

C H A P T E R T W O



Last Hired, First Fired: Working through the Great Depression

The Great Depression devastated the economy. Factories, stores, banks, mills, and business firms collapsed. Others radically cut their workforce. Three million people could not find jobs in January 1930, according to the American Federation of Labor. That figure rose to more than 13.5 million three years later. Wages had fallen to roughly 60 percent of their pre-Depression level. Declining demand followed the decline in earnings, speeding the downward spiral. For farmers, the situation was worsened further by competition from foreign growers and by terrible droughts in 1930 and 1931. The result of these economic contractions was rapidly falling prices, which brought disaster to both the industrial and the farm markets.

The economic crisis affected everyone, rural and urban, skilled and unskilled, black and white. The federal government in 1930 estimated that 17 percent of the white population and 38 percent of the black population could not support themselves without assistance. Those figures soon worsened. African Americans were particularly hard hit, as white men took jobs formerly held by black men, and white women took the jobs of black women. A large proportion of the lucky few black Americans who had earlier managed to finance their own businesses or buy their own homes lost them.

Wages of those still employed plummeted, and professional workers found themselves underemployed or unable to collect fees from their clients. Farm workers struggled to stay on the land or took to the road in hopes of finding work elsewhere. Black workers faced greater competition for even the worst jobs. When successful, organizing by a reinvigorated union movement and by

leftist activists eased the worst exploitation, but such efforts were met more often with employer resistance and white violence than with victory. The experiences of black workers differed by region, employment level, gender, origin, and education, but most followed a similarly troubling path. Hunger and homelessness increased; more fell ill. Apartments that housed four might now house eight or ten as needy friends and relatives pooled income and living arrangements just to survive. Charitable organizations were overwhelmed by the need, and the number of children placed in orphanages who still had a living parent skyrocketed. In black communities across the nation, the Great Depression had arrived in a fury.

For farmers, collapsing prices resulted in tragic irony. It became more expensive to farm and ship produce than it could be sold for. Some farmers poured unsold milk onto the ground rather than compounding their losses by shipping it to market, or slaughtered sheep they could no longer afford to feed. Even high yields of cotton or corn brought little easing of debts because prices per bushel had declined so precipitously. Cotton, which had sold for eighteen cents a pound in 1929, had fallen to six cents a pound four years later.

For a variety of reasons, including discrimination and the relative levels of debt, the impact was greater on black farmers than white. After a single year of the Depression, the number of black farm owners had already fallen 5 percent and their total acreage by almost 10 percent. The value of their land had declined by more than a third. By the close of the Depression decade the number of black farmers who owned or managed their own farms had dropped from a quarter of all black agricultural workers to less than 15 percent, even as the proportion of white farm owners and managers rose to almost half of all white farmers.

For those laboring on the land of others, wages fell sharply. In 1931 in Sumter County, South Carolina, farm wages averaged twenty-five cents a day. In nearby Clarendon County, farm workers earned fifteen cents. Sometimes these payments were made in credit redeemable only at the plantation store. A 1934 study found that those families forced to borrow money in order to make ends meet paid local interest rates as high as 37 percent. As a result, sharecroppers and tenants of both races sunk even deeper into debt. The impact of that decline in farm earnings was greater on black professionals and business owners who relied on their patronage than on those businesses serving white communities. Many local shop owners were forced to close. Professionals, including lawyers, doctors, and nurses, might have to accept payment in food or labor if they received anything at all. Congregations could no longer support their ministers.



The Mayberry family, North Carolina sharecroppers, had little to their name in 1933. Here they pose for the Resettlement Administration photographer in front of their home, a rundown house with cracks in the walls and a stone for the front steps. Mayberry family, Iredell Co., N.C., 1933. Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Digital Archives.

Even excluding families so poor they required government relief, southern black farm families earned less money than white. In fact not only did white Georgia sharecroppers earn more than black sharecroppers, they earned more than black farm owners. In North Carolina, while black farm owners earned slightly more than white sharecroppers in their state, they lagged well behind white farm owners (see table 2.1).

Such disparities existed across the South. In his research for a Depression-era study of black Americans, Thomas Woofter discovered that in the 600

Table 2.1. Average Annual Earnings of Farm Families by Race, 1936

<i>State</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>
Georgia		
Sharecroppers	\$422	\$583
Owners	\$533	\$794
North Carolina		
Sharecroppers	\$803	\$1,036
Owners	\$1,053	\$1,590

southern counties he studied, black cotton sharecroppers netted an annual income of \$295, compared to \$417 for white sharecroppers. Black wage farmers working in cotton earned an average of \$175 a year, Woofter found, compared with \$232 for whites.

Not surprisingly, such low earnings and high debt meant that these families lived in horrifying conditions. When desperation led to crime—or when railroaded into false arrests and convictions—southern black convicts found themselves in even worse straits, forced to labor on harsh chain gangs in prisons like the notorious Parchman Penitentiary in Mississippi. If prison officials did not themselves put inmates to work, local white landowners seeking cheap labor paid convicts' fines and then compelled their labor as repayment, in a system known as convict leasing.

Many agricultural workers were forced off the land entirely. Landlords who rented out their land cut back on production by expelling tenant farmers. Where whites tenanted or sharecropped alongside blacks, the latter lost their place sooner. Those few who owned their own land struggled to hold onto it as earnings plummeted. A growing number fell delinquent in their taxes during the Depression years; in response authorities either placed liens on their property or seized the land outright. Even in towns like Promised Land, a South Carolina Piedmont community of black-owned farms, the value of personal property, low to begin with, declined by one-third in the course of the decade. It fell by half for those without land. Meanwhile, natural disasters brought their own perils. Drought, dust storms, and poor soil conservation practices led to substantial loss of farmable land in the Dust Bowl. The continued spread of the cotton-destroying boll weevil and flooding in the Mississippi Delta, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Texas left thousands more without land to till.

Close to 100,000 sharecroppers lost their livelihood. They and thousands of other southern black agricultural workers, along with family or friends, joined the exodus of migrants searching for a better life. Some sought farm work elsewhere, but most, whether moving North or remaining in the South, headed toward rapidly expanding urban areas. There they pressed into already crowded black neighborhoods, deepening the poverty and hardship there and competing with residents for the limited jobs available. By the end of the Depression one-third of southern African Americans and almost two-thirds of the national black population lived and worked in cities. Yet while urban areas did offer greater job prospects, wages and opportunities there had also declined. Southern mills and factories laid off thousands of workers and paid many of the remaining workers wages lower than they needed to live. Memphis sawmills offered work at seven cents an hour. Those shelling nuts

received six cents a pound, or a maximum of four dollars a week. Riverboat workers there earned eight cents an hour for eighteen-hour days.

African Americans hovered at the bleakest end of the southern economy. Legal segregation and overt discrimination continued to exact high costs, and those who remained at work continued to find their lives degrading, constrained, and dangerous. They were well aware that only the lowest jobs were available to them, but now they were often last in line even there. In South Carolina, where African Americans constituted almost half of the population, whites outnumbered blacks four to one in mills and factories. Across the South, groups of armed white workers threatened and intimidated employers who hired African Americans, arguing that they must hire the white unemployed first. The June 1931 *Monthly Labor Review* reported that replacing black workers with whites was a common practice. In Mobile, Alabama, Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company brought in white migrants to fill jobs, and it even employed some white women in traditionally male fields, rather than employ local black workers. As Hilton Butler wrote in *The Nation*, "Dust had been blown from the shotgun, the whip, and the noose, and Ku Klux practices were being resumed in the certainty that dead men not only tell no tales but create vacancies."¹ Even the usually cautious Commission on Interracial Cooperation concluded that lynching had become a tool of economic as well as political exclusion.

Skilled black workers in the South lost much of the tenuous foothold they had gained in earlier decades. In 1930 only approximately 100,000 black men, 3 to 4 percent of all southern black male workers, held skilled positions. Within six years that tiny number had fallen to under 30,000. Along the South Atlantic coast, only black painters and cement finishers expanded in number by the end of the decade. In every other major field of skilled work, both the number and proportion of black workers declined. Tradespeople and professionals employed within the black community, from hairdressers to store owners, watched their client base wither. Thousands lost their businesses entirely. Even physicians and members of the clergy found themselves seeking other employment. In the first six years of the Depression, almost 500 black businesses failed in New Orleans. By 1936 a fifth of all the storefronts in Norfolk, Virginia's black business district were vacant.

As a result, black unemployment rates skyrocketed in the Depression years. Black southern urban unemployment increased from one-third to one-half between 1931 and 1932. In some places, rates ran even higher. In Memphis, African Americans made up just over a third of the total population, but 75 percent of the unemployed. In Atlanta, almost 70 percent of black workers had no jobs in 1934. The proportion of black families in Norfolk

applying for aid topped 80 percent. In every case, black unemployment rates in southern cities and towns doubled or even tripled those of whites.

Underemployment, which plagued workers of every race and skill level as companies fought desperately to stem their losses, also hit black workers harder than whites. Black workers usually found their hours cut sooner and more dramatically. Meanwhile, their history of lower pay meant they had less to cushion them during these hard times. In Norfolk, even those families with at least one member employed in a nondomestic job struggled; more than a third reported they were in debt. Some had lost the homes they had worked so hard to purchase. Of those with any savings at home or in bank accounts, none had accumulated more than fifty dollars.

Certainly those with jobs fared better than those with none, but the earnings of black workers in southern cities continued to lag well behind whites. In Atlanta, the median annual income for black families in 1936 came to only about a third of that of white families. The situation was similar in Mobile, where black families fared substantially worse than whites (see table 2.2). These discrepancies remained whether comparing households with one parent or with two. In fact black families with two parents, even those of skilled workers, earned significantly less than white families with only one parent present.

A White House conference on children described this pattern across the South. Overall in 1936, white families in southern cities earned three times what black families did. More than half of all southern urban black families reported annual incomes of \$750 or less that year, compared with about 12 percent of white families. On the other end of the earnings spectrum, more than a quarter of whites but fewer than 2 percent of blacks earned more than \$2,500. It is hard to imagine families surviving on so little especially when, as the White House report reminded its readers, crowded and segregated black families usually paid more for housing than did white. In every city the decline in earnings from before the Depression far surpassed the drop in the cost of living, making it even harder to make ends meet than before.

Table 2.2. Median Family Income by Race and Family Status in Mobile and Atlanta

<i>City</i>	<i>Two-parent Families</i>	<i>Single-parent Families</i>
Mobile		
African American	\$481	\$301
White	\$1,419	\$784
Atlanta		
African American	\$632	\$332
White	\$1,876	\$940

Economic opportunities were somewhat better in northern and western cities. There, discrimination was less overt and not enshrined in the law, and a history of local black activism meant that there were already mechanisms in place to challenge the worst outrages. In 1936 northern urban black family income came to almost two-thirds of white, well above the southern ratio. Not surprisingly, leaving the South proved an attractive option. By 1940 approximately 1.75 million black residents had moved to northern and western cities.

Nevertheless, like their southern counterparts, these urban black workers still suffered from multiple handicaps when it came to keeping their jobs during the Depression. The more industrialized North experienced higher levels of unemployment, given the collapse in production. Within each industry, unskilled labor was hit the hardest, the job category reported by the vast majority of black workers. But as in the South, at every skill level, northern black workers suffered more than whites, for reasons of past as well as present discrimination. When northern employers allocated cutbacks and layoffs fairly, length of time on the job largely determined workers' hours and positions. Even black people who had lived in the region for many years lacked seniority, given employers' long-standing preference for white workers. Therefore, earlier patterns of discrimination ensured that even in cases of equitable cutbacks, most black workers lost their jobs sooner than whites. A greater proportion of skilled black men in the North than in the South reported themselves as holding semiskilled or unskilled jobs or unemployed, and a substantial number of those who still held skilled positions worked in government-funded New Deal programs.

More often than not, however, even in the North, employers did not allocate layoffs and cutbacks fairly, and racism continued to affect employment patterns. Being white doubled one's chances of finding work. The figures varied by city, skill level, and gender, but the pattern of higher black unemployment held. In 1932 approximately 25 percent of all white workers in the urban North reported themselves unable to find work. For black workers the figures ran significantly higher throughout the decade. In Pittsburgh and Chicago, half reported they had no work. In Philadelphia and Detroit, black unemployment approached 60 percent. In each case these figures were substantially higher than those for whites. As late as 1940, as the Depression began to ease, almost twice as many northern black men as white reported themselves unemployed. African Americans lamented that they were consistently "last hired, first fired" when employers could have their pick of workers. And many of these men and women remained unemployed for years. Of those unable to find work in 1940, 20 percent of African

Americans, but only 7 percent of whites, reported that they had not been able to find work for four years or more.

As in the South, northern unemployment and underemployment also had a greater impact on black lives because of their long-standing poverty and therefore relatively lower level of savings. In one Philadelphia study, only half of the black families between 1930 and 1932 had any savings at all. Investigators estimated that, on average, among those with savings and some credit, white unemployed families could continue for approximately eight months at their regular living standard, but black families could do so for only six weeks. In fact, unemployed white families reported cutting back their spending by 50 percent and black families by 75 percent. Because black workers found it harder to make ends meet even when employed, they felt the consequences of unemployment more quickly and dramatically.

Most African American workers who did succeed in obtaining or keeping their jobs labored in unskilled and service fields, regardless of their actual skills. In the Middle Atlantic and North Central states, the areas of greatest industrial activity, fewer than 40 percent of male skilled workers in 1936 reported holding jobs at their skill level. In New York City, the Urban League and the New York State Employment Service reported that although a quarter of black job seekers in New York City qualified for skilled or white-collar work, almost 90 percent of the jobs available to black workers were in unskilled fields.

Such tremendous economic pressures made northern black earnings for both professionals and blue-collar workers fall almost as dramatically as those of their southern counterparts. Part of that decline was the result of a general decline in wages; more reflected the large number who worked at jobs below their training. But the greatest burden once again fell on the poor. The incomes of unskilled laborers, the vast majority of the black working population, declined to roughly a third of what they had been before the Depression.

As a result, many black families in the North as well as the South were forced to get by on incomes well under what federal and local agencies considered a minimum standard of living. In Chicago, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) estimated in mid-decade that for a married laborer with two children to meet rental, food, and clothing costs, with no additional expenditures—what it termed an “emergency budget”—required \$973 a year. More than 40 percent of Chicago’s black families lived at or below this level. Among those with jobs in industry or domestic service, two-thirds earned less.

Emergency budgets could not sustain a family for long. The WPA therefore also calculated what it termed a “maintenance budget,” or enough money to survive without major hardship for a longer period. A 1935 survey

of Harlem found that while average family earnings there did exceed the WPA's emergency budget for New York, they fell below its maintenance budget. White families in New York, by contrast, earned more than enough to meet maintenance levels. At the same time, more black families were among the poorest: nearly a quarter of black families who did not receive relief survived on less than the minimum estimated emergency budget in the city. Indeed, African Americans as a whole in New York fared worse than poor whites there: one study found that even white families living in New York's most run-down tenement houses had higher median household incomes than did black families living in Harlem.

These racial disparities were visible at every level and in every region. In Chicago in 1936, more than twice as many black families as white earned less than \$500. On the other extreme, only a tiny percentage of black families, but almost a third of whites, earned more than \$2,000. These disparities remained regardless of family structure or occupational level. The average black laborer in New York working all year long earned what white laborers could earn in eight months. Black male clerical workers' salaries averaged only three-quarters those of white male clerical workers.

Thus, many skilled and educated black workers saw their opportunities for good jobs decline, finding themselves working in those unskilled or service jobs usually relegated to African Americans. But now, North or South, there were no longer any purely "black" occupations. During the Depression, there were no jobs white workers refused to do. This meant even greater employment insecurity; African Americans could no longer even count on access to the worst jobs. White men cleaned streets and collected garbage, jobs formerly reserved for black workers. The Atlanta School of Social Work reported in 1933 that white men in that city had been taking jobs as garbage men, waiters, bellhops, elevator operators, delivery boys, and chauffeurs—jobs that paid little but had, as a result, offered reliable employment for African Americans in the past. Other studies found the same patterns of white workers replacing black all over the country. In Seattle, when struggling companies and families cut back on hiring, black stewards and hotel, railroad, and domestic workers lost their jobs. Those who were able to keep their jobs saw their wages cut dramatically. As a result, the number of black families on relief in that city quadrupled just between 1930 and 1931. These patterns held everywhere.

Black women faced similar job pressures as men. Married or single, they continued to work far more frequently than white women. The numbers of employed black married women remained at just over a third across the decade, more than three times the rate of native-born whites. While these

working black women generally held different jobs from black men, they too remained at the bottom of their occupational ladder. The number of black women in manufacturing dropped by a third, for example; most of these women ended up in domestic work. But generally when black women lost their jobs, they lost them to white women rather than to men. While white men would now accept jobs previously left for black men, few willingly crossed gender boundaries to accept jobs more commonly associated with women, although white women were known to replace black men in service jobs, such as waiting tables.

Almost half of all employed black women held jobs as servants or domestic workers, positions that remained firmly in the category of women's work. There were suddenly many more white laundry workers or those employed in tailoring and sewing than before the Depression, for example, but they were still largely female. In Norfolk, white women threatened to fire their black domestic workers in favor of needy white women and later, a number of sewing rooms funded by the government-run WPA replaced black women with white. In neither case did anyone propose hiring men. The reverse was true as well. Distinct gender roles in employment were widely accepted in this era for both women and men. When the Birmingham WPA assigned black women heavy construction jobs, the local NAACP protested that such work was inappropriate.

Ironically, in some cases the divided labor market proved advantageous to working women, white or black. Because the Depression affected traditionally male fields of manufacturing and construction most severely, some traditional female jobs like teaching and nursing proved more secure. The persistence of gender divisions, therefore, meant that both white and black women fared a bit better in terms of finding employment than their male counterparts. On the other hand, the desperation of these women meant wages could drop to almost nothing, and employers could still find women willing to take those jobs. In 1935 Marvel Cooke and Ella Baker published an exposé of the exploitation of domestic workers in the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine. The conditions were so dreadful they titled their piece "The Bronx Slave Market." They described black women seeking domestic work in New York who stood on street corners while white housewives bartered for the lowest possible wages. Cheating by employers was also common, but these women had no recourse. They had to feed their families, even on the fifteen or twenty cents an hour they received. Across the city, black domestics reported earning between \$6 and \$10 dollars a week, a dramatic drop from even the low \$15 they averaged in the 1920s. Domestic wages were similarly

dreadful in every city studied. Well over half of Birmingham's black domestic workers earned less than \$200 for an entire year of work.

Women also earned less than men for work at the same occupations. New York women in laundry work, all races combined, earned \$13 per week, a dollar less than men received. Black women earned less than \$9 for the same work. Among unskilled workers, black women earned roughly half as much as black men. Black women doing clerical work earned only about two-thirds of what their male counterparts did. Similar disparities appeared at all employment levels and in all regions of the country. Racial lines of employment blurred in the desperate rush to the bottom, but, for both good and ill, gender lines held fast. As black women had noted for years, race and gender compelled them to carry a double burden.

Greater black unemployment and underemployment also meant that across the nation more black teens than white teens were compelled to work. Despite the National Youth Administration and other government-aid programs for young people, almost 40 percent of nonwhite males and 18 percent of females between fourteen and nineteen years old held jobs in 1940, compared to a quarter of white. For young women, the proportions were 18 percent for nonwhites and 13 percent for whites. Because employment usually meant an end to education, the racial disparities in youth employment had implications for the future as well. More years in school yielded better employment and higher earnings later; in that way the greater black poverty in the Depression era that compelled young people to work also meant greater black poverty in the next generation.

The Depression was hardly kinder to the tiny black middle class. In 1939 there were fewer than 30,000 black-owned businesses in the entire United States. Sales had declined almost 30 percent since 1929. With less capital and more dependent on an impoverished clientele, black businesses failed more often and more quickly than those owned by whites. A single white insurance company held more African American policies than all the black insurance companies combined. Some black businesses, like the Atlanta Life Insurance Company and the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, survived the Depression; a few even prospered. But for the vast majority in both North and South, the hard-won gains from the past twenty years were lost in the Depression decade. This included even large institutions like Binga State Bank of Chicago, black-owned and black-run since 1908, with over \$1.5 million in deposits. Of the 134 black banks established before the Great Depression, only 12 remained in 1936. Urban black businesses collapsed at an alarming rate and black real estate developers were forced to sell

their buildings to white absentee owners. Even in Harlem, where the number of black businesses actually increased, profits declined. Many did not have a single paid employee. As elsewhere, a majority of its black-owned real estate turned over to white hands.

Nor did many African Americans make it to professional ranks during the Depression decade. As late as 1940 only 2 percent of all doctors in the United States were black—a 10 percent decline from 1930. Black nurses constituted less than 2 percent of all nurses. Among lawyers, less than 1 percent were African American. All in all, just under 3 percent of employed black men and just under 5 percent of black women held professional jobs in 1940. White rates were three times as high.

In the North as well as in the South, the earnings of these and other professionals plummeted during the Depression as their clients' ability to pay for their services declined. In New York, black professionals suffered a one-third drop in income from pre-Depression figures, to \$1,440. Black female professionals earned even less. By contrast, white professionals there earned more than twice as much. Everywhere, black physicians, lawyers, writers, social workers, and other highly trained individuals found themselves compelled to find alternative employment or apply for government help. The same was true for many black clergy, who suffered alongside their congregations. Journalist George Schuyler's melodramatic observation about railway baggage handlers seemed apt through the Depression decade: "Turn a machine gun on a crowd of red caps . . . and you would slaughter a score of Bachelors of Arts, Doctors of Law, Doctors of Medicine, Doctors of Dental Surgery."²

Black employment opportunities in white-collar areas did expand in the government sector, as New Deal programs increased the number of public jobs. Because most of these new agencies had nondiscrimination provisions, black workers at all levels of skill had a better chance to obtain these jobs than those in the private sector where racial discrimination remained pervasive. Certainly many government programs disregarded nondiscrimination rules, and elsewhere discriminatory labor unions excluded potential black workers. But other government agencies engaged large numbers of black workers, including 18,000 employed by the U.S. Postal Service alone. Although most black employees still worked in the same menial jobs they found in private employment, many government programs—particularly in northern and western cities—also hired black skilled, clerical, and professional workers. That group included a substantial number of black social workers, teachers, nurses, office managers, architects, engineers, and administrators. Fully a fifth of all those working in skilled jobs held them thanks to govern-

ment work. New Deal programs had a tremendous impact on black employment levels and occupational patterns.

One promising development for workers was the growth of trade unions. Both New Deal legislation and economic hardship gave unionism a boost. In 1932 section 7A of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) for the first time guaranteed workers the right to organize unions. In 1935, after the Supreme Court declared the NIRA unconstitutional, Congress passed the Wagner National Labor Relations Act, which extended 7A's scope. It prohibited company (employer-created) unions, protected organizing workers against employer retaliation, and required good faith negotiations between worker representatives and employers.

All types of unions benefited from New Deal labor legislation. Craft unions, those organized around specific and hard-to-obtain skills, had begun organizing in the nineteenth century, and their successes relied on limiting the number of workers available to perform the tasks. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, for example, managed to keep wages relatively high because a strike would cripple the industry. Employers could not find enough skilled and trained strikebreakers to do what they needed.

The New Deal labor laws solidified the base of craft unions but did not have much impact on black employment, since these unions continued to restrict the jobs they controlled to white workers. By 1928, for example, the railroad unions had managed to bar black firemen, brakemen, yardmen, and trainmen from the field entirely, despite the opposition not only of the African American workers but of the railroads themselves. As of 1935, more than twenty craft unions still explicitly barred nonwhite members. Many others segregated black members, denied them voting rights, or used more informal mechanisms of exclusion. As a result, black union membership remained low, estimated at somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000.

Industrial unions, by contrast, organized largely by and for unskilled and semiskilled workers, could not employ such exclusionary tactics. If laundry or construction workers walked off the job in protest, employers could easily find thousands of desperate unemployed people eager to take their place. Before the New Deal, unskilled and semiskilled workers faced almost insurmountable odds against successful organizing. Now, newly protected by federal labor legislation and spurred to greater efforts by the economic desperation, a group of union organizers set out to aid these industrial and unskilled workers they had largely neglected before. Most worked through a Committee on Industrial Organizing established in 1935 within the American Federation of Labor. Two years after it was founded, the committee had

more members than the rest of the AFL. In 1938 the two separated and the committee became the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

Since it was impossible to limit the number of people capable of doing the work, industrial union organizers sought instead to engage all possible workers in the struggle for union recognition. When racist whites excluded black workers, organizers pointed out, employers hired the latter as strikebreakers. Only by offering union membership and benefits to all, regardless of race, could unskilled and industrial unions succeed. Thus most such unions, or at least their leadership, were devotedly antiracist and actively sought to recruit African American workers along with whites. If African Americans did not become union brothers and sisters, they might become scabs. This breadth of outreach provided much of the momentum behind the great West Coast Waterfront Strike (also known as the Longshoremen's Strike) of 1934, an eighty-three-day strike that shut down docks on the West Coast. The first general strike in U.S. history, it included sailors, cooks, stewards, and dock workers, affecting more than 2,000 black and white workers in Seattle alone.

Among these organizers were many Socialists and Communists, drawn to this unionizing movement out of a political conviction that the working class was the victim of an exploitative capitalist system. The harsh realities of the Depression made their arguments even more convincing. Only unity among all workers could overthrow the tyranny of their bosses, they insisted, and bring substantive economic change. They considered racism a tool for the wealthy to divide workers and dilute their power. Thus their politics as well as realities of organizing the unskilled convinced them to welcome black workers. As black Communist leader James Ford argued, the benefits worked in both directions. Unionizing helped desperate, unemployed black workers while including black members improved the chances for successful organizing. "The struggle for Negro freedom and Negro rights depends upon the organization of the masses to struggle for their daily immediate needs, better wages, unemployment and social insurance, civil rights and equal rights," he insisted.³ To better achieve these goals, the Communist Party announced its Popular Front strategy of working with liberal groups when doing so advanced common goals. Communists, therefore, embraced all progressive union activists as coalition partners in organizing efforts.

A few unions had already begun organizing around the principles that interracial unions advanced the interests of all workers. The United Mineworkers Union, for example, was interracial from its inception in 1890. Because African Americans already worked in mining, and because mining involved so many different types of tasks, any union had to incorporate all workers to avoid strikebreaking. Black and white organizers built the union

together. The International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, one of the most famous examples of an interracial industrial union, began this inclusive style of organizing in the early twentieth century. But more, like the Dockworkers and United Auto Workers, saw their first broad organizing successes during the Depression, as new black as well as white members joined their ranks.

Inspired by these ideas, two Socialist activists, Don West and Myles Horton, established the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, in 1932. Designed as a cooperative center for developing effective organizing strategies and an open forum for leftist discussions, Highlander centered its training around the conviction that workers become empowered by making decisions for themselves. In the Depression years, the Folk School trained hundreds of labor activists; within a decade Highlander shifted its focus to civil rights and became a strategy and training center for that movement as well.

Many African Americans, recognizing both the potential of union organizing and the pervasive racism of existing unions, organized or reinvigorated their own unionizing projects, as did Frank Crosswaith with the Negro Labor Committee. Crosswaith, a Socialist, worked with local unions in New York City to integrate their ranks and with local black workers to convince them of the importance of unionizing. A. Philip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids, which gained formal recognition from the Pullman Company only in 1937, also aided other workers' efforts. From Memphis to San Francisco, union struggles coincided with black struggles for decent jobs at fair wages.

The CIO and its allies organized across the country, in the South as well as the North and West, reaching out to black workers who unloaded cargo on the docks, farmed the land, mined for coal, or worked in laundries, textile or automobile factories, steel mills, or packing houses. Black and white female nut pickers in St. Louis struck for better pay in 1933 and the owners raised wages and recognized the Food Workers Industrial Union. In Chicago, black and white women struck at a clothing factory, winning higher wages and equal pay for black and white workers. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union, under the leadership of Harry Bridges, fought for integration of the docks at West Coast ports; the West Coast Waterfront Strike was part of this effort. The Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), set up in 1936, worked with the NAACP, National Urban League, and National Negro Congress to recruit black members. SWOC held integrated meetings and appointed African Americans to union office in many of its locals, in the South as well as the North. Even the International Association of Machinists, an

all-white craft union, expanded its reach in 1936 to include semiskilled and unskilled workers, in this one stroke integrating its membership.

Unionizing clearly benefited African Americans who had, for so long, labored longer hours at harder jobs for less pay than their white coworkers. Although at first white workers perceived black involvement as a threat to their jobs, the hard-fought pay increases and shorter work hours won by SWOC and others demonstrated the benefits that interracial unions offered whites as well. Their successes also demonstrated that black cooperation was crucial in establishing and sustaining these unions, so these organizing efforts built on one another. In 1939 female tobacco workers struck in Richmond and formed the Tobacco Workers Organizing Committee. By 1943 they had compelled even the large R. J. Reynolds Company to negotiate with them. The United Auto Workers, whose past record on race had not been positive, overcame tremendous black distrust to win a union contract at Ford in 1941 only after working with black organizations, hiring racially progressive organizers, clamping down on informal racist practices, and becoming more outspoken on civil rights issues. Interestingly, a number of local African American leaders supported Ford against the strikers. But a year or so later when the CIO defended the right of black workers to obtain their share of defense jobs, even these conservative leaders came around. As a result of such efforts, approximately 200,000 black workers held membership in a union by 1940.

As Crosswaith, Randolph, and others had promised, incorporating black workers in organizing drives proved mutually beneficial. Unionizing helped black workers, and black workers helped build unions. Indeed, as many scholars have argued, not only did organizing in the New Deal and war years improve conditions for black workers within the union movement, black union activists advanced liberal democracy, social justice, and the power of organized labor in the nation as a whole. In so many examples, from interracial union organizing in Memphis to the story of the Winston-Salem chapter of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers of America or the longshoremen and seamen on both coasts, black and white union members forged an interracial framework for challenging the control of white conservative businessmen and politicians. Through integrated union meetings, classes on labor history, education programs, sports and music clubs, these and other union locals offered new possibilities for interracial organizing around issues of democracy and workers' rights. Working together, black and white workers strengthened the power they held over their working conditions and their earnings. Furthermore, they helped pioneer tactics that other progressive

struggles would use, from the civil rights and feminist movements to those for disability rights and against South African apartheid.

Certainly, significant barriers to organizing black workers remained. Virtually every effort to unionize brought resistance, even violence, from powerful interests. Police beat, arrested, and even on occasion shot protesters and organizers, often assisted by other angry whites. A 1931 strike of New Orleans dockworkers resulted in more than a hundred arrests, most of them of black workers. The Georgia Klan, unhappy at the advancement of black textile workers as a result of a union drive, responded with a violent anti-CIO campaign in 1939. Even in the North and West demonstrators faced intimidation. Local police attacked workers at a Seattle demonstration and then arrested the protest speakers for inciting riot.

That Communists led many of these organizing projects intensified the threat of violence even further. Many linked Communists and Socialists with the authoritarian Soviet Union. Closer to home, they feared that these leftists' anticapitalist stance threatened business. Most southern whites interpreted the Communists' interracial union organizing as a Soviet plot to destroy the United States by undermining traditional race relations. Communist agitators, they were convinced, stirred up otherwise contented black Americans to demand an equality they did not deserve and—even worse—sought to bring down the white race by granting black men ready access to white women. Such inflammatory rhetoric, so useful in preserving economic advantages for the white middle and upper classes, brought anti-union violence to new heights.

African American Hosea Hudson became active in Communist Party organizing around labor issues in and around Birmingham beginning in 1930. At mass meetings public speakers like Hudson laid out the harsh conditions facing the unemployed and placed the blame on the capitalist system and the local bosses who propelled it. These speakers argued that segregation, lynching, poor wages, unemployment, and union busting all worked together to weaken the poor and enrich the employers. The only productive response, they insisted, was racial unity between black and white workers who together could smash the system. Police routinely broke up these public meetings, often violently. A 1930 meeting in Birmingham led to the firebombing of that speaker's home. In 1933 police tried to shut down a demonstration there attended by approximately 3,000 people, many of whom were African American. When demonstrators refused to yield, the police attacked. Hudson encountered violence in every city and town in which he tried to organize.

In Atlanta in 1930, police used a slave statute to arrest two black men, two white men, and two white women for “attempting to incite insurrection.”

Their crime: holding an integrated protest against unemployment and in support of striking textile workers. Although the “Atlanta Six” never went to trial, the charges against them were not formally dismissed until 1939. African American Communist Angelo Herndon was even less fortunate. In 1932 he led an integrated unemployment protest in Atlanta. Police arrested him for violating the same slave statute and beat him. When he was found guilty and sentenced to eighteen to twenty years on a chain gang, he became a cause célèbre for the Communist Party. For five years the party marshaled thousands of prominent men and women and hundreds of thousands of rank-and-file supporters to demand Herndon’s freedom. As part of its Popular Front strategy the party also collaborated with the black press, the NAACP, ACLU, Central Conference of American Rabbis, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, League for Industrial Democracy, and other non-Communist groups. Finally, in 1937, the Supreme Court reversed Herndon’s conviction, ruling that his rights under the Fourteenth Amendment had been violated.

These harsh reprisals against Communist and Socialist organizing made it exceedingly difficult to recruit new members or to get support from liberal organizations for the party’s programs. Only one white local group came out in support of the Atlanta Six, the Socialist-based Workmen’s Circle. Nevertheless, as the Herndon case and the unionizing campaigns of mine, tobacco, and other workers reveal, a number of these struggles succeeded. The Textile Workers did unionize in Greenville, South Carolina, despite vicious repression, and Hosea Hudson became one of the first black recording secretaries of the Steelworkers’ Union in 1937.

More difficult for black workers to understand was the violent resistance of many white workers and even union members. While industrial unions proved more friendly to black workers than most craft unions, virtually none welcomed them enthusiastically. Racism ran rampant even in the most progressively led unions, as local members and shop stewards continued to favor white workers over black, or to treat African Americans with disdain—or worse. Whites frequently launched protests, work stoppages, or walked off the job when black workers first came onto the dock or shop floor; occasionally there was violence. In such cases white union leaders were forced to choose between integrating workers or maintaining white support for the union struggle. Other unions, like the railroad brotherhoods, continued to hold tenaciously to their white supremacist origins despite the argument that doing so ran against their economic self-interest. As a result, even in the Depression, roughly the same number of African Americans got jobs thru strike-breaking as they did by joining unions, and the NAACP pursued litigation against discriminatory unions into the war years and beyond.

Most of the industrial organizing took place in cities. In the rural South, desperate black farmers and white and black Communists who supported them launched their own organizing campaigns. Seeking both political and economic change, such groups fought for better terms for black and white tenants and sharecroppers, more equitable distribution of aid, and an end to racial discrimination. Some sought to pool agricultural produce in order to raise prices, others to improve farming techniques or increase land ownership by black farmers. The rural South, however, proved even less hospitable to black or interracial organizing, and pervasive racism, virulent anti-Communism, and white violence limited their impact.

African American farmer Ned Cobb worked with the Sharecroppers' Union in Alabama, organized with Communist Party support in 1931. Struggling for a decent life, Cobb understood the relationship between his poverty and southern racism. "Ever since I been in God's world, I've never had no rights, no voice in nothin that the white man didn't want me to have—even been cut out of education, book learnin, been deprived of that."⁴ White landowners and storekeepers consistently cheated black farmers and customers with impunity. The results were desperate. "Conditions has been outrageous every way that you can think against the colored race of people." Hearing about the Sharecroppers' Union's organizing efforts, he understood it was "somethin unusual," not only because it was "an organization for the poor class of people" but because it was deliberately interracial. White and black organizers encouraged local sharecroppers and tenant farmers to stick together in order to obtain fairer treatment and to defend their rights, supported by the union. As Cobb explained to his neighbors, "The organization would back up and fight your battles with you."⁵ Indeed it did. A standoff in Reeltown between the sharecroppers and the deputy sheriff turned bloody. Cobb and other armed local men resisted the sheriff's attempt to seize a man's property. Both sides fired weapons. Three black men died of their wounds and the inability to get medical help; Cobb and several others were arrested and jailed. Lawyers from the party's International Labor Defense (ILD) defended Cobb and the others. After Cobb lost the case, the ILD mounted a number of (ultimately unsuccessful) appeals. In the end, Cobb served thirteen years in prison.

Despite this and other bloody conflicts, the Sharecroppers' Union continued its efforts to organize. By 1933 it reported 5,500 members, mostly African American, and it supported strikes by cotton pickers and other agricultural laborers until its demise in 1939. A 1935 strike by cotton choppers in Alabama brought higher wages in a few counties, but led to arrests and severe beatings by both law enforcement officers and vigilante groups elsewhere in the state,

where the strikes collapsed. A pickers' strike later that year resulted in brutal violence, including the beating of dozens of men and women not involved in the union and the killing of at least six.

Similar experiences faced those who joined the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU), which began organizing in 1934 in Arkansas with the help of Socialist activists. Like the Sharecroppers' Union, it encouraged unity among black and white tenants, and its membership was approximately 50 percent African American. Given the reality of southern life, however, the membership of most of the STFU locals were almost exclusively racially separate. Despite a number of successes in dealings with landowners, including several effective cotton-picker strikes, and despite a claimed membership of 30,000, the union could bring little improvement to the lives of most farm workers and the vast majority remained mired in desperation. As with the Sharecroppers' Union, even the results that successful STFU strikes achieved ended up unraveling as planters reneged on agreements and vigilantes systematically beat and killed those who had been active in the campaigns. The STFU's political outreach, however, was more successful. With the help of the NAACP and Socialist and Communist leaders, the union gained coverage in progressive national journals like the *New Masses*, *The Nation*, *New Republic*, *Opportunity*, *Crisis*, and even *Time* magazine. The resulting public exposure of the exploitative labor and living conditions facing sharecroppers and tenant farmers, and the debilitating levels of illiteracy and disease, prompted some federal intervention to protect these most desperate workers.

The experiences of Hudson, Cobb, and so many others suggest how difficult such organizing proved to be. The willingness of so many black men to stand up to white authority, despite the evident danger, is a testament to the farmers' anger and desperation as well as to their extraordinary courage. Too few citizens, black or white, were willing to risk their jobs, or possibly their lives, for advances that seemed impossible. Some therefore consider such organizing efforts a failure. Nevertheless, these struggles helped build important bridges among progressive communities and tested organizing strategies. Along with other forms of political activism, they formed a base for later civil rights organizing.

The Depression era proved bleak for black workers and their families as they struggled against the dual burdens of racism and economic devastation. Still largely restricted to the worst jobs offering the least pay and mobility, hired last and fired first, African Americans endured dramatic increases in poverty and unemployment and suffered greatly from the ills they produced. The desperation itself, though, did fuel economic and labor protests. While

only minimally successful at the time, they provided a repertoire of tactics and rhetoric that would prove crucial to civil rights struggles to come.

Notes

1. Hilton Butler, "Murder for the Job," *The Nation* 137 (July 12, 1933): 44.
2. In Wayne Cooper, ed., *The Passion of Claude McKay: Selected Poetry and Prose, 1912–1948* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 255.
3. James Ford, "The Communist's Way Out for the Negro," *Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 1 (January 1936): 2, 94, 95.
4. Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Random House, 1984), 314. Shaw was Cobb's pseudonym for the book to protect him and his family.
5. Quotations: Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 314–15, 311, 320, respectively.