at the “leftward drift” of the new politics. “The spirit of radicalism predominated throughout the proceedings,” he complained. “The Reds, the Socialists and Communists were everywhere in ascendancy, either in number or in indomitable purpose, or in both.” The Chicago conference “was revolutionary in more than one sense,” for “traditional organizations, agencies and personnel were either scrapped, sidetracked or ignored,” while “religion, philanthropy and patriotism, the three pillars upon which the life and hope of the race have been built, were either ruthlessly flouted or tepidly tolerated out of a sense of salutary prudence.” The “dominant note that differentiated the Congress from all preceding racial groups,” he concluded, “was encouched [*sic*] in Communistic phraseology—the race must present a united front with Labor against Capitalism.”<sup>120</sup> As such, the Congress was a failure in Miller’s eyes. It wasn’t just conservatives who identified the Communists as sitting in the institutional driver’s seat. Edward Welsh of the Lovestonite Communist Party Opposition unhappily noted that “control [was] centered completely in the hands of the Communist Party” from the NNC’s inception onward.<sup>121</sup> Trotskyists agreed. In May 1940, the Socialist Workers Party insisted that the NNC had not been “kidnapped” by CPers at its recent gathering because “from the very beginning,” “in the heyday of their People’s Front line,” the Congress had been “the baby of the Stalinists.”<sup>122</sup>

Randolph, the long-standing socialist with no love for either the Soviet Union or the Communist Party, came forcefully to the Communists’—and the NNC’s—defense. The charge that the NNC was under Communist domination was “entirely without foundation,” he insisted, for the Congress was a “Negro movement” that “was not, is not and will not be dominated by either Communists, Republicans, Socialists or Democrats.” But as a Negro movement, it “naturally includes

118. Frank Marshall Davis, “The World in Review,” *Black Dispatch*, February 27, 1936.

119. “Nuffie” to Walter White, March 17, 1936, *Papers of the NAACP*, part 11, series B, reel 16; Evans, “What Was It All About”; Nahum Daniel Brascher, “National Negro Congress Tidbits,” *Chicago Defender*, February 22, 1936.

120. Kelly Miller, “The Leftward Drift of the National Negro Congress,” *Black Dispatch*, March 5, 1936. Miller’s column was printed in multiple Black weeklies. On the broader theme of Black anticommunism, see Arnesen, “The Traditions of African-American Anticommunism.”

121. Edward Welsh, “Once Again the National Negro Congress,” *Workers Age*, October 16, 1937.

122. Robert L. Birchman, “The Negro Question,” *Socialist Appeal*, May 11, 1940.

Negroes of all political faiths,” from Communists to Catholics, Republicans to Presbyterians. In what was perhaps his most full-throated exposition of a “united front” philosophy, he denounced the “‘red scare’ bogey” and made clear that Blacks who “elect to be Communists need make no apology for it. That is their right.” The CP was a “legitimate political party” and Communists were “not criminals.” “It’s gotten to be a regular indoor sport now to damn most movements and individuals who resolutely and aggressively fight for human and race rights and the rights of the workers and minority groups by branding them as ‘red.’” Depicting “persons and movements that fight for social justice as ‘reds’ is a trick, a red herring, which is practiced by labor-baiting capitalists, Negro-hating whites or by morons, halfwits or persons who are good enough all right but who don’t know the difference between a ‘red’ and helitrope.” He concluded that “While I am not a Communist, I am willing to go down fighting for the rights of any Negro to exercise his Constitutional right as a free man, to join the Communist party or any other party he may choose to join, for to deny him this right is to reduce him to a slave.”<sup>123</sup> A decade and a half earlier, Randolph had dismissed the Communists as “utterly devoid of any respect for fact, truth, or honesty,” viewing them as “disruptionists” whose “irrational and romantic zeal” and “utterly senseless, unsound, unscientific, dangerous and ridiculous . . . policies and tactics” made them “a menace.”<sup>124</sup> That, of course, was during the Party’s early sectarian years. Now, with the Party embracing alliance politics, Randolph welcomed former enemies-turned-allies to the fight.

The Communist Party was more than just one coalition partner among many, a fact that Randolph neither admitted nor perhaps fully recognized. Kelly Miller may have exaggerated the red presence, but the Communists themselves did not hesitate to trumpet their own role and success. “The Communists have played a big part in this development as well as in the larger struggle for the unity of the Negro people and the white masses,” James W. Ford boasted after the February 1936 meeting. “Through the vigilance, energy and steadfastness of the Communist Party on the Negro question a powerful movement among the Negro people is taking solid root.”<sup>125</sup> Although never numerically dominant in the NNC’s top leadership, key Black CPers played a central role in guiding the Congress and overseeing its on-the-ground operations in the years that followed, particularly in the realm of labor organizing. Davis and Communist organizers defined the unionization of Black workers in strategic industries as a core part of the NNC’s mission. On this front, they could boast some accomplishments. Its involvement with the CIO’s Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) campaign, for instance, drew Black workers into the union in the greater Chicago area. The *Pittsburgh Courier* dispatched its colum-

123. A. Philip Randolph, “Randolph Says Race Congress Not Communist,” *Chicago Defender*, February 29, 1936. A long illness prevented Randolph from attending the first NNC gathering in Chicago.

124. “The Menace of Negro Communists.”

125. Ford, “The National Negro Congress,” 317, 316. The impact of the new Popular Front line was evident in the change of tone in Ford’s analysis of Black politics. Contrast the language and analysis found in Ford’s 1936 article, “The National Negro Congress,” with that in Ford, “The United Front in the Field of Negro Work.”

nist George Schuyler to the Great Lakes region to investigate the role Black workers played in the CIO's grand organization campaign. The industrial union federation "has been fortunate in getting the Negro organizers it has, and this accounts in no small measure for the success of its drive in this area," he concluded. "Many of them are former Socialists or Communists and possess some idealism. Many are identified with the National Negro Congress."<sup>126</sup> In their classic study *Black Workers and the New Unions*, Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell too noted the NNC's role. "Although the organization did not have great strength or organization unity," they wrote in 1940 of the steel campaign, "nevertheless it did much in the way of creating a friendly public opinion in the Negro community or at least tended to counteract much of the prevailing hostile opinion."<sup>127</sup> That the SWOC employed particular Black organizers was partially to the credit of John P. Davis, who lobbied CIO officials relentlessly; that John L. Lewis, desperate for talented organizers to undertake the gargantuan task of unionizing the notoriously antiunion steel industry, was eagerly snapping up large numbers of Communist organizers to do the job made Davis's task easier.<sup>128</sup> The result was the employment in the greater Chicago region of three African American NNC members—Henry (Hank) Johnson, James McDonald, and Eleanor Rye—whose effectiveness in convincing Black workers to enlist in the trade union movement is attested to by multiple historians. All three were Communists, as were two other leaders in the Chicago NNC's campaign to integrate city transit jobs—Herb March (a white activist) and Ismael Flory (who took over the Chicago chapter in 1940), along with Henry (Hank) Johnson.<sup>129</sup> In Detroit,

126. George Schuyler, "Negro Workers Lead in Great Lakes Steel Drive," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 31, 1937. See also "NNC to Give Cooperation to CIO Drive," *Chicago Defender*, August 22, 1936; Eleanor Rye, "Women in Steel," *Chicago Defender*, September 12, 1936; Eleanor Rye, "Davis Visits Chicago, Aid CIO Pickets," *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 17, 1937.

127. Cayton and Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions*, 205. See also Tompkins Bates, "A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP," 362–65; Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America*; Davis, "Plan Eleven," 262–63, 276; "50,000 Workmen Watch Lewis as Efforts to Organize Steel Industry Grow, Vital to Race," *Indianapolis Recorder*, August 1, 1936; "Negro Steel Workers Rally to Drive in Chicago Mills," *Daily Worker*, July 28, 1936; Adam Lapin, "Negro America Acts to Build Steel Union," *Daily Worker*, February 8, 1937; "Demands Speed in Steel Union Organizing," *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 23, 1937; "Davis Visits Chicago, Aid CIO Pickets," *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 17, 1937; "Birds of a Feather," *Nashville Banner*, July 26, 1937.

128. Burt Cochran cites sources claiming that "31 or 32 out of 33 SWOC staff members in the Chicago area were attending the Communist caucus." Cochran, *Labor and Communism*, 97. See also John P. Davis to A. Philip Randolph, July 10, 1936, *NNC Papers*, reel 7; John P. Davis to Curtis Garvin, July 22, 1936, *NNC Papers*, reel 3; John P. Davis to C. C. Spaulding, August 24, 1936, *NNC Papers*, reel 7; John P. Davis to John L. Lewis, October 19, 1937, box 1, Matt Crawford Papers, Emory University.

129. Gellman, "Carthage Must Be Destroyed," 69; "Race Congress Council Here Opens Office," *Chicago Defender*, June 6, 1936; "Negro Congress Launches Fight for Utility Jobs," *Northwest Enterprise*, May 20, 1936; "Chicago Council Concentrates Fight on Carriers in Gigantic Job Drive," *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 11, 1936; "Negro America Acts to Build Steel Union," *Daily Worker*, February 3, 1937. The infamous Texas congressman Martin Dies, an early specialist in Red-baiting, was particularly exercised by the Communist presence in the steel industry. In 1941, he identified the following Black steel labor activists as party members in

the NNC local overlapped with a preexisting militant body, the Civic Rights Committee. Its members who worked most closely on United Auto Workers campaigns included LeBron Simmons, Joseph Billups, Walter Harden, Veal Clough, Paul Kirk, and Christopher Alston, all party members or close fellow travelers.<sup>130</sup> The same was true in Richmond, where James E. Jackson Jr., Edward Strong, Louis Burnham, and Christopher Alston of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, which was affiliated with the NNC, organized tobacco workers.<sup>131</sup> Along the way, John Davis ran interference for NNC activists, promoting his talented crew to top CIO officials and rendering his services, and those of his organization, valuable to the industrial union federation.

“Bringing together . . . the American Negro from every state in the Union,” the *Minneapolis Spokesman* editorialized in October 1937, the NNC “has vast possibilities for racial good.”<sup>132</sup> Those vast possibilities were not realized. Indeed, the NNC’s record on the labor front was not matched at the local level. The twelve hundred delegates who gathered in Philadelphia’s Metropolitan Opera House for the NNC’s second annual convention heard many speeches about national political issues from such Communist luminaries as James W. Ford, Doxey Wilkerson, and Angelo Herndon; progressive non-Communists like Randolph; and nonradical leaders like Alain Locke and Charlotte Hawkins Brown. What they did not hear much about were grassroots efforts across the nation—for there weren’t many genuine grassroots efforts to hear about.<sup>133</sup> George Schuyler was complimentary toward the NNC after its Philadelphia meeting but concluded that its delegates “have probably not represented established and functioning local groups in many instances and probably in some cases represented only themselves.” The NNC was to the NAACP what the “1917 draftees were to the regular army. There is a great deal of enthusiasm, but the organizational training is as yet inadequate.” To be sure, he recognized and praised the contribution of “a number of Congress members . . . active in the education and organization of labor”—something that should not be “underrated and ought to be multiplied a hundredfold.” But ultimately, he speculated, perhaps the Congress was “not an organization at all” in the same sense as the NAACP, but “rather an assemblage of outstanding people from various parts of the country.”<sup>134</sup>

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a long list of Communists in SWOC: Ben Careathers, William Hill, Joseph Howard, Eleanor Rye, and Joe Cook. “A Message to Our Fellow Workers,” *Lackawanna Leader*, May 1, 1941.

130. Tompkins Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford*, especially chap. 8; Dillard, *Faith in the City*, especially chaps. 2 and 3; Lewis-Colman, “From Fellow Traveler to Friendly Witness”; Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 45–46.

131. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*, chap. 2.

132. “The Negro Congress,” *Minneapolis Spokesman*, October 22, 1937.

133. “Civil Rights Campaign Is Cited as Needed,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 21, 1937; “A. Philip Randolph Opens Meet with Stirring Address,” *Kansas-American*, October 23, 1937; “Mayor Aids Pickets!,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 23, 1937; “Race Congress Calls for Unity,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, October 23, 1937.

134. George S. Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 30, 1937.

That was an exaggeration—though not by much. Before and after the Philadelphia assembly, local NNC councils sponsored symposia advocating interracialism and meetings to investigate housing conditions and debate the “pros and cons of ‘socialized medicine’” in Los Angeles,<sup>135</sup> surveyed housing conditions and discussed “various economic, social, political, religious and education problems of the Negro” in Detroit,<sup>136</sup> participated in a coalition to protest a Harlem principal’s beating of a Black student, and protested a Brooklyn high school instructor accused of disparaging Black students.<sup>137</sup> In 1938, the Washington, DC, chapter—or at least eight or nine of its members—picketed the showing of *Birth of a Nation*; it hosted an antilynching conference and regularly protested police brutality.<sup>138</sup> The Omaha local, established after the 1937 Philadelphia convention, held multiple forums and its youth division convinced the city to designate a school as a summer recreation center to deter juvenile delinquency.<sup>139</sup> In Chicago, the local NNC launched a drive for utility jobs and joined other organizations in opposing segregation in public housing,<sup>140</sup> but personality conflicts and perpetually poor finances impeded its progress. Three years after the NNC’s successful launch in Chicago, Davis felt obligated to share ideas for building the local council, including the prosaic recommendation to hold regular meetings and

135. “NNC to Sponsor Symposium,” *California Eagle*, October 23, 1936; “Plan Study of Housing Problem Here,” *California Eagle*, April 30, 1937; “Housing Problem to Be Discussed by Council,” *California Eagle*, April 14, 1938; “Hold Housing Conference Tomorrow,” *California Eagle*, July 14, 1938; Political News,” *California Eagle*, July 21, 1938; “‘Housing Project’ Theme of Mass Meet Sunday,” *California Eagle*, August 10, 1938; “Fire Opening Guns in Better Housing Campaign,” *California Eagle*, August 17, 1938; “National Negro Congress to Meet Here,” *California Eagle*, October 20, 1938.

136. C. S. Frankson, “Michigan Branch Nat’l Negro Congress to Hold Meeting,” *Detroit Tribune*, October 24, 1936; “Michigan N.N. Congress Calls Meet,” *Detroit Tribune*, December 12, 1936.

137. “Harlem Rally to Spur Fight on Jim Crow,” *Daily Worker*, November 21, 1936; “Harlem Routs Principal Who Beat Boy” *Indianapolis Recorder*, December 12, 1936; “Fight Prejudiced in Brooklyn,” *Arizona Gleam*, Phoenix April 16, 1937.

138. “‘Birth of Nation’ to Be Shown Tonight,” *Washington Evening Star*, February 19, 1938; “‘Birth of Nation’ Film Is Picketed,” *Washington Evening Star*, February 24, 1938; “Colored Group Pickets Theater Where ‘Birth of Nation’ Is Given,” *Washington Post*, February 24, 1938; “Picket ‘Birth of Nation’ Film in Washington,” *California Eagle*, March 3, 1938; “Policeman Tells of Blows by Keys,” *Evening Star*, March 11, 1938; “News from the Nation’s Capital,” *Chicago Defender*, March 26, 1938; “Murders by Police in Nation’s Capital Protested at Meet,” *Chicago Defender*, May 22, 1936; “Organizations Rally for Passage of Anti-lynch Bill,” *Carolina Times*, March 26, 1938; “Negro Congress Unit Protests Shootings,” *Washington Evening Star*, June 8, 1938; “D.C. Police Brutality Is Charged in Call,” *Washington Evening Star*, July 30, 1938; “1,200 Hear Attack on Police ‘Brutality,’” *Washington Evening Star*, August 1, 1938; “Washington Police on Trial for Death of Negro War Vet,” *Northwest Enterprise*, September 16, 1938; “Report of John P. Davis,” April 27, 1940, *NNC Papers*, reel 21.

139. “Omaha Negro Council Organizes Youth,” *Omaha Guide*, February 26, 1938; “The Omaha Council Sponsors 3rd Forum,” *Omaha Guide*, April 2, 1938; “Youth Council Gets Northside Center,” *Omaha Guide*, April 16, 1938.

140. “Negro Congress Launches Drive for Utilities Jobs,” *Chicago Defender*, May 30, 1936; “Chicagoans Go to Mayor in Housing Problem,” *California Eagle*, March 3, 1938.

jump-start its trade union committee.<sup>141</sup> The small and overworked national office, it seemed, was perpetually cash strapped—and everyone knew it.<sup>142</sup>

From the start, the NNC struggled to surmount challenge after challenge. In late 1936, the Urban League's Lester Granger viewed the NNC as a "struggling organization, just trying to set up a national office,"<sup>143</sup> while the NNC's chief in Los Angeles admitted that the local structure did "not allow for active participation of the delegates to the Council, that little effort has been made to involve the membership of the organizations represented in the Council in the work—and that thus one of the main objectives of the Congress generally is lost—namely, to educate the broad masses of people in their problems and to train them to work together to effect a solution for them."<sup>144</sup> Davis recognized the limited success at the local level. In 1939 the Twin Cities possessed no NNC chapters;<sup>145</sup> despite support from the national office, the Pittsburgh chapter's work was at a standstill,<sup>146</sup> the Atlantic City chapter experienced a "falling off in activity" and a "failure . . . to continue its good work";<sup>147</sup> and as a result of "a number of serious mistakes"—for example, white people assuming the leadership and a "lack of understanding" of the NNC's functions—the Newark local ran out of steam.<sup>148</sup> A disgruntled member confidentially informed Davis that the Rochester local was "divorced from struggle and in danger of disintegration" unless a "more militant and collective leadership" replaced the existing autocratic and opportunistic officers.<sup>149</sup> That record supports an assessment rendered four decades ago by Cicero Alvin Hughes: the years between the 1937 and 1940s conventions were "difficult ones for the National Negro Congress," for the "excitement over the new Congress concept wore thin as the arduous task of keeping the organization alive taxed the genius of

141. John P. Davis to Dewey Jones, February 14, 1939; John P. Davis to Ishmael Flory, May 22, 1939, *NNC Papers*, reel 16.

142. On the precarious state of NNC finances, see John P. Davis to M. L. Porter, October 6, 1936, *NNC Papers*, reel 7; "Report of the National Secretary, Cleveland, Ohio, June 19–22, 1936," *NNC Papers*, reel 7; Matt Crawford to John P. Davis, March 27, 1939; John P. Davis to Ben Careathers, March 10, 1939; Lena Davis to John P. Davis, July 12, 1939; and Goldie Irvin to John P. Davis, April 23, 1939, *NNC Papers*, reel 16.

143. Lester Granger to John P. Davis, August 10, 1936, box 57. "G" part 2 in *African America, Communists, and the National Negro Congress, 1933–1947* (Gale Archives Unbound Digital Database).

144. *Newsletter of the Los Angeles Council* 1, no. 1 (November 20, 1936), *NNC Papers*, reel 1.

145. John P. Davis to Maceo V. Littlejohn, May 22, 1939; John P. Davis to Maceo V. Littlejohn, June 14, 1939, *NNC Papers*, reel 16.

146. John P. Davis to Ben Careathers, February 11, 1939, and John P. Davis to Ben Careathers, March 10, 1939, *NNC Papers*, reel 16.

147. John P. Davis to Albert Forsythe, October 3, 1939, *NNC Papers*, reel 16.

148. Lena Davis to John P. Davis, July 12, 1939, *NNC Papers*, reel 16.

149. Gertrude Kowal to Davis, April 3, 1939, *NNC Papers*, reel 16. For their part, just weeks later the Rochester leaders that Kowal criticized claimed that the results of their efforts had, in fact, been "very encouraging" and reached out for information about what "progress the Congress is making elsewhere in the country." "Does the Congress have a constitution which covers the activities of all local councils?" Howard Coles and Mary E. Langford to Davis, April 22, 1939, *NNC Papers*, reel 16.

its national leaders.”<sup>150</sup> If the NNC “performed some of its most effective work at the local level”<sup>151</sup> in these years, as one scholar has claimed, its accomplishments hardly gave older civil rights organizations a proverbial run for their money. As important as their activities were, NNC chapters were no more successful and, in many instances, much less successful than either the far more numerous local NAACP chapters or other grassroots groups.

To the extent that the NNC aided various civil rights and Black unionization efforts, a necessary and related but often unasked question concerns the matter of personnel: Who and what was *the* NNC which accomplished this task? The answer suggested by the profile of NNC labor organizers is that the NNC—or at least its most activist contingent—was largely if not exclusively composed of Communists. Keeping their political affiliations out of the public eye, they constituted the “core group of members who did the bulk of planning and organizing on a day-to-day basis,” as Gellman rightly notes.<sup>152</sup> Their numbers were not large: that group was sufficiently small to lead Davis to postpone the second NNC conference, initially scheduled for May 1937, on the grounds that “many of the members and officers of the Congress . . . [were] aiding in the organization of various industrial unions and would not be free to attend the meeting if held in May.”<sup>153</sup> But if the NNC constituted the “black vanguard of the Popular Front,” as some suggested, it was the Communists who dominated that vanguard. In one sense, the NNC as an organization served as a talent recruitment firm for the CIO, sending its Black Communist activists into the union-organizing fray, preferably on CIO payrolls. In another sense, overt identification with the NNC—and not with the CP—gave Communist activists cover to do their jobs without the added burden of Red-baiting by employers or rival trade unionists. Given the broader organizational weakness of the NNC on both the national and local levels, historians’ depiction of these organizers as NNC members and the air-brushing their Communist affiliation out of the picture overstates the NNC’s reach and denies the CP credit for its members’ accomplishments. In effect, it inflates the small NNC while selling the party short. If Davis and his allies decided that concealing organizers’ Communist identity was prudent politics, historians need not, and should not, follow suit. Those who do—or who downplay or otherwise obscure party membership—are engaging in the same kind of concealment that their historical subjects did.

150. Hughes, “Toward a Black United Front,” 152–53. John Baxter Streater Jr. notes that the “leveling of both CIO growth and left influence in the CIO” by 1937 “meant that the growing ties with the NNC would also level off.” Streater, “The National Negro Congress,” 2.

151. Wittner, “The National Negro Congress,” 887.

152. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*, 6.

153. “October New Date of Race Conference,” *Arizona Gleam*, May 7, 1937. On early NNC chapter activities, see John P. Davis, “National Negro Congress: Report of National Secretary, Cleveland, Ohio, June 19–20, 1936,” *NNC Papers*, reel 7.

### The Fall of the Popular Front

The finessing of the Communist issue came to an abrupt end with the implosion of the Popular Front. The Hitler-Stalin Pact, signed in late August 1939, produced a rapid shift in the CP's program. Antifascism, a cardinal party tenet and a unifying belief across the progressive political spectrum, was instantly sacrificed on the altar of the new party line. In its place, the party highlighted the need to keep America out of any conflict abroad and oppose what it called the interimperialist conflict in Europe. That shift, Mark Naison once observed, "had a profound impact" on the party's work in Harlem. Many allies dropped away; morale in neighborhood branches declined, and membership dropped. But the Party survived, retaining its "base in the trade unions and the intelligentsia."<sup>154</sup> The impact proved greatest on those most concerned with the fascist threat overseas and the threat of war. Postpact divisions tore the American Student Union apart, as Communists "alienated thousands of activists and potential activists . . . by championing first the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Stalin's shocking abandonment of anti-fascism, and then his brutal invasion of Finland," historian Robert Cohen has concluded.<sup>155</sup> The NNC, for the moment, appeared unaffected, in part because it wasn't doing all that much.<sup>156</sup> Its upcoming third convention, scheduled for late April 1940, promised panels on economic security, social security, citizenship rights, and cultural freedom that were consistent with the NNC's past interests. The Popular Front alliance appeared to hold firm.<sup>157</sup>

It didn't—and the unraveling occurred quickly. When the roughly one thousand delegates assembled in the Department of Labor's auditorium in late April 1940, John P. Davis's unqualified embrace of the Communist Party's foreign policy line, which many delegates appeared to endorse with their enthusiastic response, set the stage for conflict.<sup>158</sup> Davis denounced "loans, credits, arms or any other aid direct or

154. Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*, 287–88. "Prior to the summer of 1939," Paula Pfeffer has argued, "the Communist party did not interfere overtly in the working of the NNC because the two organizations shared the same goals. The situation changed, however, when the party line abruptly shifted following the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in August." Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 39. On the impact of the pact on mass work, see Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism*, 211.

155. Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young*, 279.

156. John Baxter Streater Jr. notes that the "leveling of both CIO growth and left influence in the CIO" by 1937 "meant that the growing ties with the NNC would also level off." Streater, "The National Negro Congress," 225.

157. "Proposed Plan for Third National Negro Congress," February 23, 1940; "Chart of Activities at Third National Negro Congress," "Program of the Third National Negro Congress, April 26, 27, 28, 1940," and "Call for the Third National Negro Congress," *NNC Papers*, reel 21; "Chicago Endorse Congress," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 27, 1940.

158. Three issues proved objectionable to the non-Communists in attendance. John L. Lewis's invitation to the Congress to join his Labor's Non-Partisan League violated the initial nonpartisan spirit of the NCC, while the heavy tilt toward the CIO, in part driven by ideological sympathy and in part by the industrial labor federation's financial generosity, appeared to compromise the body's independence. John L. Lewis, "Equal Opportunity: Speech at the National Negro Congress, April 1940" (Washington, DC: Congress of Industrial Organizations Publicity Department, 1940), in George Meany Memorial Archives, University of Maryland, College Park; "'Organize My Friends,' John L. Lewis Tells Race," *Houston Informer*, May 4, 1940. Lewis's invitation came as no

indirect to either side of the belligerents”—a reversal of the NNC position from previous years—as well as the Roosevelt administration for “taking sides in this imperialist conflict.” What the Negro people wanted was “not war—but peace; not guns, but jobs; not death, but life; not reaction, but democratic rights.” That was why there was an “increasing ground swell in the ranks of labor saying the ‘YANKS ARE NOT COMING.’ . . . That is why the Negro people are saying we shall not die in the war of American imperialism.” Particularly problematic was the way the “makers of war,” the “American reactionaries,” were attempting to “create diversion by organizing and inciting a war against the Soviet Union,” a country that Davis had visited and whose “ideals and aspirations” he admired. “I firmly believe that the American Negro people will refuse to follow victims [*sic*] to anti-Soviet adventures,” he declared, and “will refuse to join American or world imperialism in any attack against the Soviet people.” The punch line was unambiguous: “Let the slogan resound loudly ‘Keep America Out of the War.’”<sup>159</sup>

Randolph would have none of it. His alliance with Communists and his strategic silence on the question of the Soviet Union’s internal practices and foreign policy vanished for good at the April conclave. Refusing to stand for reelection as NNC president, he took pains to differentiate his views from those of the pro-Soviet delegates. The Soviet Union, like Nazi Germany, was a totalitarian society, a place “where freedom of speech, press and assembly, the foundations of democracy, are suppressed”; like Japan, it was “a dictatorship with no concern” for its people’s rights. As for the American Communist Party, with which he had been allied for the past four years, Randolph reverted to views he had held toward the party during its sectarian Third Period: it was “unsound and disastrous in tactic, strategy and allegiance to the Soviet Union” and its policies and programs were as “changeful and unpredictable as the foreign policy and line of Moscow.” To “take the position that the Negroes should place their fortunes at the feet of the Communist Party, which is subject to such violent and far-reaching shakeups, a party which lacks stability of purpose, and serves an alien master,” he concluded, “is passing strange.”<sup>160</sup>

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surprise, for he had announced it earlier in an April 1 speech in West Virginia. John L. Lewis, “I Am Serving Notice . . .,” *New Masses*, April 16, 1940, 13–15.

159. “Report of John P. Davis, National Secretary of the National Negro Congress, Saturday, April 27, 1940,” p. 8, *NNC Papers*, reel 21. See also “Resolution on the Imperialist War” in “Report of the Resolutions Committee,” pp. 2–3, and “National Negro Congress of Los Angeles, California to the Third National Negro Congress, April 26, 1940,” *NNC Papers*, reel 21; Orrin C. Evans, “Communist Domination Seen Menace to National Negro Congress Future,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 2, 1940; “Negro Conference Split on Red Issue,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1940; FBI Report on the National Negro Congress, December 5, 1940, *FBI File on NNC*, reel 1.

160. A. Philip Randolph, *The World Crisis and the Negro People Today* (pamphlet of speech given before the Third National Negro Congress, n.p., 1940), *Papers of A. Philip Randolph*, reel 34; Randolph, “The World Crisis and the Negro People Today” (typescript), *NNC Papers*, reel 21; Randolph, “Why I Would Not Stand for Re-election for President of the National Negro Congress,” 1, 4; Randolph, “Randolph, Ex-head of Nat’l Negro Congress, Urges Co-racialists to Organize Themselves for Democracy,” *New Leader*, May 11, 1940; “Randolph Quits Negro Congress,” *California Eagle*, Los Angeles, May 2, 1940. Accounts of Randolph’s NNC statements in 1940 can be found in Eric Arnesen, “No ‘Graver Danger’” and “The Red and the Black”; Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*, 151–56.

A majority of delegates demonstrated their views in word and deed. They responded to Davis's speech with an "overwhelming" demonstration in which they "climbed upon seats, slapped backs, waved hats and handkerchiefs, yelled, stamped and whistled." (By that time, one Black journalist observed, "the audience would have cheered anything that Davis said.")<sup>161</sup> Randolph received no such reception. "Packed with leading Communists and many sympathizers," another Black journalist reported, "the Labor Auditorium was as quiet as an empty church after Randolph had completed his address."<sup>162</sup> In his "frightfully dispiriting speech," a "performance unworthy of Mr. Randolph," a critic noted, the soon-to-be former NNC president "talked dryly and meaninglessly about international politics. . . . If the people listened with obvious pain and offended amazement, if at all, to Mr. Randolph, it was because they sensed the impertinence, and the far-fetchedness of his words, strung out over an hour and a half."<sup>163</sup> Then-Communist journalist Ralph Ellison reported that the "audience was quiet" as it waited for Randolph "to reveal himself." But Randolph's "voice droned out abstract phrases; statistics rolled forth. . . . And through it sounded unmistakable notes of Redbaiting." Soon the delegates became "restless," unimpressed by his arguments. Even before their president had concluded his remarks, they were "leaving the auditorium." Ellison "sat through the address with a feeling of betrayal. I did not realize it, but I had witnessed a leader in the act of killing his leadership." Ralph Bunche would have rejected Ellison's take on Randolph's leadership but concurred with what he said happened: the auditorium had been packed with 1,700 people when Randolph began his talk, but "no more than one-third . . . remained at the conclusion."<sup>164</sup>

Why the rush to the exits? Simply put, "when Randolph grouped the Soviet Union with the other imperialist and totalitarian nations, many in his audience became offended," as Bunche later put it. First out the door were the white delegates, "of whom there were a great many present"; the restless audience gradually dwindled in size, and "hostile criticisms and murmurs" could be heard "whenever Randolph made any uncomplimentary remark about the Soviet Union."<sup>165</sup> Those who had

161. Joseph Shepard, "Lewis Urges Voters to Quit Roosevelt," *Washington Afro-American*, May 4, 1940.

162. Earl Brown, "Call Negro Congress 'Red'; Randolph Is Out," *Amsterdam News*, May 4, 1940.

163. Marc Moreland, "Conversation Piece," *Carolina Times*, Durham, May 25, 1940.

164. Ellison, "A Congress That Jim Crow Didn't Attend"; Ralph J. Bunche, "Extended Memorandum on the Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations," memorandum 2, June 7, 1940, pp. 70–71, in *Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro in America Research Memoranda Collection*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, microfilm, reel 1. In his account of the 1940 convention, Erik Gellman uncritically endorses the positions of Davis and the Communists, suggesting that Randolph "seemed especially threatened by the NNC's success in the CIO, which might have jeopardized his own leadership of the BSCP in the AFL." In his view, "Randolph tragically helped develop a new vanguard coalition of the black freedom movement that by the dawn of the next decade he was unwilling or even unfit to lead." Gellman, "The Spirit and Strategy of the United Front," 148, 123. I see little evidence to support these claims.

165. Bunche, "Extended Memorandum," pp. 70–71. "It was noticeable, too," Bunche added, that during other addresses, "when the Soviet Union was mentioned, enthusiastic applause was always given" (76).

departed “congregated outside to express their indignation,” observed Layle Lane, a teacher, union leader, columnist, and Socialist Party activist. “‘Randolph was confused,’ was preaching Negro chauvinism, was trying to justify his Jim Crow union, was betraying the Congress program to unite with all progressive forces, was no longer a fighter for the Negro masses”—these were the complaints she heard.<sup>166</sup> Those who joined Randolph in defecting from the NNC certainly saw it her way. Ashley L. Totten, Randolph’s BSCP colleague, was “amazed, and then angered, by the evidence on all sides of Communist domination of the Congress and its policies.”<sup>167</sup> Frank Crosswaith, long suspicious of the NNC, believed that the Communists had played an outsized role since its formation in 1936. Predictably, he saw the “Red hand of Communism” at work in the lead-up to the 1940 gathering and concluded that no person “seriously concerned with advancing the interests of our group and the American workers could afford any longer to permit the Communists to use the plight of our group to carry on their destructive program in the United States.”<sup>168</sup> Ralph Bunche thought the Congress “dug its own grave at this meeting,” for it would “now be reduced to a Communist cell.”<sup>169</sup>

Randolph’s friend and neighbor Layle Lane shared her thoughtful observations of the convention in her column in the *New York Age*. “There was every evidence that with the exception of President Randolph, the leadership of the Negro Congress is not independent but closely and definitely tied to the Communist Party,” she noted. “This is not to indulge in ‘Red-baiting or smearing a progressive movement’ as was charged by many speakers, but merely to state the truth. It is one thing to call a person or movement a name in order to discredit it; it is another to label it correctly.”<sup>170</sup> In its methods, the NNC followed “very closely those practiced by the Communist Party in all of its ‘front’ organizations,” excluding those with “any divergent point of view or vilifying those who possessed one.” In response to Randolph’s address, delegates indulged in “personal abuse of a more vicious nature” and observed a “social ostracism practiced not only against Randolph but against all non-conformist delegates.” On the matter of program, it was the “war issue” that most “clearly revealed the hypocrisy of condemning British imperialism while being silent on Russian imperialism.” The resolution submitted by the Socialist Party’s Negro Work Committee, which condemned not only the Italian conquest of Ethiopia and the Japanese invasion of China but also the German “destruction of Austria, Czecho-

166. Layle Lane, “‘Land of the Noble Free,’” *New York Age*, May 25, 1940.

167. “Tells Catholic Group That ‘Reds’ Control Natl. Negro Congress,” *New York Age*, May 11, 1940; “Denounce Communism as Enemy of Negro,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 9, 1940.

168. Frank R. Crosswaith, “Looking around and Beyond,” *Boston Guardian* (n.d., but 1940), *A. Philip Randolph Papers*, reel 34. The 1940 convention was “Communist-packed,” Pfeffer has argued. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 40.

169. Bunche, “Extended Memorandum,” memorandum 2, p. 82; Kirby, “Ralph J. Bunche and Black Radical Thought in the 1930s,” 136.

170. In Lane’s eyes, the “dominating personnel of the Congress was by persons who follow the Communist life [*sic*] such as John P. Davis, William Patterson, Richard B. Moore, Max Yergan, Edward Strong, James Backer, and James Ford.” Layle Lane, “‘Land of the Noble Free,’” *New York Age*, May 18, 1940.

slovakia, and Denmark, the Nazi invasion of Norway, the Hitler-Stalin partition of Poland and the Soviet attack on Finland,” was not even considered by Congress organizers. “From all the evidence an honest observer could not but conclude that the Congress is Communist controlled and directed.” That was the prerogative of the Congress, as “long as the Bill of Rights is a part of the Constitution,” she conceded. But “instead of being hypocritical and evasive the Congress would serve the Negro better if it stated unequivocally—Yes, we are Communists and unjust conditions make it so. We submit our policies and program to your critical examination so that we can work more effectively for social and economic democracy.” That admission, in Lane’s eyes, was precisely what was missing.<sup>171</sup> The indefatigable Pauli Murray, also present at the convention, similarly had no doubts about who attended and what transpired. “This Congress is a farce,” she reported to Morris Milgram of the Socialist Party–affiliated Workers Defense League. “The conference is completely C.P. dominated,” with very few important African American organizations represented. “Out-and-out C.P.’ers were elected to all Committees,” and non-CPers received a minuscule number of votes. “Everything is a well-ordered machine of speeches,” with little time for discussion. “Some observers had the feeling that the National Negro Congress was not a NEGRO congress at all, but a packed delegation of white CP members who therefore controlled the votes and policies of the Congress.” “So you see what we’re in for,” she concluded.<sup>172</sup>

171. Lane, “Land of the Noble Free,” *New York Age*, May 25, 1940. We have no reliable breakdown of party vs. nonparty delegates in attendance at the 1940 gathering, but those assembled were not representative of Black America. From the southern states came a mere 26 delegates; from the Mid-Atlantic and Upper South—mostly from Washington, DC—came 219; from northern and midwestern states came 468, with 257 delegates from New York alone. Figures from the report of the secretary of the Credentials Committee, First Business Session, April 27, 1940, Third National Negro Congress, *NNC Papers*, reel 21. Observers reported that as many as a quarter of the delegates were white, with a significant—if impossible-to-determine—number of representatives from trade unions. Presumably many—likely most—of these were members of or sympathetic to the CP. The “huge” New York delegation, Mark Naison concluded, was “dominated by the left-wing organizations,” with few from more traditional, non-leftist bodies. Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*, 296. Charlotta Bass, the editor of the *California Eagle*, suggested that the most significant factor in the “disintegration” of the NNC was the “increasing outside leftist domination of the organization,” which “in successive sessions came increasingly under the direct sway of the Communist party and certain CIO organizations.” Charlotta A. Bass, “On the Sidewalk,” *California Eagle*, May 2, 1940. The NNC had attracted “crackpots and scatterbrains,” columnist Ralph Matthews concluded after the gathering; the organization’s rank and file now included “a motley group of one-track-minders who make a fetish of race blabbing, trade unionism and Moscowites which makes them more fanatical than the most disillusioned” followers of Father Devine. “In spite of the Red-Nazi pact which proved communism to be so much hog-wash, even to its exponents there is a large number who cling tenaciously to that doctrine as the way to salvation.” Ralph Matthews, “Watching the Big Parade: The Negro Congress Deliberates,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 4, 1940.

172. Pauli Murray to Morris Milgram, April 28, 1940, and Pauli Murray, “Report on National Negro Congress, Washington, D.C. April 26–28, 1940,” box 406, Morris Milgram Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Murray thought it unlikely that the smaller state delegations were controlled by Communists or their sympathizers but believed that the New York delegation was. Of the 930 delegates reporting in at one point, she noted that 352 were from New York, and about half of those New York delegates were white and almost solidly CP (she modified this to about 40 percent days later). Murray, “Report on National Negro Congress.”

With Randolph's resignation, the Popular Front alliance that joined Communists and non-Communists largely unraveled. The *Washington Afro-American* "had little doubt that the stand taken by the Red-dominated National Negro Congress will drive out many sincere organizations and persons who are equally anxious to see a better order, but object violently to having the race problem made more complicated by mixing it up with the problems of the poor white trash of Europe."<sup>173</sup> The NAACP's Roy Wilkins with evident satisfaction concluded that the Congress "had been merely one of the megaphones for the voice of the Stalinists" and had taken African Americans "for a ride."<sup>174</sup> Lester Granger, initially a gung ho backer, believed that the April meeting "marked the passing of the Congress from any effective role as a coordinating agent serving the Negro population on a national basis."<sup>175</sup> The membership of the Congress, Bunche predicted, would "soon be reduced to devout party members, close fellow travelers, and representatives of the C.I.O. unions."<sup>176</sup> The Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal, drawing his knowledge from his travels across the United States and from his research assistant Bunche, concluded that at the 1940 conference the NNC had "sealed its doom by becoming simply a front organization for the Communist party," sinking into "unimportance, from which it will probably never rise again." Through its actions, the Congress had "largely lost its support" from the non-Communist organizations, "which originally furnished its basis" and was "kept up by the Communist party as a paper organization with some scattered local following."<sup>177</sup>

The NNC survived the departure of Randolph and many other non-Communists. Free of the political constraints that their presence imposed, the organization, now led by Davis and a new president, Communist ally Max Yergan, made the CP's antiwar stance a focal point of its efforts.<sup>178</sup> "We in the National Negro Con-

173. "Whither the Negro Congress," *Washington Afro-American*, May 4, 1940.

174. Roy Wilkins, "Watchtower," *Amsterdam News*, May 18, 1940.

175. Granger, "The Negro Congress—its Future."

176. Bunche, "Extended Memorandum," 83.

177. Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 2:817–18. Erik Gellman argues that it "made sense that NNC delegates pushed for an isolationist position since John L. Lewis on the one hand and the CP on the other endorsed an idea that was not too dissimilar from the slogan 'We Ain't Going to Study War No More' of Howard University's Liberal Club, which linked war with the spread of fascism. Moreover, many African Americans also linked war to imperialism, especially after the Italian attack on Ethiopia." Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*, 157. I do not find this line of thinking persuasive. Prior to 1939, NNC members put forward a vocal antiwar and antifascist stance that was critical of Western—and US—neutrality, especially toward Republican Spain. Nor had the NNC equated Nazi Germany and Great Britain or described the conflict as one of imperialist rivalry. The contrast between the pre- and post-pact rationales suggests less continuity than Gellman suggests.

178. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*, 157. Even before the April Congress meeting, individuals in both the CP and NNC had pivoted on the war question after the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Ishmael P. Flory, a prominent Chicago-based Communist and NNC leader, took to the pages of the *Chicago Defender* on October 7, 1939, with an essay titled "European Struggle Is Merely Fight between Three Masters to Rule Colored Slaves," which clearly reversed both the Communist and NNC positions on fascism in circulation just weeks before. See also "Ask Pledge of F.D. on Peace Issue," *Chicago Defender*, April 20, 1940; Augusta Jackson Strong, "Peace, Democracy Is

gress are not afraid to call this war what [it] . . . really is—an imperialist war,” Yergan declared in November. The “Negro people have everything to lose and nothing to gain by American involvement in the imperialist war.”<sup>179</sup> Randolph stood firmly in the antifascist camp, though he now concluded that the isolationist stance of his Socialist comrades—indeed, of much of the nation—wasn’t going to suffice. As the NNC advanced its new antiwar position that summer, Randolph moved in the opposite direction, offering a cautious endorsement for the Roosevelt administration’s defense buildup as “proper, timely and necessary.” (He remained opposed to conscription and to the involvement of US troops.) He came to support the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies and, by the spring of 1941, the even more interventionist group Fight for Freedom.<sup>180</sup> The debate between Communist isolationists and non-Communist progressives’ creeping interventionism came to an end in June 1941 when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. For Communists in and out of the NNC, the war’s objective character had again changed. No longer was the conflict one of competing imperialist powers, and no longer could the US afford to remain aloof. They committed themselves to promoting American involvement and, after Pearl Harbor, patriotically subordinated their commitment to labor and civil rights to the imperatives of wartime production. Randolph simultaneously supported the war effort yet waged a crusade against discrimination on the home front, for which NNCers and Communists pilloried him as a fifth columnist who undermined the war effort. But that is another story.

## Conclusion

The united front / Popular Front of mid-1935 through 1939–40 was a genuine alliance of convenience that overcame past divisions and promised a new, militant political departure. From the outset, Communists played a dominant if often concealed role,

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Keynote of Youth Confab: Civil Rights Called Prime U.S. Problem,” *Chicago Defender*, January 13, 1940; “Yanks Are Not Coming Mass Meeting,” April 5, 1940, Admission Card and Irving Kandel to John P. Davis, March 7, 1940, *NNC Papers*, reel 21.

179. “Present War for Plunger’ Says Yergan,” *Chicago Defender*, November 9, 1940; “Negroes Are Called to Form ‘2D’ Party,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1940; Morgen S. Jensen, “Wants Race to Assume Leadership in Forming Second Major Political Group,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 30, 1940. That the leftists in the National Negro Congress assumed a strong antiwar stance did *not* put them at odds with many in the larger Black community, even if their rationales didn’t fully line up. On the evolution of Black attitudes toward the conflict, see Aldridge, “A War for the Colored Races.” The NNC survived its 1940 convention, as Erik Gellman argues, and its wartime and postwar activities deserve greater attention. But the organization no longer embodied the spirit of the earlier Popular Front; it is not dismissive, as Gellman suggests, to recognize that it was, in effect, a “Communist Front” organization. See Gellman, “The Spirit and Strategy of the United Front,” 154.

180. “Editorial: National Defense”; A. Philip Randolph, “Now I Think,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 1, 1940; Randolph, “Report of the International President,” September 16, 1940, in “Biennial Convention of Fifteenth Anniversary Celebration of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1940, Report of Proceedings,” 38–40, in *Records of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*, series A, part 1, reel 13. On Randolph’s growing pro-interventionist position, see Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land?*, 138–39.

bringing the NNC into existence and staffing its key positions. The alliance made possible its real if limited accomplishments in these years, even if the NNC never lived up to initial hopes. Although the upsurge in Black organizing and protest during the Great Depression assumed a variety of forms—some connected to left-wing groups and much of it independent—the NNC’s full-throated militance resonated among large numbers of African Americans. But from the start, the presence of Communists ensured an undercurrent of criticism from those who were hostile to the party’s beliefs and practices, criticism that cannot be dismissed simply as misguided or opportunistic Red-baiting. In the end, the NNC’s political ecumenism evaporated in the aftermath of the Hitler-Stalin Pact.<sup>181</sup> However one evaluates the role of the various parties involved, this article has sought to establish the case for recognizing the crucial contributions—positive in some historians’ eyes, negative in others’—of Communists to the building and operation of the NNC as well as their role in the collapse of the Popular Front. One cannot tell the organization’s history without wrestling with the “hand grenade” of the Communist issue.

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181. There is debate over the nature and duration of the United Front / Popular Front. See Barrett, “Rethinking the Popular Front”; Dubofsky, “The Devil Is Not in the Details”; Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

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