THE NEGRO LABOR COMMITTEE AND THE DILEMMAS OF BLACK
TRADE UNIONISM IN NEW YORK CITY, 1925-1950

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The Negro Labor Committee (NLC) was an organization of black and white trade unionists which sought to eliminate the barriers to labor market entry and trade union membership which black workers faced after their mass migrations to New York City during and immediately after World War I. The same organization existed under several different names between 1925 and 1969. As perhaps the only sustained effort in New York by a black-led organization to focus specifically on the problems of blacks as both workers and trade unionists, the NLC evokes considerable interest. A critical examination of the historical context in which the NLC emerged, its political and trade union affiliations, its ideology and objectives, and its accomplishments and failures could be illuminating in a number of respects. First, it can provide a picture of the specific challenges which black workers faced in New York during the second quarter of this century in their attempts to achieve equality with whites in the workplace and the union hall. Second, it can give us the opportunity to assess the specific strategies the NLC utilized given the obstacles it faced. Finally, it can potentially provide an overview of the social history of black workers in New York during this period.

This paper attempts such a critical examination of the NLC. In constructing my argument, I will rely heavily on the organizational files of the NLC, and verify these materials to the extent possible with secondary sources on the period. I will begin by providing background on the position of blacks in the New York City labor force at the turn of the century. Second, I will discuss the predominant strategies which AFL-affiliated craft unions used to either exclude or marginalize black workers in the labor movement during the period under study. Third, I will discuss the policies of the Socialist Party and its affiliated unions with respect to both black workers and the trade union movement as a whole during this period, given that the NLC was a project of both

Socialist Party militants and socialist unions. Examining the socialists' position toward trade unions and black workers will be necessary for an understanding of the ideology and practice of the NLC. Fourth, I will chart the organizational history of the NLC and its predecessors - the Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers (TUC) and the Harlem Labor Committee (HLC). I will focus on the trades where the NLC met with organizational success, some of the cases of discrimination against black workers which it addressed, and its relations with its competitors in Harlem - the Communist Party and the Harlem Labor Union. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of the NLC's approach, and the dilemmas for black trade unionism which these limitations suggest. The first set of weaknesses stem from the NLC's sponsorship by the socialists. The latter never gave strong support to the NLC. Further, the NLC and the socialists never proposed an alternative to craft unionism and its exclusionary nature with respect to blacks and other unskilled workers. Finally, Socialist Party politics often took precedence over trade union work. The second set of problems relates to the NLC's self-conception. In creating a racially integrated organization, it could not act on behalf of black workers in the same way as ethnically based groups, such as the United Hebrew Trades. By taking a "progressive" stance in proclaiming its loyalty to the trade union movement as a whole rather than to black workers themselves, the NLC overlooked its own awareness of the systematic exclusion of blacks from white trade unions. The NLC's overarching loyalty to the labor movement led it to underestimate the efficacy of organizing blacks through community institutions toward goals defined in terms of the community's interest. Thus, the NLC sacrificed racial solidarity for trade union solidarity, only to find that most white unions in the AFL were more committed to the former than to the latter.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

After the full emancipation of blacks from slavery in New York State in 1827, they developed footholds in a number of service professions until after the Civil War: domestic servants (cooks, waiters), caterers, bootblacks, barbers, chauffeurs, and hackmen (Franklin 1935, Scheiner 1965). They were not able to enter into skilled trades in significant numbers during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Franklin 1935, Scheiner 1965, Ovington 1911). After the Civil War, blacks were displaced from many of the service professions in which they had been important (caterers, barbers, chauffeurs) by the Irish and later the Italians (who came to New York in large numbers in the last third of the 19th Century) [Franklin 1935]. The majority of blacks who were employed continued to work primarily in non-domestic service professions, and at the turn of the century, began to gain positions as unskilled laborers in ditchdigging, rock drilling, asphalt laying, etc. (Ovington 1911). The one industrial occupation in which blacks participated continuously after their emancipation was longshoring (Spero and Harris 1930: 198).

In spite of blacks' participation in the service professions, they represented a small fraction of the labor force before the northward migration stimulated by World War I: they represented 3.9% and 6.5% of the employed population of New York City in 1910 and 1920, respectively. This proportion jumped to 14.1% by 1930 (Franklin 1935: 37).

The onset of World War I brought two waves of northward migration occurring from 1916-19 and 1921-23. The first wave was a response to wartime demand in industry and was spurred on by agents of northern manufacturers who travelled south to gather as many black workers as possible. In both the first and second periods, demand for black labor was sharpened by the cessation of immigration due to both the war itself and the nativist backlash which inspired the

postwar anti-immigration laws. In his observations regarding the immigration, James Weldon Johnson notes: "I witnessed the sending north from a Southern city in one day of a crowd estimated at twenty-five hundred...The exodus was on, and migrants came north in thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands" (Johnson 1930: 151).

The wartime and postwar migrations accelerated a process which began in the 1910s: the creation of the principle black community of New York in Harlem. The overbuilding of apartments in Harlem and the poor transportation to the area east of Lenox Avenue led to substantial housing vacancies in central and east Harlem. A black real estate entrepreneur, Phillip Payton, first began to approach landlords and suggest that he could fill the vacant apartments with blacks. He then formed the Afro American Realty Company (Johnson 1930: 147-49). As black families moved in, many whites became terrified and left the neighborhood: "Seeing that they could not stop the movement, they began to flee. They took fright, they became panic stricken, they ran amok...The prices dropped; they dropped lower than the bottom, and such colored people as were able took advantage of these prices and bought" (Johnson 1930: 150).

As noted above, the wartime and postwar migrations brought unprecedented numbers of blacks to New York. Once the majority of this population got jobs, they sought housing:

With thousands of Negroes pouring into Harlem month by month, two things happened: first, a sheer physical pressure for room was set up that was irresistible; second, old residents and new-comers got work as fast as they could take it, at wages never dreamed of, so there was now plenty of money for renting and buying...Buying property became a contagious fever (Johnson 1930: 153).

Harlem became the principle black community in the city; it also became the nexus of black intellectual, cultural, and political activity. Black nationalism, community job initiatives, political campaigns, and trade union activism all found their home in Harlem, and the leaders of each of these movements sought to mobilize overlapping constituencies in the community. Like other organizations, the NLC sought to mobilize black workers primarily in Harlem, as I will discuss below.

The influx of black migrants did not produce a qualitative shift in the kinds of jobs blacks were able to secure. While blacks' increased from 1.2 to 10.8 percent of the labor force in manufacturing between 1910 and 1930, their highest participation rates were still in transportation and services in 1930, at 15.8 and 30.9% respectively. To further emphasize this point, 70% of black workers were employed in personal and domestic service in 1930 (Franklin 1935: 40-41). By 1930, the occupations with the highest rates of trade union participation were the transportation unions (24.8%) - particularly the longshoremen, seamen, and railroad porters; personal service (22.5%) - particularly the building services; and the individual locals of laundry workers (50%), asphalt layers (100%), Metal, Bed and Spring Workers (45%), and Compressed Air Tunnel Workers (34.5%) [Franklin 1935: 162-81]. The virtual absence of blacks from the building trades and other skilled trades was a consequence of the exclusionary policies of AFL-affiliated craft unions, to which I will now turn.

CRAFT UNIONISM AND RACIAL EXCLUSION

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) had become the predominant national trade union organization in the U.S. by the 1890s. The ascendancy of the AFL came on the heels of the demise of the Knights of Labor with its inclusive vision and practice of organizing unskilled workers (among whom were the bulk of black and female wage workers) alongside skilled workers. The AFL offered a far more conservative theory and practice of trade unionism which was centered around both craft pride and craft autonomy. Concretely, the AFL's vision translated into a commitment to the organization of skilled workers along craft lines, and non-interference in the practice of the national and international craft unions by the federation's Executive Committee.

As the majority of black workers were unskilled, the bias of the AFL-affiliated unions in favor of skilled workers meant that, at minimum, the organization of black workers and defense of their wages and working conditions was not the AFL unions' first priority. However, the Executive Committee refused to grant charters to unions whose constitutions had clauses which excluded blacks during the 1890s. By the turn of the century, it became obvious to the AFL's national leadership that the enforcement of this anti-racist stance would reduce its membership dramatically, as many white controlled craft unions began to use other methods besides the "color clause" to exclude blacks:

Before long, however, the heads of the Federation came to realize that this ideal [of racial equality] was standing in the way of its expansion. It was presented with the choice of remaining a militant body true to its ideals, or of compromising for the sake of increased membership. Without very great struggle, it chose the latter course (Spero and Harris 1930: 88).

As skilled workers, members of AFL unions sought to control entry into their craft to maintain wages, job security, and control over the labor process. Thus, they sought to limit the numbers of unskilled workers who could apprentice and thus move up the skill hierarchy. This practice of exclusion of the unskilled was compounded by racial antipathy:

While race prejudice is a very fundamental fact in the exclusion of the Negro, the desire to restrict competition so as to safeguard job security and to control wages is inextricably interwoven with it. Which is more important would be difficult to say. But one can say with some degree of certainty that the exclusion of white men is due largely to the psychology of craft unionism while that of the Negro is due to an interplay of craft-union psychology with the psychology of race prejudice (Spero and Harris 1930: 56).

The important point, for our purposes, is that craft unions utilized a number of formal and informal mechanisms to exclude blacks from entering either the skilled trades or craft unions, and these exclusionary practices were treated with benign neglect by the AFL's national leadership.

Given that unions could not exclude blacks explicitly in their constitutions, they developed other mechanisms for exclusion like licensing requirements for union members which were enforced against non-union members through boycotts; high initiation fees; requiring all new union members to take an oath to prevent black members from joining the union; apprenticeship requirements where training could only occur through the union; and through informal means, preventing black workers from operating effectively on the job (Franklin 1935: 229, Spero and Harris 1930: 56-70).

The policy of exclusion was successfully practiced by some craft unions. Where there were a significant number of blacks practicing a particular trade, the AFL Executive Committee often suggested the formation of black locals or federations which were directly affiliated with the AFL, while national and international unions often organized separate black locals which had an auxiliary status vis-a-vis the white locals in the same jurisdiction. Each of these organizational forms was fundamentally inadequate in representing the interests of black workers.

The directly affiliated locals were dependent on the Executive Committee to defend their wage demands rather than the national or international union of their craft. This meant that the black unions had little or no power to enforce their demands because they could not depend on the solidarity of organized white workers in their craft. The only recourse of the AFL when a black local or federation requested their support during a strike or contract negotiation was to request that the national union of that particular trade enforce the standard wage of the craft:

While a union is morally obligated to execute the Federation's request, is it likely that one which debar Negro workers from membership will use the full force of its bargaining power in the protection of these workers if, in spite of their membership in Federation locals, the employer persists in refusing to pay them at the union scale?

Under these conditions should the Negroes strike, their places could be easily filled with unorganized Negroes or organized white men. Herein lies the weakness of the

Federation's Negro organization policy (Spero and Harris 1930: 99).

Independently affiliated black locals and federations were left to fend for themselves, leaving them with few of the benefits of unionization.

The auxiliary locals had a different set of pitfalls. The terms of their organization often prevented blacks from attending the meetings of the white locals, selected whites to represent the black locals before the national/international union, and blacks were restricted to working in the black communities within the white unions' jurisdiction (Spero and Harris 1930: 61, Franklin 1935: 104-205). Furthermore, white-controlled national or international unions often organized black auxiliary locals to prevent the undercutting of white workers' wages by employers' use of black workers, and to displace black workers from the newly unionized jobs:

As a consequence of this deceptive "good will" on the part of the unions toward these Negro workers, it is now a rare thing to see Negro workers employed in those jobs that they once monopolized. They were gradually pushed out by their fellow white union members. Bound by union loyalty, they could not undercut their fellow unionists who had seized these jobs after they had been made more secure and desirable by union protection. The net result for Negro workers was their becoming unemployed union men (Franklin 1935: 233).

Thus, auxiliary locals succeeded in securing blacks' union dues, and often displacing them from their jobs. Membership in an auxiliary was occasionally a steppingstone for blacks to enter the white local, but this was not always the case.

AFL-affiliated unions used an incredible variety of means to exclude or marginalize black workers beginning at the turn of the century. White unions' motives for the total exclusion or organization into independent unions of blacks were essentially the same: to neutralize black workers' potential for undermining the privileges of white union members. Where unions were

highly skilled, total exclusion was possible through the control of entry into the trade. In less skilled professions where the employment of significant numbers of blacks had the potential to depress wages and displace whites, white-controlled unions organized auxiliary black locals. Where blacks were totally excluded from a trade, they often organized independent locals or federations. Auxiliary locals or independent unions were the two alternatives under the aegis of the AFL which black workers would face in most trades in New York. I will discuss how the NLC and its predecessors confronted this limited horizon after an examination of the policies of the Socialist party toward the AFL and black workers.

THE SOCIALIST PARTY

The Socialist Party gave little attention to the "Negro Question" before World War I. The northern migration spurred some interest on the part of the socialists because of its potential divisive consequences for the trade union movement. However, the socialists never fully confronted the implications of a racially divided labor force for their vision of societal transformation. This phenomenon can be seen in the party's pronouncements on the race issue and in its relationship with the AFL.

The party's response to racism at the turn of the century followed from its uncritical application of Second International Marxist doctrine to the peculiar conditions of the U.S. The party condemned discrimination and invited blacks to join it in its struggle against international capitalism (Spero and Harris 1930: 404). Eugene V. Debs stated the party's position with respect to blacks in 1912: "'We have nothing special,' said Debs, 'to offer the Negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all the races. The Socialist Party is the party of the working class, regardless of

color - the whole working class of the whole world" (Spero and Harris 1930: 405). Based on the belief that capitalism gradually dissolves all non-class identities, this position ignored the reality of racial antagonism within the working class. Furthermore, the party's official position was that since racism was a capitalist tool used to divide workers, with the advent of socialism, racism would disappear.

The party's position with respect to the trade union movement was similarly idealistic. The official socialist position with respect to the trade union movement was that as the political party of the workers, it was not its function to interfere with the economic policies of trade unions. Thus, the party sought the voluntary adherence of AFL unions to its cause rather than taking a critical stance with respect to craft unionism and its consequent racial exclusion. The party never sought to create "dual" socialist unions in trades where it had considerable influence, nor did it commit itself to the industrial unionism of the I.W.W. or the C.I.O.:

What the party desired was that its hegemony as the political expression of the proletariat be accepted by the Federation [the AFL] just as it accepted the Federation's autonomy on the economic front. This compromise with the trade-union leadership was, in the language of those who opposed it, "a betrayal of the cause of the working class" (Spero and Harris 1930: 408).

This compromise was also problematic for black workers, because of the exclusion and marginalization they experienced in the AFL.

Given the party's timid official positions with respect to blacks in general, and black workers in particular, one would expect that the party's history would have had little relevance for black workers in New York. However, this was not the case for two reasons. First, the party attracted a significant group of political supporters and militants in Harlem. Second, a few socialist unions who were affiliated with the AFL, particularly the International Ladies' Garment Workers (ILGWU), actively organized black workers in their own trades and spearheaded efforts to organize them elsewhere.

The Socialist Party attracted several prominent black militants and sympathizers in Harlem in the 1910s and 1920s: "The center of the Socialist party's strength among the Negroes in the United States was the 21st Assembly District of New York City, which included Harlem" (Spero and Harris 1930: 411). Hubert Harrison, a Caribbean-born militant, led the short-lived Colored Socialist Club which the party created in Harlem in 1911 (Foner 1977: 211). Impressed by Harrison's knowledge of African and African American history and his speaking skills, and influenced by a prominent local party member, Max Rubinow, the party's New York local branch decided to engage in "special agitation" among blacks. However, after the club was created, W.E.B. DuBois and Reverend George Frazier Miller criticized the party for setting up a segregated local. In response to the criticism, the party dissolved the Harlem club after only two months of operation. Harrison was subsequently disciplined for criticizing the party's stance toward the AFL, and left the party in 1914 (Foner 1977: 212-218).

Two other black socialist militants in Harlem who formed a direct link to the Negro Labor Committee were Chandler Owen and A. Phillip Randolph. Both individuals began their involvement with the party as political propagandists and campaigners in Harlem in 1916 (Foner

1977: 268). After leading the mayoral campaign for Socialist Morris Hillquit in 1917, the two were asked by the party to edit a monthly magazine of black waiters who were trying to organize a union. They entitled the magazine the Hotel Messenger (Foner 1977: 271). Randolph and Owen were fired for criticizing the white headwaiters for their discriminatory behavior toward the black waiters. They then changed the name of the magazine to The Messenger, transforming it into the first black socialist publication in the country (Foner 1977: 272-73).

The two succeeded in getting the party to run three blacks (including Randolph) in local elections in 1918, and five in 1920 (Spero and Harris 1930: 411, Foner 1977: 284-85). Randolph and Owen made unsuccessful attempts to organize black switchboard and elevator operators, laundry workers, and journeyman bakers and confectioners in New York; donated the services of The Messenger to the Brotherhood Workers (who represented black longshoremen in Virginia and sought unsuccessfully to build a national federation of independent black unions); and in 1923 proposed the creation of a United Negro Trades, modelled after the United Hebrew Trades and the Italian Chamber of Commerce (Spero and Harris 1930: 390-96, Franklin 1935: 93-94). While all of these efforts failed, they were important precursors for the NLC.

While the official policy of the Socialist Party was one of non-interference in the affairs of the AFL, some socialist unions pressed for industrial unionism or reforms within the AFL (Spero and Harris 1930: 320). Prominent among these unions was the ILGWU. This union engaged in a number of campaigns to organize black workers in New York and elsewhere. In New York (unlike other cities like Baltimore Philadelphia or Chicago where blacks represented a substantial percentage of garment workers), black women represented a small minority of workers in the dress

shops,¹ and were primarily unskilled. In spite of the absence of any strategic importance of blacks in the industry, the ILGWU made sustained efforts to organize them and give them important roles in the governance of the union (Spero and Harris 1930: 342).

The union sponsored an organizing campaign to increase its black membership in 1929-30 in which it employed a black organizer and gained the assistance of the New York Urban League, the NAACP, and the YMCA. The campaign added 650 new black union members (Spero and Harris 1903, 341-42, Franklin 1935: 115). In 1933, when white workers of ILGWU Local 22 went out on strike, black workers joined them. As a result of the strike, 4,000 blacks joined the local, which had formerly had only 600 black members (Franklin 1935: 127). It is not entirely clear why the ILGWU took such an enlightened stand with respect to black workers in New York. One account suggests that because the bulk of workers in the industry were recent immigrants, they had not yet adopted American racism (Spero and Harris: 341). In any case, the ILGWU was in a class by itself in New York.

The Socialist Party avoided the issue of racism in the trade union movement for the most part. However, the party won a number of adherents, particularly in New York, who were committed to improving the position of black workers. Black radicals in Harlem and the leadership of the ILGWU would converge in the mid-1920s as the foundation of the NLC.

¹ There were 5,000 blacks out of 90,000 employed in the New York garment shops in 1933 (Franklin 1935: 126).

THE NEGRO LABOR COMMITTEE AND ITS ANTECEDENTS

There were two organizational predecessors to the Negro Labor Committee: The Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers (TUC) and the Harlem Labor Committee (HLC). Both were organized by Frank Crosswaith. Crosswaith was an immigrant from the Virgin Islands, who came to be known as the "black Eugene Debs" because of his tireless propaganda efforts on behalf of the Socialist Party in Harlem (Walter 1979: 36). He became a close associate of A. Phillip Randolph, and the latter was involved with the TUC, HLC, and NLC.

The TUC was organized in 1925, and its officers included Crosswaith, and leaders from the Tunnel and Subway Constructors', Teachers', Stenographers', Carpenters', Cigarmakers', Laundry Workers, and Garment Workers' (ILGWU) unions (Franklin 1935: 101-102). The Executive Board was divided evenly between blacks and whites. The founders of the organization hoped that it would function as a United Negro Trades (following Randolph and Owen's 1923 proposal). The initial funding for the TUC came from the American Fund for Public Service, and from the Central Trades and Labor Council provided organizational support. Both of these organizations had Socialist Party leaders in prominent positions (Walter 1979: 36-37). The TUC received office space in The Messenger headquarters.

The TUC's organizing activities focused on black motion picture operators, laundry workers, and Pullman porters. In 1925, nine black film projectionists who worked in Harlem complained to the TUC that Local 306 of the Motion Picture Operators' Union issued them temporary union cards when a strike was imminent, and then rejected them from the union when the strike threat was over.² In the TUC's consultation with the business agent of Local 306, the latter

² "Minutes of the Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro

suggested the creation of a black auxiliary local, because the union's constitution had a clause barring blacks. Shortly after setting up the auxiliary, the black projectionists were allowed to join the union.³ The projectionists' incorporation into the union was partly a consequence of their employment in Harlem: "The theatre owners preferred to employ them because the patronage of the Harlem theaters is made up mostly of Negroes. Because of this power the Negro operators insisted upon a local charter and won it" (Spero and Harris 1930: 61).

Also, during 1925, the TUC spearheaded a joint organizing committee including Locals 280 and 290 of the International Laundry Workers' Union, and the Women's Trade Union League. At the time, according to the TUC, of the 30,000 laundry workers in New York, 20,000 were black, most of whom were women. The black women in the industry were working eleven hours per day, six days per week.⁴ While little was accomplished with this initial campaign, partly because the TUC ceased to participate in the Joint Committee by the middle of 1926, "the work begun there was carried on in some degree by the International Laundry Workers' Union, Locals 280 and 290 and by the Women's Trade Union League even up to 1928 and 1929" (Franklin 1935: 107).

The activities of the TUC were discontinued in 1926 because Frank Crosswaith was recruited by A. Phillip Randolph as a full-time organizer for the Pullman Porters.⁵ The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BCSP), thanks to the monopoly which blacks had in that trade, and the

Workers, June 1, 1925," Negro Labor Committee Records, Schomburg Library, Reel 1.

³ "Minutes of the TUC, September 22, 1925," NLC Records, Reel 1.

⁴ "TUC Six Month Report of Activities, January, 1926," NLC Records, Reel 1.

⁵ "Minutes of the TUC, June 5, 1926," NLC Records, Reel 1.

efforts of Randolph, Crosswaith, and other black organizers, became the most successful independent black union in the country.⁶

In addition to his involvement with the Pullman porters, Crosswaith was active in Socialist Party politics:

From 1926 to 1936, Crosswaith won the nomination of the Socialist party for a number of local, state, and national offices...Beginning in 1930, he was used on national speaking tours of the North and West with a frequency second only to Norman Thomas [the party's perennial presidential candidate] (Foner 1977: 339).

In 1934, Crosswaith was hired as a general organizer for the ILGWU, and his assumption of this position coincided with the formation of the Harlem Labor Committee.⁷ The committee's executive body included leaders from the Union Mechanics' Association (black mechanics directly affiliated with the AFL), Building Service Employees Union, Carpenters' Union, Teachers' Union, Pullman Porters, Motion Picture Operators, and the ILGWU. Unlike the TUC, the board was composed of all black unionists.⁸ The Harlem Labor Committee operated until July, 1935. During this period, the primary organizing success of the HLC was the expansion of the membership of the Building Service International. The building service workers of Manhattan had been organized in one local (32b) until 1924. Because a significant portion of the union's members were blacks who lived and

⁶ For a discussion of the organizing drive of the BCSP, see Franklin (1935), pp. 107-109, and Spero and Harris (1930), Ch.20.

⁷ Letter from Frank Crosswaith to Margaret Lamont, March 5, 1936, NLC Records, Reel 3.

⁸ "Report on Activities, Harlem Labor Committee, December 1934-March 1935," NLC Records, Reel 1.

worked in Harlem, and received substantially lower wages than white union members, the local formed a Harlem section of the union (Franklin 1935: 206). The Harlem section was not an auxiliary union: while most of its members were black, it included some whites, and the section had two representatives on the local's executive board. The HLC helped organize a general strike of 32B in February, 1935, which resulted in the addition of 4,000 black members to the union.⁹ By 1935, the union had 9,000 black members out of a total of 31,800 (Franklin 1935: 206).

The HLC also organized a rally of 4,000 black workers in Harlem on January 6, 1935. The organization manned picket lines for shoe workers on strike; supported two Brooklyn strikes of burlap bag workers; attended meetings of black theatre and vaudeville performers; increased the membership of the two laundry workers' locals; and negotiated resolutions to conflicts between white unionists and black non-union workers in the motion picture operators, painters, and furniture handlers locals.¹⁰

After a few months of operation of the Harlem Labor Center, Crosswaith decided to hold a conference of black and white members of "bona fide AFL-affiliated unions" in July, 1935. The conference included representatives of 70 unions, all of which had black members. In addition to the unions represented on the executive board of the HLC, the conference participants included several unions of the garment trades, as well as locals of the building trades, accountants, dining car employees, laborers, cooks and kitchen workers, butchers, retail employees, newspaper employees,

⁹ The organization of the Harlem section also meant that blacks who had worked in downtown hotels were displaced by white workers. Thus, the creation of this section was a mixed blessing. See Franklin (1935), p. 233, and McKay (1940), p.215.

¹⁰ "Report of Activities of HLC, December 1934-March 1935," NLC Records, Reel 1.

chauffeurs, elevator operators, and leather goods workers.¹¹

While the official reason for creating the Negro Labor Committee through this conference was that an all-black organization would be ineffectual in breaking down the barriers blacks faced in the labor movement, the formation of a new organization seems to have resulted from resistance to an all-black organization expressed by leaders of the New York Socialist Party.¹² In a letter to Margaret Lamont¹³ written in March 1936, Crosswaith complained that there were virtually no trade union members in the New York branch of the party, and only Noah C.A. Walter¹⁴ and himself expressed an interest in creating the Harlem Labor Committee. When they suggested the creation of a United Negro Trades, the Central Trade and Labor Council rejected the idea, so they called the organization the Harlem Labor Committee.¹⁵ Crosswaith wrote:

Prior to the [Negro Labor] Conference, we voted to enlarge the Harlem Labor Committee by getting in as many Negro and white trade unionists that we could - the while the control and direction of the work remained in the hands of the Socialists. Of course, the Committee started to grow in numbers and influence to the chagrin of some comrades who openly referred to the Committee as a 'damned racket.' ...Daily

¹¹ "Minutes of the Negro Labor Conference," NLC Records, Reel 1.

¹² Both Franklin and Walter take the HLC's public proclamations that an all-black organization would be ineffectual at face value. See Franklin (1935), p. 144, and Walter (1979), p. 41.

¹³ Foner notes that Lamont was the only white member of the Socialist Party to criticize its inaction on the race issue during the 1930s. See Foner (1977), p. 359.

¹⁴ Black member of the Building Services Local 32B, and secretary of the HLC.

¹⁵ Negro Labor Committee Records, Reel 3.

there are many organized Negro and white workers in the center as a result of strikes and other activities which offers a splendid opportunity for Socialist work, but outside of Comrade Walter and myself, there are no Socialists around.¹⁶

There are two important issues in this letter. First, the Socialist Party would not tolerate an all-black organization, even if it sought to build interracial unionism.¹⁷ Second, the party was indifferent to the HLC and NLC, and Crosswaith had to go out of his way to get the party's approval for the NLC's work. As indicated in the above quote, the newly-formed NLC opened an office called the Harlem Labor Center on 125th St. in 1935. The office housed the NLC, and space was rented out to the ILGWU, Building Service Employees, and Laundry Workers, who used it alternatively as a headquarters or a base for educational activities in Harlem. The speeches given at the dedication of the center give a sense of the distinct missions which the NLC sought to incorporate. In a statement read by Frank Crosswaith, the president of the AFL, William Green, argued that black workers had recently become more interested in organized labor. He continued,

They [black workers] are becoming more responsible union members, sharing the benefits and hardships of union endeavor.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Crosswaith was consistent in his commitment to interracial unionism. However, the fact that both he and the Socialists drew a distinction between a United Negro Trades and a Negro Labor Committee indicates that both saw the former as being by definition an all-black organization. Ironically, Crosswaith continued to compare the NLC to the United Hebrew Trades and Italian Chamber of Commerce throughout its existence, without calling it the **United Negro Trades**. I will return to this contradictory self-understanding of the NLC in the conclusion.

All those negro wage earners who want to undertake seriously the job of increasing their income and assuring themselves of definite work rights, should join the union of their fellow workers or apply to the American Federation of Labor for a charter. You can better yourselves if you are ready to make the effort.¹⁸

Here, Green gave the standard position of the AFL: the reason black workers were not better represented in trade unions was that they lacked the desire and responsibility. Virtually the same speech was given by Hugh Frayne of the AFL at the opening meeting of the TUC in 1925.¹⁹ Of course, these AFL leaders neglected to mention that the systematic exclusion of black workers practiced by most AFL-affiliated unions might have had something to do with the small black participation in trade unions.

A speech written by David Dubinsky, president of the ILGWU was read next:

Our international union has maintained a glorious tradition of racial, national, and religious equality and has throughout its existence invited all workers in our industries to join in our mighty labor army to improve their condition of life and labor. We congratulate you upon your initiative to lead negro workers on the path of progress and enlightenment along with the millions of their fellow wage earners in our land.²⁰

¹⁸ "Dedication of the Harlem Labor Center, December 5, 1935," NLC Records, Reel 3.

¹⁹ "Preliminary Report of the TUC, June 1925," NLC Records, Reel 1.

²⁰ "Negro Labor Conference," op. cit.

What is striking in comparing these two speeches is not only the explicit proclamation in favor of equality, but the aggressive posture which the speaker takes. Rather than telling black workers to be more responsible, Dubinsky says that the union has historically sought out all workers in the needle trades. This statement underscores the unique attitude of the ILGWU among AFL unions.

Finally, Crosswaith spoke:

With increasing clarity Negro workers are learning the wholesale lessons: 1) that the so-called Negro problem is basically economic, 2) that to meet the problem effectively economic organized action is essential, 3) and that because of the widespread prevalence in America of the virus of race prejudice it is necessary to organize an agency to combat the evil within and without the labor movement.²¹

He continues by stating that in order not to appear to give organized recognition to Jim Crow, the NLC was formed as a racially integrated organization.²² What is fascinating about Crosswaith's statement is that it simultaneously acknowledges and denies the peculiar position of blacks in the labor movement. In point 1), he repeats the old Socialist Party slogan which was used as an excuse for ignoring the peculiar position of blacks, and in point 3), he underscores the impact of racism on black workers. Finally, he rejects the idea of an all-black organization because it could be perceived as reproducing segregation.²³ Thus, the NLC's organizing would follow the spirit of Crosswaith's

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ This point underscores the Socialists Party's fears of being attacked as racist after the criticisms of its Colored Socialist Club. It is also consistent with the Central Trades and Labor Council's rejection of the proposal for the formation of a United Negro Trades.

statement. While the racism of craft unions was recognized, the NLC would be an integrated organization of black and white unionists which would follow the Socialist Party strategy of "boring from within" in the AFL.

The NLC's major organizing successes were achieved in collaboration with already existing unions, or with other groups. As noted above, the Building Service Employees' black membership increased by 4,000 with the help of the HLC. One of their officers, Noah Walter, served as both an officer on the NLC and an organizer for the laundry workers' Local 290.²⁴ Blacks were particularly successful in that union: "In it [Local 290] Negroes compose the majority of the membership - 60% or 150 of the 250 members. Similarly, they are well represented in the executive positions of the union as the vice-president, the treasurer, 14 members of the Executive Board of 40, and an organizer are Negroes" (Franklin 1935: 210).

The NLC also organized a community coalition demand the reinstatement of locked-out editorial employees at the black-owned NY Amsterdam News in 1935:

Frank Crosswaith and Elmer Carter, working closely with Guild officials, organized a Harlem Citizens Committee in support of the boycott [of the NY Amsterdam News] that included representatives of the Urban League and the NAACP..., several large churches, and the Socialist and Communist Parties (Naison 1983: 176).

The paper went bankrupt as a result of the boycott, was subsequently bought by Harlem doctors, and the employees were reinstated. A similar success occurred when the NLC collaborated with other groups to organize Harlem grocery clerks into Local 338 of the United Retail Employees

²⁴ "Minutes of the HLC, August 12, 1935," NLC Records, Reel 1.

Union:²⁵

Backed by the Negro Labor Committee, the Grocery Clerks Union drive, headed by veteran Communist Hammie Snipes, signed contracts that provided for substantial wage increases for the clerks, and a reduction in hours from 50 to 40 hours per week (Naison 1983: 263).

These collaborative efforts with the CP were to be few and far between as Crosswaith adopted the anticommunism of the Socialist Party with religious conviction.

In individual organizing drives, the NLC was able to organize small numbers of employees. Through an appeal to the NY State Labor Relations Board, the NLC was able to get 18 black singer sewing machine salesmen who had been fired for organizing activities reinstated and unionized.²⁶ They organized the journeyman and master barbers of Harlem.²⁷ The Independent Taxi Workers successfully organized using the HLC as a base for operations.²⁸ The NLC organized black porters at Columbia University and facilitated their affiliation with the Building Service Employees Union.²⁹ The Committee organized a boycott of Harlem drug stores which had refused to hire black

²⁵ "Harlem Labor Committee Activities, 1935-1950," NLC Records, Reel 3.

²⁶ "Minutes of the Negro Labor Assembly, March 11, 1938," NLC Records, Reel 4. The singer salesmen then organized all 65 shops of Singer in Manhattan, unionizing about 300 workers, most of whom were white. The Negro Labor Assembly was the body of NLC members who met to discuss the activities of the latter.

²⁷ "Report of Activities of the Negro Labor Committee, 1939," NLC Records, Reel 4.

²⁸ "Minutes of the Negro Labor Assembly, May 10, 1940," NLC Records, Reel 4.

²⁹ "Minutes of the Negro Labor Assembly, December 11, 1942,"

pharmacists which resulted in the organization of a pharmacists' local and their employment under contract.³⁰ Finally, the committee organized a Harlem garment shop with a predominantly black staff.³¹ It can be surmised that all of these organizational successes represented small numbers of workers because the minutes leave the number of workers organized unspecified (except for the Singer salesmen), unlike the discussions of the laundry workers or building service employees, which involved hundreds (if not thousands) of workers.

In addition to organizing unions, the NLC responded to complaints of discrimination brought to them by black workers. The NLC was unsuccessful in resolving most of these cases, which is indicated by the committee's minutes, in which occasional reference is made to a success story (like that of the Singer salesmen), while the organizational files contain reports of dozens of cases of discrimination. I will discuss two such cases to give a sense of the kinds of obstacles workers faced to unionization in New York. In one case, two black workers in a stationary house joined the Department Store and Variety Employees Local 1115 when they were hired. After working for six months, the headquarters of the Department Store and Variety International sent the two a letter revoking their membership in the union and notifying them that they were fired.³²

In 1942, the NLC brought the case of three black porters who worked for Pepsi to the War Department Committee on Discrimination. The porters had worked for Pepsi for between four and

NLC Records, Reel 4.

³⁰ "Minutes of the Negro Labor Assembly, March, 1937," NLC Records, Reel 4.

³¹ "Minutes of the Negro Labor Assembly, April 14, 1939," NLC Records, Reel 4.

³² "Minutes of the Negro Labor Assembly, December 10, 1937," NLC Records, Reel 4.

seven years but had not been allowed to work as bottlers. In the hearing, the white union representative insisted that the black workers were not qualified to do bottling. Even though the complainants had worked on canning, the union representative insisted that bottling was too difficult. After the meetings, new black members were denied entry to the union. Those experienced black workers who passed a three-day trial to see if they could produce at the level of white bottlers who had done that job for years were allowed to work at the machines; the others remained as continued to work as porters.³³

What is striking about these two cases is the extent to which craft unions functioned essentially to safeguard specific positions for white workers, as discussed above in the section on craft unionism. The NLC had very little influence on this phenomenon unless, as in the case of the Harlem pharmacists, they could use the power of a boycott. What is striking, here, is that the NLC, throughout its existence, stood firm in its position of building access of blacks into the bona fide unions of the AFL. Given that these unions often had enormous powers to deny this access, it is surprising that the NLC did not pursue alternatives like independent black unionism or industrial unionism.

One of the pitfalls of the NLC was the inordinate energy it spent during the late 1930s and early 1940s in fighting its two chief enemies in Harlem: the Harlem Labor Union, Inc. (HLU), and the Communist Party (CP). The HLU was an organization formed in the mid-1930s in Harlem which was designed to secure retail jobs in Harlem for black community residents. Its two leaders, Arthur Reid, and Ira Kemp sought to act as both suppliers of black workers to stores with whom

³³ "Negro Labor Committee Discrimination Cases, 1935-1942," NLC Records, Reel 2.

they negotiated and collective bargaining representatives for these workers. Their chief method of operation was picketing stores which did not employ black workers.

The HLU sharply criticized the AFL for its exclusion of black workers. By supplying workers to employers at sub-union wages, the HLU represented a direct threat to the NLC, the AFL, and the CIO. In virtually every meeting of the Negro Labor Assembly from 1937 until the late 1940s, Crosswaith denounced the HLU as racketeers and said that most of the NLC's time was being spent in attempts to rid Harlem of the HLU.³⁴ However, the HLU was able to maintain a foothold in Harlem:

Their [the HLU's] appeals to black solidarity and their cynicism about interracial organizations, struck a responsive chord among Harlemites who had been left out of New Deal programs and remained divorced from organized labor, and their capacity to win jobs, however low paying, provided them with a valuable source of patronage (Naison 1983: 263).³⁵

The problem with the NLC's response to the HLU was not that the former's contention that the HLU was undercutting union labor was false; but that "The Socialist Negro Labor Committee had no adequate reply to the issues raised by the roughneck Harlem Labor Union" (McKay 1940: 213). Given the HLU's legitimate criticisms of the AFL, it would have been to the NLC's benefit to try to join forces with the HLU in demanding community jobs in order to redirect the HLU's wrath toward

³⁴ See the minutes of the Negro Labor Assembly during these years. NLC Records, Reel 4.

³⁵ For an extended and sympathetic discussion of the HLU, See McKay (1940).

employers and away from those unions which included blacks.

The NLC cooperated with the CP in a few instances, but generally fought the party tooth and nail. Crosswaith refused to support the National Negro Congress in 1936 for fear that it would be controlled by the CP (Naison 1983: 181). Foner notes that the fact that between 1937 and 1939, the socialist press did not report on the Congress's attempts to organize blacks into the CIO "is not surprising in view of Crosswaith's obsession with the idea that this would only help the communists - and this even though A. Phillip Randolph, the socialist, was president of the Congress" (Foner 1977: 366).

This opposition to the CP was unnecessary in that the party's strength among black workers was with the WPA relief workers, Unemployed Councils, and intellectuals and artists from the WPA arts projects (Naison 1983: 257). Thus, the CP did not represent competition for the NLC in the labor movement as they only commanded the loyalty of a specific segment of public sector workers. Furthermore, as the NLC's anticommunism often translated into distancing themselves from the CIO, the NLC lost the opportunity to throw the weight of their efforts behind industrial unionism, which offered more promise for the bulk of unskilled black workers than the AFL: "for several years after the birth of the C.I.O., N.L.C. meetings were the only places in the nation where the A.F. of L. and C.I.O. workers met in harmony for a common approach to their problems until their ultimate merger" (Walter 1979: 46). Of course, the NLC had a tradition as a friendly critic of the AFL which stemmed from its close association with the Socialist Party and the ILGWU. However, the emergence of the CIO did not shake the organization's loyalty to the AFL. This loyalty was likely enhanced by the participation of the CP in the CIO.

The bulk of the NLC's trade union activity occurred between 1935 and 1943. From 1943-1950, most of Crosswaith's time was spent giving speeches to various organizations, and assisting in the formation of Negro Labor Committees in Boston, and other cities.³⁶ While the organization existed until 1969, it shifted its focus to the Civil Rights movement.

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

The accomplishments of the Negro Labor Committee were limited for several reasons. First, the committee's links to both the Socialist Party and the AFL provided it with few benefits. The Socialists never strongly supported the organization, while much of its leader's time was spent on Socialist Party politics - from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, and from the mid-1940s until 1950. Further, the organization's acceptance of the socialists' view that the Negro problem was essentially economic led it to ignore the complexity of black workers' relationships to white trade unions. Further, the socialists' 'hands off' attitude toward the AFL hindered the NLC from exploring alternatives to craft unionism.

The NLC's commitment to support the bona fide trade union movement of the AFL led it to ignore the recurring and intractable problems which its constituents confronted with the AFL. The NLC's attempts to get the AFL to mend its ways with respect to cases of discrimination were largely unsuccessful. Furthermore, while the NLC had links with the few unions which had significant (if not majority) black participation in New York (laundry workers, building service employees, Pullman porters, dining car employees, and the needle trades) they did not attempt to build an

³⁶ See minutes of the Negro Labor Assembly for these years. NLC Records, Reel 4.

independent organization of black workers in those unions. Further, the NLC did not take an unequivocal stand in favor of industrial unionism, even though its strongest supporter (the ILGWU) practiced industrial unionism in its own trade, and might have supported such a stance.

The NLC also operated under the fallacy that it was possible to perform the same function as ethnic labor organizations (like the United Hebrew Trades) without being an all-black organization. As discussed in the section on craft unionism, those craft unions which organized blacks had pragmatic motives for deciding to do so. Thus, the white participants in the NLC did not have the same self-interest in participating in the NLC as its black members. While white unionists may have felt sympathy for the plight of black workers, or feared job competition from unorganized blacks, they did not have to face the exclusion from unions which blacks did. To assume that black and white workers had identical interests in building the trade union movement was simply naive. In some instances, trade union membership worked to blacks' advantage; in others being unionized meant the loss of the monopoly on a specific occupation, however lacking in prestige; in still others, unions did everything in their power to keep black workers out of a given trade and its union. As McKay notes,

Negro intellectuals who are interested in the labor and radical movements show little understanding of the special needs of their group. They imagine they can escape the problems of their group by joining the whites as individuals. Their approach is academic. And the attitude of the whites is to regard them as novelties. Every radical sect in New York has its Negro exhibit (McKay 1940: 218).

McKay's sardonic wit, if exaggerated, points to a critical issue. While the NLC wanted to empower black workers, it sought to do so by appealing to the good faith of white radicals (as with, for example, the ILGWU or the Socialist Party). However, winning the favor of the ILGWU and the Socialists did not help the NLC cope with the harsh realities of white craft unions which, for the most part, ignored or undermined the NLC's efforts.

Further, the specter of Jim Crow led the NLC to shy away from building an organization based exclusively on black social networks in Harlem: "The Communists have made a careful study of the educated Negro and are aware of his weakest points. They know that Segregation is the delicate, sensitive issue about which few educated Negroes are sane and logical" (McKay 1940: 225), and

Black workers had a rich fraternal life, but it centered around the churches, the lodges, and the regional societies (South Carolinians, Barbadians, etc.), rather than the left. Communist fraternal organizations in Harlem, interracial as a matter of principle, exercised little appeal for working-class Harlemites, who preferred to organize their social and cultural lives on more familiar terrain (Naison 1983: 282).

While both of these quotes refer to the CP, the NLC faced a similar problem. Choosing an interracial organization for ideological, political, and (what appeared to them to be) pragmatic reasons, they underestimated the extent to which labor solidarity is most easily cultivated through community institutions.³⁷

³⁷ On this point, see Carsten (1988), Gutman (1987), and Rachleff (1984).

The NLC's failure to recognize this point is also linked to the NLC's rejection of the HLU. While it was certainly true, as Crosswaith argued, that most Harlemites worked outside the neighborhood, and even if all of the retail jobs in the community were turned over to blacks, most would remain unemployed;³⁸ this argument did not take into account the symbolic importance of community control for Harlem residents. By subordinating the community of Harlem as both a locus for organizing and as a political symbol to putative communities (the bona fide labor movement, united black and white workers), the NLC curtailed the realization of its own goals. The NLC correctly saw the dangers of Garveyism and the HLU for trade unionism. However, they did not examine why these movements were so appealing to Harlemites. If they had done so, they might have developed a black trade union organization, which was more firmly rooted in the traditions and social networks of the black community.

AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

There are important questions this study raises but cannot answer. Most notably, what was the social history of black workers during this period? What were working conditions and leisure activities like for the thousands of black garment workers, building service employees, laundresses, longshoremen, and seamen in New York during the Depression and World War II? Answers to these questions might emerge from a careful study of the records of these individual unions,

³⁸ Frank Crosswaith, "The Harlem Employment Agreement," Jewish Frontier, January, 1938. NLC Records, Reel 3.

NAACP and Urban League discrimination cases, and the records of community institutions in Harlem. The information in the NLC records scarcely gives us a glimpse of how that world might have looked like.

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