

# Black and Red: The Role of Communists in the Black Liberation Movement

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## The African Blood Brotherhood

*The ABB was a left split-off from the Garvey movement. Many of the early African-American members of the CP came from its ranks.*

From Harry Haywood *Black Bolsheviks*, Chapter 4, An Organization of Revolutionaries

At the time that I joined the African Blood Brotherhood, I knew little about the organization other than the fact that it was in some way associated with the Communist Party. I do remember having read a copy or two of *The Crusader* before I joined the group.

Some of the history of the ABB I got from Otto and other post members, but most of it I found out much later when I met and worked with Cyril P. Briggs, the original founder of the group. The African Blood Brotherhood was founded in New York City in 1919 by a group of Black radicals under the leadership of Briggs. A West Indian (as were most of the founders), he was a former editor of the *Amsterdam News*, a Black New York newspaper. He quit in disagreement over policy with the owner, who attempted to censor his anti-war editorials. Briggs's own magazine, *The Crusader*, was established in 1919. The Brotherhood was organized around the magazine with Briggs as its executive head presiding over a supreme council.

The group was originally conceived as the African Blood Brotherhood "for African liberation and redemption" and was later broadened to "for immediate protection and ultimate liberation of Negroes everywhere." As it was a secret organization, it never sought broad membership. National headquarters were in New York. Its size never exceeded 3,000. But its influence was many times greater than this; the *Crusader* at one time claimed a circulation of 33,000. There was also *The Crusader* News Service which was distributed to two hundred Black newspapers.

Briggs, his associates—Richard B. Moore, Grace Campbell and others—and *The Crusader* were among the vanguard forces for the New Negro movement, an ideological current which reflected the new mood of militancy and social awareness of young Blacks of the post-war period. In New York, the New Negro movement also included the radical magazine, *The Messenger*, edited by Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, and *The Emancipator*, edited by W.A. Domingo. Many of the groups were members of the Socialist

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Party or close to it politically. They espoused "economic radicalism," an over-simplified interpretation of Marxism which, nevertheless, enabled them to see the economic and social roots of racial subjugation. Historically, theirs was the first serious attempt by Blacks to adopt the Marxist world view and the theory of class struggle to the problems of Black Americans. Within this broad grouping, however, there were differences which emerged later. Briggs was definitely a revolutionary nationalist; that is, he saw the solution of the "race problem" in the establishment of independent Black nation-states in Africa, the Caribbean and the United States. In America, he felt this could be achieved only through revolutionizing the whole country. This meant he saw revolutionary white workers as allies. These were elements of a program which he perceived as an alternative to Garvey's plan of mass exodus.

A self-governing Black state on U.S. soil was a novel idea for which Briggs sent up trial balloons in the form of editorials in the *Amsterdam News* in 1917, of which he was then editor. Shortly

after the entrance of the United States into World War I, he wrote an editorial entitled “Security of Life for Poles and Serbs—Why Not for Colored Americans?”

Briggs, however, had no definite idea for the location of the future “colored autonomous state,” suggesting at various times Washington, Oregon, Idaho, California or Nevada. Later, after President Wilson had put forth his fourteen points in January 1918, Briggs equated the plight of Blacks in the United States to nations occupied by Germany and demanded:

With what moral authority or justice can President Wilson demand that eight million Belgians be freed when for his entire first term and to the present moment of his second term he has not lifted a finger for justice and liberty for over TEN MILLION colored people, a nation within a nation, a nationality oppressed and jim-crowded, yet worthy as any other people of a square deal or failing that, a separate political existence?

He continued this theme in *The Crusader*. One year after the founding of the Brotherhood, Briggs shifted from the idea of a Black state on U.S. soil to the advocacy of a Black state in Africa, South America or the Caribbean, where those Blacks who wanted to could migrate. In this, he was undoubtedly on the defensive, giving ground to the overwhelming Garvey deluge then sweeping the national Black community. In 1921, Briggs was to link the struggle for equal rights of U.S. Blacks with the establishment of a Black state in Africa and elsewhere:

.Just as the Negro in the United States can never hope to win equal rights with his white neighbors until Africa is liberated and a strong Negro state (or states) erected on that continent, so, too, we can never liberate Africa unless, and until, the American Section of the Negro Race is made strong enough to play the part for a free Africa that the Irish in America now play for a free Ireland.

The Brotherhood rejected Garvey’s racial separatism. They knew that Blacks needed allies and tied the struggle for equal rights to that of the progressive section of white labor. In the 1918-1919 elections, the Brotherhood supported the Socialist Party candidates. *The Crusader* and the ABB were ardent supporters of the Russian

Revolution; they saw it as an opportunity for Blacks to identify with a powerful international revolutionary movement. It enabled them to overcome the isolation inherent in their position as a minority people in the midst of a powerful and hostile white oppressor nation. Thus, *The Crusader* called for an alliance with the Bolsheviks against race prejudice. In 1921, the magazine made its clearest formulation, linking the struggles of Blacks and other oppressed nations with socialism:

The surest and quickest way, then, in our opinion, to achieve the salvation of the Negro is to combine the two most likely and feasible propositions, viz.: salvation for all Negroes through the establishment of a strong, stable, independent Negro State (along the lines of our own race genius) in Africa and elsewhere: and salvation for all Negroes (as well as other oppressed people) through the establishment of a Universal Socialist Co-operative commonwealth.

The split in the world socialist movement as a result of the First World War led to the formation of the Third (Communist) International in 1919. This split was reflected in the New Negro movement as well. Randolph and Owens, the whole *Messenger* crowd, remained with the social democrats of the Second International who were in opposition to the Bolshevik revolution. Members of *The Crusader* group—Briggs, Moore and others—gravitated toward the Third International and eventually joined its American affiliate, the Communist Party. They were followed in the next year or two by Otto Hall, Lovett Fort-Whiteman and others.

The decline of the African Blood Brotherhood in the early twenties and its eventual demise coincided with the growing participation of its leadership in the activities of the Communist Party. By 1923-24, the Brotherhood had ceased to exist as an autonomous, organized expression of the national revolutionary trend. Its leading members became communists or close sympathizers and its posts served as one of the Party's recruiting grounds for Blacks.

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## The Communist Party and the Scottsboro Youths

From Harry Haywood *Black Bolsheviks*, Chapter 12, White Chauvinism Under Fire

On March 25, 1931, a freight train crowded with young people hobbing from Chattanooga to Memphis in search of work, passed through Paint Rock, Alabama. Nine Black youths were pulled off by the local sheriff and his deputies, charged with raping two white girls who happened to be riding the same freight train. The nine were: Charles Weems, age twenty; Clarence Norris, nineteen; Haywood Patterson, seventeen; Ozie Powell, fourteen; Eugene Williams, thirteen; Olen Montgomery, seventeen; Andy Wright, eighteen; Willie Roberson, fifteen; and Roy Wright, thirteen.

The situation was made to order for the local henchmen of Alabama's ruling oligarchy. The economic crisis had struck deeply into the entire region of northern Alabama, an area of mainly small, family-size farms and a few textile mills. Many in its largely white population were facing evictions and repossession of tools and livestock by the banks. In the textile mills, lay-offs were throwing many out of work. But the sizable Black population in the area suffered even greater hardships.



Eight of the nine Scottsboro Youths

Moving with lightning speed, the local authorities of Pant Rock lost no time in exploiting the case. The boys were taken to Scottsboro (the county seat), where they were arraigned, indicted, tried and found guilty of rape in a period of less than three weeks. The trial began on April sixth and ended on the tenth, with the sentencing of eight boys to death in the electric chair. The case of the ninth victim, Roy Wright, was declared a mistrial. The prosecution had requested life imprisonment in view of his youth (he was thirteen), but the jury returned deadlocked with seven jurors insisting on the death penalty.

The trial was carried through in a lynch atmosphere. On the day it opened, mobs of white natives from the surrounding countryside and towns surged around the courthouse. A band was playing "There'll Be A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." The National Guard had been called out, ostensibly to preserve order and prevent the mob from attacking the boys. One of the youths, however, was bayoneted by a guardsman.

It was the new style, legal lynching carried through with the cooperation of the courts and law enforcement agencies. It was intended to guarantee to the mob the same results as would be obtained in an old-fashioned burning and hanging in a public square—the death of the victims.

The courtroom farce at Scottsboro was a part of a wave of racist terror sweeping the South which had resulted in ten known lynchings in the past three months. Clearly its purpose was to "keep the nigger in his place," to prevent unity of Blacks and poor whites; in other words, to divert the unrest of Black and white workers into channels of interracial strife.

This aim received open and brutal expression by the governor of Texas, Ross Sterling, an arrogant spokesman of the racist rulers of the South. Speaking of a case in his state, he stated, "It may be that this boy is innocent. But it is sometimes necessary to burn down a house in order to save a village."

The Chattanooga Negro Ministers' Alliance retained Stephen R. Roddy, reportedly a member of the Ku Klux Klan, as defense attorney. His defense amounted to little more than pleading for life imprisonment instead of the death penalty. The NAACP kept a low profile on the case as they were not sure the boys were innocent and they wanted to avoid the possibility of the association being identified with mass rapists. This was their official justification for

holding back from the case.

***The N.A.A.C.P. is not an organization to defend Black criminals. We are not in the field to condone rape, murder and theft because it is done by Black men...***When we hear that eight colored men have raped two white girls in Alabama, we are not first in the field to defend them. If they are guilty and have a fair trial the case is none of our business.

It was only when confronted with the dispatch of the ILD [International Labor Defense] and the communists in taking up the case, and with the widespread outcry against the legal lynching in all sections of the Black population, that the NAACP belatedly tried to enter the case and force the communists out.

We communists viewed the case in much broader, class terms. First, we assumed the boys were innocent—victims of a typical racist frame-up. Second, it was a lynchers’ court—no one, innocent or guilty, could have a fair trial in such a situation.

From the beginning we called for mass protest against the social crime being acted out by Wall Street’s Bourbon henchmen in the South. On April 2, the ***Daily Worker*** called for protests to free the Boys. Again on April 4, the ***Southern Worker*** carried an article that characterized the case as a crude frame-up.

From Harry Haywood *Black Bolsheviks*, Chapter 13, Class Warfare in the Mines

It is difficult to fully assess the tremendous impact Scottsboro had on the Party’s political development in that period. Every area of work—every mass organization we were involved in—was strengthened by our participation in this defense campaign. Through our militant working class policy, we were able to win workers of all nationalities to take up the special demands of Black people embodied in the Scottsboro defense. I’ll never forget how the immigrant workers in the Needle Trades Union would sing “Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die” in their various Eastern European and Yiddish accents.

In the South, the movement awakened the great mass of the Black peasantry and resulted in the building of the militant Sharecroppers Union, which embraced thousands of land-starved Black croppers and poor farmers. Scottsboro helped pave the way for the

growth of the Unemployed Councils and the CIO. The International Labor Defense (ILD), which had been initiated by the Party in 1925 to fight for the freedom of political prisoners like Tom Mooney and Warren Billings, became the main mass organization in Scottsboro. The Mooney case and others like it were linked to the Scottsboro frame-up and became instrumental in winning white workers to the fight for the freedom of the Scottsboro Boys.

Scottsboro marked the first real bid of the Party and the Black working class for leadership in the Black liberation struggle. Within the national movement, Black workers emerged as a force independent of the reformists and greatly strengthened by their role as part of



Demonstration for Scottsboro Youths  
New York City, 1933

the working class generally. By the end of 1931, we had effectively won hegemony in the defense efforts. Although the NAACP did not formally withdraw from the defense until January 1932, we were already in de facto control, the boys and their parents having signed up with the ILD.

*All but the youngest defendant, Roy Wright, who was 12 years old, were initially sentenced to death. All spent many years in jail until they finished their sentences or were paroled.*

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## **Angelo Herndon and the Fight for Unemployment Insurance in the South**

From Harry Haywood *Black Bolshevik*, Chapter 14, Reunion in Moscow

In the summer of 1932, nineteen-year-old Angelo Herndon, a YCL member, was arrested in Atlanta, Georgia. Herndon was

charged with “incitement to insurrection” under an old 1861 fugitive slave statute. Much of what I learned was from my brother Otto who was in Atlanta at the time and worked actively in the campaign.

That June, the Fulton County Commissioners had announced that there was no more money for relief. After all, there was no need for relief, they said—there was no one in the city of Atlanta who was starving. Then they invited any stray soul who might be hungry to come to their offices and they would investigate the situation.

The Communist Party and the Unemployed Councils immediately took them up on their offer. They mobilized 1,000 people—Black and white—to come to the county courthouse and demand relief. The meeting itself was historic—the first time that such a large meeting of Black and white workers had taken place in the South.

Herndon described its significance in his autobiography: “It was a demonstration of the Southern worker’s power. Like a giant that had been lying asleep for a long time, he now began to stir.” Atlanta’s ruling circles were appropriately alarmed and the next day they found \$6,000 for relief.

One week later, Angelo Herndon was arrested. His trial was an example of Georgia lynch justice and the local rulers through their newspapers were to use it to sensationalize the “red Jew” scare for many years to come. I think the prosecutor’s remarks sum up the situation pretty well.



Angelo Herndon, center, with Robert Minor, left, and James Ford

Falling to his knees, the Reverend Hudson [the prosecutor] told the jury that he expected them to arrive at a verdict that would “automatically send this damnable anarchistic Bolsheviki to his death by electrocution.” The good reverend said that this would satisfy God and the “daughters of the state officials can walk the streets safely. Stamp this thing out now with a conviction.”

Hudson didn’t get everything he asked for, but Herndon was sentenced to eighteen to twenty years. Before he was sentenced, however, young Herndon told the court: “You may succeed in killing one, two, even a score of working-class organizers. But you cannot kill the working class.”

In the beginning stages of the case, the ILD had immediately taken charge of the defense, which was then in the hands of a young Black Atlanta attorney, Ben Davis, Jr. The case was linked up with the Scottsboro struggle as a symbol of the racist persecution of Blacks.

A long legal battle ensued. Mass meetings and huge petition campaigns were launched as part of the defense effort. The case was fought through to the Supreme Court, which at first sustained the conviction, but ultimately reversed it by a five to four decision. Herndon, out on bail, was finally freed in 1937.

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## **Organization of the Sharecroppers Union**

*The Crisis*, Chicago, IL, March 1936

Epic of the Black Belt, by Harold Preece

A new type of Negro has appeared in Alabama, as bent hacks straighten to throw off an insufferable burden. From the most exploited group of a traditionally backward state, a genuinely indigent labor movement has arisen. Today, the gentlemen planters of the Black Belt no longer confront a Negro population that can be intimidated by whip-lashes and commanding epithets. They face Negroes who have forged for themselves a potent weapon—the Share Croppers Union,

For the union is a force emanating from the very heart of the Black Belt. All the emotional intensity, all the aching desires of a subject people find expression in the unceasing struggle of this organization. Let it be remembered that the American Negro has an

unbroken tradition of revolt. In the cabins of the Deep South, one may still hear tales of the numerous slave rebellions which occurred before the Civil War. Thus Camp Hill and Reeltown stand in logical relation to almost forgotten battles of the past century, Ralph Gray and Cliff James were the heirs of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. The Share Croppers Union is an expression of the tradition in modern terms, with only a slight change in economic symbols.

Four years ago, a surprised nation read of the fight at Camp Hill. The then president, Mr. Hoover, was unperturbed since Alabama never goes Republican anyway. The Democratic aristocracy of the state issued printed invectives about "bad niggers stirring up good niggers." Liberals deplored the action of the lawless deputies who had used gunpowder, instead of the customary civil processes, to enforce the landlord laws.

I doubt if the croppers of Camp Hill had any illusions about the law before their meeting was attacked on that hot summer night of 1931. Not since the inception of the union, a few months before, had they dared to exercise their constitutional rights and assemble openly. Twenty-one year old Estelle Milner had brought them a paper called *The Southern Worker*, and those who could read a little had spelled out each issue to the illiterate. Later, another Negro, bearing credentials as an organizer, had come into their midst and talked to them in vacant, isolated shacks. The meeting near Camp Hill had been called because of the suspension of "furnish" by the landlords.

That night, planters, deputy sheriffs, klansmen, and stool pigeons swarmed into the neighborhood. These traditional defenders of Southern womanhood first invaded the cabin where Estelle Milner lived, beating the young girl into insensibility. The croppers were overtaken on the road to the meeting place and immediately attacked by the Tallapoosa County chivalry. During the fight, Ralph Gray and Sheriff Kyle Young shot each other, although neither was killed instantly.

In the words of Al Jackson, secretary of the union. "The sheriffs picked Ralph Gray for the first attack because he had always fought for his rights as a human being." After the shooting on the highway, the croppers congregated with guns in front of Gray's cabin. Late that night, the expected lynch gang came to finish the wounded leader. The attackers were held off until the Negroes had exhausted their ammunition. During the fight, three more croppers were killed.

Gray was finished, while lying on his bed, by Policeman Matt Wilson of Camp Hill. Wilson placed the barrel of his pistol into Gray's mouth, and pulled the trigger. The body of the dead Negro was taken to town and dumped on the courthouse lawn.

### **The Reeltown Battle**

Another classic battle occurred at Reeltown, the next year. 'Reeltown had become one of the strongest sections of the union with the most fearless comrades' ... (A. J.) Cliff James, leader of the Reeltown local, was in debt to W. S. Parker, a wealthy landlord of the community. Parker, learning of James' activities, demanded immediate payment or surrender of his crop and livestock. After much argument between the two men, an understanding was reached whereby James was to pay a certain sum on account the following Monday.

On the next day, however, a posse rode into James' yard, armed with revolvers, winchesters, and a writ of attachment. James' neighbors, warned of such a possibility, had gathered to protect his home and possessions. Ned Cobb and James pleaded with the officers to leave peacefully. The Sheriff's face flushed until it attained the red heat of an anvil. Rising from his saddle, like Tam Mix in a second-rate horse opera, he declaimed, "We'll go and come back and kill all of you damned niggers in a pile."

But the "damned niggers" refused to die in a pile. When the original posse returned with their forces augmented by Camp Hill's town loafers, they found Negroes who were armed and ready to fight. The siege of that Alabama cabin is comparable to anything in the pioneer saga. Through windows, through holes in the walls, and while fleeing to the woods, the



Ned Cobb

Negroes fought as courageously as any group of early white settlers resisting an Indian attack.

Ned Cobb was shot while trying to enter the house. He is now serving a term in the state penitentiary for defending his life against the murderous hoodlums. Alf White, convicted of the same offense, was recently drowned in a well on the prison farm, and there is every probability that he was thrown into the watery hole. Cliff James and another cropper died from traumatic pneumonia as a result of lying in the woods with their wounds unattended. Many of the posse were also injured in the battle, and several of its members died from exposure.

Misled white tenants were members of the bloodthirsty mob at Camp Hill. But the encounter at Reeltown witnessed the initial attempts toward solidarity. When the survivors of the second battle were fleeing for their lives, they were hidden in the cabins of poor whites until they could travel. The force of hunger was shattering the mutual distrust of the two races. According to Al Jackson, "Even those farmers who participated in terrorizing the Negroes in 1931, are now reading our literature, keeping us informed of the designs of the landlords, and distributing leaflets when we ask them to do so."

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## **The CIO and Organizing Black and White Workers**

From William Z. Foster *The Negro People in American History*, Chapter 45, The Negro and the New Trade Unionism

### **Attitudes of the C.I.O. and A.F. of L. Toward Negro Members**

From the outset the C.I.O., in the formation of which the Communists played a prominent part, took a friendly attitude toward the organization of Negro workers. This, largely influenced by the Communists, was also implicit in industrial unionism which, unlike craft, unionism, does not confine itself to unionizing small minorities of the workers but includes all those in a given industry. The C.I.O. early wrote the following inclusive membership clause into its national constitution: it proposed, "To bring about the effective organization of the workingmen and women of America, regardless of race, creed, color, or nationality, and to unite them for common action into labor unions for their mutual aid." All the affiliated

C.I.O. unions proceeded upon this general policy.

Nevertheless, the present-day right-wing C.I.O. unions permit great discrimination against their Negro members. For example, although Negro workers are beginning to accumulate seniority rights of their own in industry, the seniority system in general has not decisively extracted the Negro worker from his traditional handicap of being "the last to be hired and the first to be fired." Negroes in industries controlled by these C.I.O. unions also fill a disproportionate percentage of the lower-paid, unskilled jobs, and efforts by the unions to upgrade and promote them to better jobs are altogether inadequate. The Negroes also get the worst of it with regard to holding official union posts; they are largely confined to the lesser offices. Negroes form at least 10 percent of the total membership of the C.I.O. unions, but they hold hardly one percent of the higher union posts, such as executive board members, organizers, etc. The big Auto and Steel Workers Unions, with a combined membership of 2,500,000, some 10 percent of whom are Negroes, have no Negroes at all on their national boards. Of the 23 leading C.I.O. unions, 12 have not a single Negro on their executive committees or among their international officers. The C.I.O. and some of its unions have official anti-discrimination committees and sometimes write anti-discrimination clauses into union contracts; but their work is often "more honored in the breach than in the observance." All this in sharp contrast to the progressive independent unions, where Negroes workers play an increasingly important role in the top leadership....

### **The Communists in the Great Organizing Campaign**

To the Communists and other left-wingers belongs a great deal of the credit for the winning of the workers in the basic industries to the trade unions during 1936-45, and especially for the successful unionization of the Negro workers. For many years, the Communists were ardent fighters for industrial unionism, when most of the later-to-be C.I.O. conservative leaders were altogether cold to the matter. The Communists prepared the ground for the big drive. The Communists, too, were the most militant of all in supporting the organization of the Negro workers, and at every stage of the great campaign they were on hand to see that proper attention was paid to this hitherto crassly neglected body of workers. And most valuable to the campaign, the Communist Party had long carried on

work among the unemployed and other groups throughout the trustified industries, and it had its branches in hundreds of major plants. When the great campaign began, the Communist Party put all these forces at work with its well-known militancy and devotion.

This was a period of the struggle against developing world fascism; and the Communist Party worked freely in formal or informal united front movements with John L. Lewis, Philip Murray, Sidney Hillman, and many other C.I.O. leaders, who were then following a progressive pro-union building, pro-Roosevelt, anti-fascist course. The Communists and other left-wing forces became a major factor in building the C.I.O. Alinsky, semi-official biographer of John L. Lewis, says that “Then, as is now commonly known, the Communists worked indefatigably.... They literally poured themselves completely into their assignments.... The fact is that the Communist Party made a major contribution to the organization of the unorganized for the C.I.O.” About one-third of the C.I.O. organizing staff in steel were Communists. The generally progressive position taken by the C.I.O. during these years was very largely due to the influence of Communists and other left-wing forces in its ranks.



Strike at R,J, Reynolds tobacco factory, North Carolina, 1947

Characteristic of the special attention paid by the Communists to the Negro workers was the conference, principally of Negro organizations, held in Pittsburgh on February 6, 1937, to stimulate the unionization of the Negro steel workers. This important gathering was organized by the well-known Negro Communist, Benjamin L. Careathers, then a paid organizer on the staff of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. Present at the conference were 186 delegates, representing 110 organizations. Many leading national Negro figures attended. The conference was a potent factor in the successful organizing of this great industry. Similar activities were carried on in auto and the other industries involved in this historic organizing campaign.

In 1938, at the height of this movement, the Communist Party had some 75,000 members, a potent force under the circumstances. Of these 14 percent were Negroes. Such a large body of Negroes in a Marxist party was unique in United States history. The Party's prestige among the Negro masses may be gauged from the fact that in a recruiting campaign a few years later, in 1944, which brought in 24,000 members, about 7,000 of them were Negroes.

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### **Ben Davis, Communist Councilman from Harlem**

*Davis wrote the notes for his book while serving a five-year sentence for violation of the anti-Communist Smith Act. His notes were taken from him in prison and were only released after his death. The book was only published in 1969.*

From Benjamin Davis *Communist Councilman from Harlem*, Chapter Six, The "Impossible" Candidate

When, in 1943, my candidacy for the New York City Council on the Communist ticket was announced, the press was unanimous in declaring my election impossible. For entirely different reasons, some of my friends joined them. The difficulties were considered insurmountable....

But the impossible happened. I was elected. The opposition and its two-party machine were shocked and dismayed. They had already had to swallow the bitter pill of the election of Peter V. Cacchione, Brooklyn Communist leader, in 1941, and they had hoped to get rid of him in 1943. Instead, they were now faced with

two Communists in the city council.

My friends and supporters were jubilant. My election was another high-water mark in the achievement of the labor-Negro people's progressive coalition. Independent political action had scored a signal victory. And the Negro people of Harlem, demonstrating tremendous political maturity, had fired a shot that was heard not only in the sharecropper's cabin in Mississippi, but in the trenches in Europe and the Far East. It was, above all, a victory for unity behind our country's patriotic, national war to defeat the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo axis.



Ben Davis, right, with Paul Robeson

The combination of circumstances and relationships which had led to this triumph had thrust upon me the honor of being the first Negro Communist elected to office in the history of the United States. While I regarded it as a great distinction and an unprecedented opportunity, uppermost in my mind was the feeling of responsibility. My task was not only to advance the movement which alone could improve the jim-crow conditions imposed upon my community in Harlem, but also to make the whole of New York City a better place for the people. There was no contradiction, but rather a dynamic unity, between the two.

A part of the campaign against me was that I would never get elected because I had two strikes against me. I was a Negro and a Communist...

Sometimes I would use the description of me as a "Black Red" to answer the favorite argument of A. Philip Randolph, the Social-Democratic Negro labor leader: "Why should the Negro add to the handicap of being Black, the handicap of being Red?"

Far from considering it a handicap to be a Negro and a Communist simultaneously, I considered it a double weapon against the

ruling class. An American Negro has a background of 300 years of oppression in this country, and great indeed is the Negro's anger. When that same Negro is a Communist, he is equipped with a science—Marxism-Leninism—which alone can help realize his 300-year aspiration for freedom and equality....

The honor of my designation as the Communist candidate belonged rightfully not to me but to the people from whom I sprang. Whatever spark of determination I possessed in the struggle was instilled in me by the hardihood of my people in resisting oppression in America, Africa, the West Indies and wherever black men fight to live. I had seen that same flame burn in my father; a little of it burns in every Negro, if he does not permit it to be extinguished by violence or intimidation, or if he does not deny it for a mess of pottage....

Major party lines had been badly shattered. In the whole of Manhattan in 1943, there were not more than 6,000 Communists. My vote was more than 43,000. My election represented a qualitative leap forward for the Negro people, for the Negro-labor alliance and for our party. It was the result of years of conscientious and consistent work of the party in Harlem in the battles of the Negro people. And it went far beyond the state lines of New York, reflecting the leading role that Harlem plays in the political thinking of the Negro, nationally. From all over the country came messages of congratulations, greetings, best wishes. And I felt a sense of responsibility to the Negro people, nationally, and to fighters for Negro and colonial liberation all over the globe.

In this campaign for the City council, as well as in my subsequent campaigns in 1945 and 1947, the dominant note was its people's character. By this I mean that my platform which was based upon the major issues facing the electorate was shaped in such a manner as to facilitate the coming together of the largest sector of the people in defense and extension of their all-round welfare. Republican and Democratic voters rallied to my support no less than independents. It was the difference between a narrow partisan campaign designed to reach primarily those who agreed with my Marxist socialist views, and a people's nonpartisan campaign designed to reach those who could unite on immediate issues such as housing, equality, police violence and civil liberties, irrespective of their party affiliation or long-range political perspective. The latter was especially adapted to Harlem, characterized by the all-people's char-

acter of the movement against the jim-crow ghetto system.

However, there was no contradiction between my being a Communist candidate and at the same time a people's candidate. The two supplemented each other. Moreover, only such an approach could guarantee Negro representation on the city council. Besides, living Marxism is itself the broadest approach to the mass of people, encompassing all who work by hand and brain. Since my party was part of the people's movement in its electoral coalition form, I could pledge the support of the Communists to this broad people's platform. Some of my well-meaning supporters who were either Democrats or Republicans hoped I would stop there and go no further, fearing that an espousal of my views would frighten away voters. I rejected this view. Some agreed, others tried to reconcile themselves with my position; but none bolted. My campaigns were an excellent example of the united or people's front, in which many forces work together on a common platform, even though they disagree on many other important questions.

At the same time, the foundation of my victorious campaign was the alliance of the Negro people and important sections of the labor movement. Upon this foundation was erected the structure of mass support among all sections of the population. The solid vote of Harlem was not enough to elect me; I needed the trade union and white progressive vote. That was shown clearly after the ALP candidate was counted out, when I received enough second-choice votes from him to assure my election by a comfortable margin....

My electoral victory rested upon years of conscientious and consistent work of the Communist Party in Harlem in the struggles of the Negro people. Many gave their lives or served in prison, victims of police brutality, frame-ups or what have you. Progress seems slow and then, all at once, when conditions are ready, it takes a big leap forward. Communist open-air speakers were pelted with cabbages and tomatoes by Garveyites back in 1929, but a dozen years later even the neo-Garveyites joined in my campaign. It is always toward the qualitative leap forward that the Communist works, for it is only in this way that socialism can be established. There is no such thing as capitalism gradually growing into socialism. But the Communist also works, even at the risk of his life, to prevent a qualitative step backward. For this can mean only one thing—fascism, which in our country might well be worse than Hitlerism.

## From Chapter Ten, My Friend Pete Cacchione Dies

Once Councilman Roger, a crackpot Republican who hardly knew the time of day, launched a silly and revolting attack upon the Negro people. The incident arose in the course of the passage of my annual resolution memorializing Negro History Week as an official observance of the city. For reasons of their own, the councilmen almost invariably passed the resolution unanimously. This time, however, Councilman Roger took the floor to point out that “we should stop petting the Negroes and playing up to them by passing such a resolution... after all, if they were like other minority groups, they would be in control of things instead of being the underdogs... if they weren’t, something must be wrong with them,” *ad nauseam*. I was on my feet instantly, but Pete pulled me down. Meanwhile, someone else got the floor—while Pete and I were arguing about who should answer Roger. It was a bitter argument, but I finally gave in to Pete, who insisted that although it was only natural that I should want to defend my own people, my strong feelings could not be the decisive factor. He pointed out that a Marxist understands that it is the duty of the white worker to rise to the defense of the Negro people when they are under attack from white supremacists, and that it was a political question, with the obligation of initiative resting on him first. He was correct, and I yielded reluctantly, for I hated to lose this priceless opportunity to get at Roger, who was constantly berating the Communists.

Pete took the floor and gave Roger two blows for one. Bat he did more. He traced the development of the Negro people in the United States from the time the first African slaves were landed in Jamestown, in 1620, to the present day. And he did it so impressively, with such an enviable command of the various periods of the Negro’s struggle for freedom, with such a comprehensive command of the contributions and the sufferings of the Negro people that he held the entire council spellbound. Pete’s defense of Negro History Week was a work of art, but the council was so enthralled by Pete’s eloquent rejoinder to Roger that it did not notice that he had occupied the floor for a full half-hour, instead of the usually allotted ten minutes. Debate was closed, and the resolution was passed almost unanimously. That day’s session belonged to Pete.

His speech impressed me deeply, although I had heard him speak effectively on almost every kind of occasion. I told him as

much, and of the pride the Negro people would have felt in hearing their history and contributions so ably expounded by a white worker. He beamed. We had a sort of silent agreement about evaluating each other's floor debates. Perhaps it leaned a bit in the direction of a "mutual admiration society." But we were so frequently and so bitterly denounced by the Tammanyites that we hardly needed to berate each other. We took great pains to commend each other on "an exceptionally good job." When we fell below par, we would say nothing in the Council. But a few days later, when both of us had had time to think, we would dissect an unsatisfactory performance from every angle and determine how we could do better on the subject next time.

Pete had gone no further than the eighth grade in school, but he often put to shame professors with multiple degrees whose only answer to his dialectical wisdom was to say, "Who listens to Communists?" Born of poor Italian-American parents in up-state New York, he had been a railroad worker like his father. The Italian immigrants who had helped build the railroads in the Northeast were brutally exploited for the benefit of the first giant American fortunes. They were among the "cheap foreign labor" that the Vanderbilts, Goulds and Morgans imported from Europe for super-exploitation and fabulous profits—just as the Negro slaves had been taken from Africa to provide "cheap labor."

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### **Claudia Jones**

*Jones was born in Trinidad, West Indies, in 1915 and came to the United States when she was eight years old. She joined the Communist Party in 1936. During the McCarthy era, she spent several years in prison and was ordered deported upon her release. She ended up in Britain, where she continued her political work. She died in London in 1964 and was buried next to the grave of Karl Marx.*

*From 13 Communists speak to the Court. 1953*

It was here on this soil... that I early experienced experiences which are shared by millions of native-born Negroes — the bitter indignity and humiliation of second-class citizen-ship, the special status which makes a mockery of our Government's prated claims

of a 'free America' in a 'free world' for 15 million Negro Americans.

It was out of my Jim Crow experiences as a young Negro woman, experiences likewise born of working-class poverty that led me in my search of why these things had to be that led me to join the Young Communist League and to choose at the age of 18 the philosophy of my life, the science of Marxism-Leninism — that philosophy that not only rejects racist ideas, but is the antithesis of them

I spent a lot of time coming from work listening also to the street corner meetings of the various political parties and movements in Harlem. These were the days of the famed Scottsboro Boys frame-up.

I was like millions of Negro people and white progressives and people stirred by this heinous frame-up. I was impressed by the Communist speakers who explained the reasons for this brutal crime against young Negro boys, and who related the Scottsboro case to the struggle of the Ethiopian people against fascism and Mussolini's invasion. Friends of mine who were Communists began to have frequent discussions with me. I joined the party in February 1936 and was assigned to work in the Young Communist League shortly after. My first assignment was secretary of the YCL executive committee in Harlem and it was about this time, I got a job in the Business Dept. of the Daily Worker. This job coincided with my application for a \$150 a week job in the field of dramatics with the Federal Theatre Project under WPA. I took the job at the Worker for \$12-15 a week instead."

From *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women*, Claudia Jones, 1949

Historically, the Negro woman has been the guardian, the Protector, of the Negro family. From the days of the slave traders down to the present, the Negro woman has had the responsibility of caring for



Claudia Jones

the needs of the family, of militancy shielding it from the blows of Jim Crow insults, of rearing children in an atmosphere of lynch terror, segregation, and police brutality, and of fighting for an education for the children. The intensified oppression of the Negro people, which has been a hallmark of the postwar reactionary offensive, cannot therefore but lead to an acceleration of the militancy of the Negro woman. As a mother, as Negro, and as worker, the Negro woman fights against the wiping out of the Negro family, against the Jim Crow ghetto existence which destroys the health, morale and the very life of millions of her sisters, brothers, and children.

Viewed in this light, it is not accidental that the American bourgeoisie has intensified its oppression, not only of the Negro people in general, but of Negro women in particular. Nothing so exposes the drive to fascism in the nation as the callous attitude which the bourgeoisie displays and cultivates toward Negro women. The vaunted boast of the ideologists of Big Business—that American women possess the ‘greatest equality’ in the world is exposed in all its hypocrisy in the Soviet Union, the New Democracies and the formerly oppressed land of China, women are attaining new heights of equality. But above all else, Wall Street’s boast stops at the water’s edge where Negro and working-class women are concerned. Not equality, but degradation and super-exploitation: this is the actual lot of Negro women!

During the anti-Axis war, Negro women for the first time in history had an opportunity to utilize their skills and talents in occupations other than domestic and personal service. They became trail blazers in many fields. Since the end of the war, however, this has given way to growing unemployment, to the wholesale firing of Negro women, particularly in basic industry. This process has been intensified with the development of the economic crisis. Today, Negro women are being forced back into domestic work in great numbers. In New York State, for example, this trend was officially confirmed recently when Edward Corsi, Commissioner of the State Labor Department, revealed that for the first time since the war, domestic help is readily obtainable. Corsi in effect admitted that Negro women are not voluntarily giving up jobs, but rather are being systematically pushed out of industry. Unemployment, which has always hit the Negro woman first and hardest plus the high cost of living, is what compels Negro women to re-enter domestic service today. Accompanying this trend is an ideological campaign to

make domestic work palatable. Daily newspaper advertisements which base their arguments on the claim that most domestic workers who apply for jobs through USES 'prefer this type of work to work in industry', are propagandizing the 'virtues' of domestic work, especially of 'sleep-in positions'.

Inherently connected with the question of job opportunities where the Negro woman is concerned, is the special oppression she faces as Negro, as woman and as worker. She is the victim of the white chauvinist stereotype as to where her place should be. In the film, radio and press, the Negro woman is not pictured in her real role as breadwinner, mother, and protector of the family, but as a traditional 'mammy' who puts the care of children and families of others above her own. This traditional stereotype of the Negro slave mother, which to this day appears in commercial advertisements, must be combated and rejected as a device of the imperialists to perpetuate the white chauvinist ideology that Negro women are 'backward', 'inferior', and the 'natural slaves' of others... The Negro Woman Worker

The negligible participation of Negro women in progressive and trade union circles is thus all the more startling. In union after union, even in those unions where a large concentration of workers are Negro women, few Negro women are to be found as leaders or active workers. The outstanding exceptions to this are the Food and Tobacco Workers' Union and the United Office and Professional Workers' Union.

But why should these be exceptions? Negro women are among the most militant trade unionists. The sharecroppers' strikes of the '30's were spark-plugged by Negro women. Subject to the terror of the landlord and white supremacist, they waged magnificent battles together with Negro men and white progressives in that struggle of great tradition led by the Communist Party. Negro women played a magnificent part in the pre-CIO days in strikes and other struggles, both as workers and as wives of workers, to win recognition of the principle of industrial unionism, in such industries as auto, packing, steel, etc. More recently, the militancy of Negro women unionists is shown in the strike of the packing-house workers, and even more so, in the tobacco workers' strike — in which such leaders as Moranda Smith and Velma Hopkins emerged as outstanding trade unionists. The struggle of the tobacco workers led by Negro women later merged with the political action of Negro and white which led

to the election of the first Negro in the South (in Winston-Salem, North Carolina) since Reconstruction days.

It is incumbent on progressive unionists to realize that in the fight for equal rights for Negro workers, it is necessary to have a special approach to Negro women workers, who, far out of proportion to other women workers, are the main breadwinners in their families. The fight to retain the Negro woman in industry and to upgrade her on the job, is a major way of struggling for the basic and special interests of the Negro woman worker. Not to recognize this feature is to miss the special aspects of the effects of the growing economic crisis, which is penalizing Negro workers, particularly Negro women workers, with special severity...

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## **We Charge Genocide**

*The Civil Rights Congress charged the U.S. government with the Crime of Genocide against the Negro People in a petition handed to the United Nations in Paris in 1951. William L. Patterson, a leading member of the Communist Party and Secretary of the Civil Rights Congress, wrote the introduction.*

*We Charge Genocide*, Introduction by William Patterson

Out of the inhuman black ghettos of American cities, out of the cotton plantations of the South, comes this record of mass slayings on the basis of race, of lives deliberately warped and distorted by the willful creation of conditions making for premature death, poverty and disease. It is a record that calls aloud for condemnation, for an end to these terrible injustices that constitute a daily and ever-increasing violation of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

It is sometimes incorrectly thought that genocide means the complete and definitive destruction of a race or people. The Genocide Convention, however, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 9, 1948, defines genocide as any killings on the basis of race, or, in its specific words, as "killing members of the group." Any intent to destroy, *in whole or in part*, a national, racial, ethnic or religious group is genocide, according to the Convention. Thus, the Convention states, "causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group" is genocide as well as "killing members of the group."

We maintain, therefore, that the oppressed Negro citizens of the United States, segregated, discriminated against and long the target of violence, suffer from genocide as the result of the consistent, conscious, unified policies of every branch of government.

The Civil Rights Congress has prepared and submits this petition to the General Assembly of the United Nations on behalf of the Negro people in the interest of peace and democracy, charging the Government of the United States of America with violation of the Charter of the United Nations and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

We believe that in issuing this document we are discharging an historic responsibility to the American people, as well as rendering a service of inestimable value to progressive mankind. We speak of the American people because millions of white Americans in the ranks of labor and the middle class, and particularly those who live in the southern states and are often contemptuously called poor whites, are themselves suffering to an ever-greater degree from the consequences of the Jim Crow segregation policy of government in its relations with Negro citizens. We speak of progressive mankind because a policy of discrimination at home must inevitably create racist commodities for export abroad—must inevitably lead to war.

We have not dealt here with the cruel and inhuman policy of this government toward the people of Puerto Rico. Impoverished and reduced to a semi-literate state through the wanton exploitation and oppression by gigantic American concerns, through the merciless frame-up and imprisonment of hundred of its sons and daughter, this colony of the rulers of the United States reveals in all its stark nakedness the moral bankruptcy of this government and those who control its home and foreign policies.

History has shown that the racist theory of government of the U.S.A. is not the private affair of Americans, but the concern of mankind everywhere.

It is our hope, and we fervently believe that it was the hope and aspiration of every black American whose voice was silenced forever through premature death at the hands of racist-minded hooligans or Klan terrorists, that the truth recorded here will be made known to the world; that it will speak with a tongue of fire loosing an unquenchable moral crusade, the universal response to which will sound the death knell of all racist theories.

We have scrupulously kept within the purview of the Conven-

tion on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide which is held to embrace those “acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such.”

We particularly pray for the most careful reading of this material by those who have always regarded genocide as a term to be used only where the acts of terror evinced an intent to destroy a whole nation. We further submit that this Convention on Genocide is, by virtue of our avowed acceptance of the Covenant of the United Nations, an inseparable part of the law of the United States of America.

According to international law, and according to our own law, the Genocide Convention, as well as the provisions of the United Nations Charter, supersedes, negates and displaces all discriminatory racist law on the books of the United States and the several states.

The Hitler crimes, of awful magnitude, beginning as they did against the heroic Jewish people, finally drenched the world in blood, and left a record of maimed and tortured bodies and devastated areas such as mankind had never seen before. Justice Robert H. Jackson, who now sits upon the United States Supreme Court bench, described this holocaust to the world in the powerful language with which he opened the Nuremberg trials of the Nazi leaders. Every word he voiced against the monstrous Nazi beast applies with equal weight, we believe, to those who are guilty of the crimes herein set forth.

Here we present the documented crimes of federal, state and municipal governments in the United States of America, the dominant nation in the United Nations, against 15,000,000 of its own nationals—the Negro people of the United States. These crimes are of the gravest concern to mankind. The General Assembly of the United Nations, by reason of the United Nations Charter and the Genocide Convention, itself is invested with power to receive this indictment and act on it.

The proof of this fact is its action upon the similar complaint of the Government of India against South Africa.

We call upon the United Nations to act and to call the Government of the United States to account.

We believe that the test of the basic goals of a foreign policy is inherent in the manner in which a government treats its own nationals and is not to be found in the lofty platitudes that pervade so many treaties or constitutions. The essence lies not in the form, but

rather, in the substance.

The Civil Rights Congress is a defender of constitutional liberties, human rights, and of peace. It is the implacable enemy of every creed, philosophy, social system or way of life that denies democratic rights or one iota of human dignity to any human being because of color, creed, nationality or political belief.

We ask all men and women of good will to unite to realize the objectives set forth in the summary and prayer concluding this petition. We believe that this program can go far toward ending the threat of a third world war. We believe it can contribute to the establishment of a people's democracy on a universal scale.

But may we add as a final note that the Negro people desire equality of opportunity in this land where their contributions to the economic, political and social developments have been of splendid proportions, and in quality second to none. They will accept nothing less, and continued efforts to force them into the category of second-class citizens through force and violence, through segregation, racist law and an institutionalized oppression, can only end in disaster for those responsible.

Respectfully submitted by the Civil Rights Congress as a service to the peoples of the world, and particularly to the lovers of peace and democracy in the United States of America.

William L. Patterson  
*National Executive Secretary*  
*Civil Rights Congress*



Patterson speaking in Prague, 1951, after his passport was canceled

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## W.E.B. Du Bois

*W.E.B. Du Bois was a noted African-American activist and scholar, famous for his works "Black Reconstruction in America" and "The Souls of Black Folks," among other works. At the age of 93, Du Bois joined the Communist Party.*

### Application for Membership in the Communist Party

To: Gus Hall  
Communist Party of the USA  
New York, New York

On this first day of October 1961, I am applying for admission to membership in the Communist Party of the United States. I have been long and slow in coming to this conclusion, but at last my mind is settled.

In college I heard the name of Karl Marx, but read none of his works, nor heard them explained. At the University of Berlin, I heard much of those thinkers who had definitely answered the theories of Marx, but again we did not study what Marx himself had said. Nevertheless, I attended meetings of the Socialist Party and considered myself a Socialist.

On my return to America, I taught and studied for sixteen years. I explored the theory of socialism and studied the organized social life of American Negroes; but still I neither read nor heard much of Marxism. Then I came to New York as an official of the new NAACP and editor of *The Crisis* magazine. The NAACP was capitalist-oriented and expected support from rich philanthropists.

But it had a strong socialist element in its leadership in persons like Mary Ovington, William English Walling and Charles Edward Russell. Following their advice, I joined the Socialist Party in 1911. I knew nothing of practical socialist politics and in the campaign on 1912 I found myself unwilling to vote for the Socialist ticket, but advised Negroes to vote for Wilson. This was contrary to Socialist



Party rules and consequently I resigned from the Socialist Party.

For the next twenty years I tried to develop a political way of life for myself and my people. I attacked the Democrats and Republicans for monopoly and disenfranchisement of Negroes; I attacked the Socialists for trying to segregate Southern Negro members; I praised the racial attitudes of the Communists, but opposed their tactics in the case of the Scottsboro Boys and their advocacy of a Negro state. At the same time, I began to study Karl Marx and the Communists; I read *Das Kapital* and other Communist literature; I hailed the Russian Revolution of 1917, but was puzzled by the contradictory news from Russia.

Finally in 1926, I began a new effort; I visited the Communist lands. I went to the Soviet Union in 1926, 1936, 1949 and 1959; I saw the nation develop. I visited East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland. I spent ten weeks in China, traveling all over the land. Then this summer, I rested a month in Rumania.

I was early convinced that socialism was an excellent way of life, but I thought it might be reached by various methods. For Russia, I was convinced she had chosen the only way open to her at the time. I saw Scandinavia choosing a different method, halfway between socialism and capitalism. In the United States, I saw Consumers Cooperation as a path from capitalism to socialism, while in England, France and Germany developed in the same direction in their own way. After the Depression and the Second World War, I was disillusioned. The progressive movement in the United States failed. The Cold War started. Capitalism called communism a crime.

Today I have reached my conclusion:

Capitalism cannot reform itself; it is doomed to self-destruction. No universal selfishness can bring social good to all.

Communism, the effort to give all men what they need and to ask of each the best they can contribute, this is the only way of human life. It is a difficult and hard end to reach, it has and will make mistakes, but today it marches triumphantly on in education and science, in home and food, with increased freedom of thought and deliverance from dogma. In the end communism will triumph. I want to help bring that day.

The path of the American Communist Party is clear: It will provide the United States with a real third party and thus restore democracy to this land. It will call for:

1. Public ownership of natural resources and of all capital.

2. Public control of transportation and communications.
3. Abolition of poverty and limitation of personal income.
4. No exploitation of labor.
5. Social medicine, with hospitalization and care for the old.
6. Free education for all.
7. Training for jobs and jobs for all.
8. Discipline for growth and reform.
9. Freedom under law.
10. No dogmatic religion.

These aims are not crimes. They are practiced increasingly over the world. No nation can call itself free which does not allow its citizens to work for these ends.

W.E.B. Du Bois