“Against Training of Fellow Americans...”

The Philadelphia Transit Strike of 1944, the FEPC, and Redefining Democracy in the Long Civil Rights Era

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Introduction

In the early hours of August 1, 1944, roughly two thousand white employees of the Philadelphia Transit Company (PTC) refused to go to work. Rallying a group of white workers later that day strike leader James McMenamin proclaimed, “We won’t go back until we obtain our aims!”1 Angered by the company’s plan to promote eight African-American employees to the motormen training program after years of negotiations and hearings, the striking workers sought to cripple Philadelphia’s public transportation system. Conceiving of the black promotions as a threat to their job security and way of life, the strike was a direct response to the social and political gains black Philadelphians had recently enjoyed. With its black workforce becoming exceedingly anxious, the transit strike was a watershed that left the city’s racial divides permanently altered. Similarly, the interplay of wartime rhetoric, increased black activism, and the role of the federal government the Transit Company dispute signified a turning point in America’s national racial policy in the World War II years.

Years before the strike materialized, civil rights initiatives had vaulted the concerns of Philadelphia’s black population to the forefront of the city’s political forum. Through the community organizing efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other local groups discrimination in the city’s workplaces became a contested issue. With the creation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) in June of 1941 as a result of civic pressure from the March

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on Washington Movement and the subsequent election of the Congress of Industrial Organization's Transit Workers' Union, blacks in Philadelphia suddenly found themselves with a powerful support network. A direct reaction to these forms of egalitarianism, however, the PTC strike was an anti-progressive political maneuver carried out by white workers afraid of losing their jobs. Faced with the prospect of federally mandated integration, these workers protested not merely the inclusion of blacks in traditionally white job sectors, but also the sense of alienation they felt as both the government and union endorsed black promotions in the PTC.

As the strike continued for almost a week, it became clear that a tangible federal presence was needed to restore order. Federally deemed a war essential city, many feared that disrupting Philadelphia's Naval Yards threatened the war effort in Europe. With no other option, President Roosevelt ordered General Philip Hayes and 5,000 American troops to force Philadelphia's transit system to operate. Although the troops did not take over the actual driving duties, Hayes eventually persuaded the striking workers to return to their jobs by appealing to their sense of patriotism, threatening their jobs, and warning of immediate draft eligibility. Establishing an August 7th ultimatum for workers to return to their jobs, Hayes forced the strikers to decide between their livelihoods and their beliefs. As historian James Wolfinger notes, "Federal power ended the strike, and although the army acted chiefly to support the war effort, African-Americans still cheered as they came through their neighborhoods." Ultimately, the military presence in the Philadelphia Transit Strike demonstrated both to the striking workers and the city's black

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2 Wolfinger 153
3 Ibid
population that the government was committed to integrating many industries as a way to maintain stability in war-essential cities.

Aided by this shift in federal policy, black organizations in Philadelphia advocated for an enhanced workplace role in the years leading up to and during the PTC work stoppage. No longer focused on class qualifications like membership payments and donations, the NAACP became an important nucleus for black activism in the city and focused their power to defeat workplace discrimination. By addressing the needs of the black working class, the Philadelphia NAACP developed as the leading community organizing body in the 1930s and 1940s. In the time leading up to the strike the NAACP was a visible presence in Philadelphia. Lead by Executive Secretary Carolyn Moore and President Theodore Spaulding, the Philadelphia branch by 1943 began to center their focus on integrating the PTC.

Nearly three years before the transit strike, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 as A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement became a reality with upwards of 200,000 blacks rumored to be involved in the march. Effectively making discrimination in war essential industries illegal, the president’s order also created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to enforce the order. While it was restructured with Executive Order 9346 two years later, the FEPC was a clear example of federal support for civil rights. With local offices in several major American cities, the FEPC functioned as a crucial symbol of rising black political awareness and demonstrated the power of mass demonstration for African-Americans. Not only was the organization committed to fighting discrimination in war industries, but it also provided African-Americans with opportunities to become involved in the federal bureaucracy. As
historian Merl Reed affirms, "The committee initially attracted candidates from labor and civil rights organizations, colleges, law schools, and the press." Through recruitment campaigns, the committee became an national extension of groups like the NAACP.

Despite the FEPC’s significance to many blacks, the organization drew criticism from both black and white communities. For some African-Americans, the Executive Order lacked the political firepower to enforce the president’s anti-discrimination agenda. As Black journalist Roi Ottley worried in an article for *The New Republic*, "Naïve attempts to mollify the natural resentment of Negroes has served only to aggravate the problems." For Ottley, without true legislative authority the FEPC would be too weak to overcome racisms in the workplace and would be so vehemently opposed by whites that it would inhibit future civil rights battles.

As the role of the FEPC remained somewhat in flux, Ottley’s fears were realized in the form of Howard Smith’s Committee in the House of Representatives. Smith, a Virginian senator and ardent enemy of civil rights legislation, curtailed the already limited legislative power the FEPC possessed. In a series of hearings beginning in 1943, the Smith Committee attempted to discredit the FEPC by questioning its legality. One of the cases the senator’s committee considered in these meetings was the Philadelphia Transit Company’s dispute. In a January 11, 1944 hearing the Smith Committee addressed the FEPC’s ability to make rulings that carried legal weight in Philadelphia.

Former public member of the PTC Joseph Sharfsin testified on behalf of the Fair

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Employment Committee and “prepared a legal brief supporting the FEPC’s jurisdiction.”

Although the investigation was comprised of mostly hostile congressmen, no decision was reached at that time. Overall, the hearing demonstrated to the black Philadelphians that powerful enemies sought to limit the FEPC’s influence over workplace disputes.

Still, the Philadelphia branch’s role in the 1944 work stoppage debunks many of the complaints about the FEPC’s lack of power. Drawing its authority from specific complaints filed by individual workers, the FEPC empowered blacks in Philadelphia’s labor talks from its inception and provided them with a reliable place to turn for help. In June of 1942, the FEPC took an active role in the case of discrimination at Philadelphia’s Sun Shipbuilding Company and fought integrate the city’s Bell Telephone Company in the next year. In both cases, the FEPC served as an outlet where “blacks could take their appeals to a federal agency and command attention.” A powerful presence in the hearings and negotiations leading up the strike, the FEPC worked within governmental framework and successfully alleviated Philadelphia’s workplace discrimination problem more effectively than in many other U.S. cities. Also with the help of new union leadership, the FEPC was instrumental in negotiations with PTC officials. Though not the fundamental restructuring many black Americans desired, the FEPC was an important step of civil rights discourse in this period.

This examination grapples with the convergence of local, federal, and union politics in World War II Philadelphia, focusing on the PTC labor struggle as the catalyst

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6 Reed 142
that paradoxically fueled white working class fears and inspired the city’s poor black population. Closely analyzing the rhetoric of both the supporters of the strike and the city’s black activists, this study will distinguish the Philadelphia Transit Strike as a defining moment in city’s civil rights history. Similarly, this examination demonstrates the national significance of the PTC dispute. As America became further entrenched in World War II, confronting the nation’s racist history was perceived to be intrinsically linked to its victory over Hitler and fascism. As the New York Times wrote, “Since this is largely a war of ideas, and since racial equality before the law has become one of the central ideas on the democratic side, we can almost say that is principle it itself may be the deciding factor.”\(^8\) For America to truly “win” the war, it would need open its civil and political arenas to blacks. This study will show that through the events of the PTC labor dispute, Philadelphia became a critical cite of shifting national perspectives of race.

In its initial section, this study establishes a foundation to analyze the PTC dispute by examining the works of the scholars and thinkers that inspired Philadelphia’s black population. Using the progressive works by pivotal African-American thinkers like Abram Harris, W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson, and A. Philip Randolph this examination will develop notions of how the civil rights movement progressed and transformed from the time of Reconstruction to the outbreak of World War II. Using the scholarly works of historians like James Wolfinger, Francille Wilson, and Matthew Countryman this study situates national progressive thinkers within Philadelphia’s framework. By specifying the influence of powerful community leader Carolyn

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Davenport Moore on Philadelphia's black population this section bridges the theoretical concepts of national thinkers and on-the-ground local experience.

As the Executive Secretary of the Philadelphia NAACP, Moore demanded the Philadelphia NAACP focus its energies on the black working class. The second section of this study traces the changes in African-American community organizations like the NAACP and National Urban League (NUL) from the early twentieth century to the 1940s. Using historian H. Viscount Nelson, the examination articulates the Philadelphia NAACP's shift from an elite organization before the 1920s to the working class advocacy group it became during the New Deal. This drastic change is characteristic of a greater unifying trend within the black community that manifested itself in an exceedingly political black population. Expanding on the themes presented by historian John Kirby, this section also addresses the notion of "black America" as a cohesive entity that mobilized to influence both local and national elections during this era. Visible in the mass black exodus from the Republican to the Democratic party during this time, the burgeoning sense of collective political might was a significant characteristic in 1944 Philadelphia as the transit strike began.

Just as the NAACP reorganized to include working class concerns in the 1940s, unions became much more open to black workers in the years leading up to World War II. Utilizing the historical work of Robert Zieger, the third section centers on the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) and the Transport Workers' Union (TWU) as unions that were not only receptive to black workers, but also proved to be important allies during the transit strike. Using historian Margaret Tinkom’s work on World War II Philadelphia, this section identifies the city as an integral center of interracial unionism.
In World War II Philadelphia, the strike functioned as a kind of litmus test to determine the level of union support of city's black workers.

The final section of the study deals with the FEPC as a landmark organization in the Philadelphia race relations. Following the argument laid out by historian Eileen Boris, this study depicts the FEPC as a vital and necessary piece of civil rights discourse in the city. Though racial and urban studies scholar Harvard Sitkoff sees the FEPC as fueling black belligerence, the study designates the FEPC as part of a movement within the African-American community at this time away from violent protests in favor of civil action and political demonstration. In Philadelphia, the FEPC was a significant factor in the integration of the PTC. Working in conjunction with the local NAACP and the TWU, the FEPC signaled a new era for blacks in Philadelphia.
Black Scholars and Political Activists Before 1944

From the moment the strikers refused to operate Philadelphia’s trolley cars and bus lines, the PTC situation drew national attention. The racial implications of the work stoppage and the strike’s impact on the war effort thrust Philadelphia onto the front pages of newspapers across the country. Although the striking workers overtly stated that maintaining their jobs amidst calls for racial integration as their primary reason for the walkout, an investigation of the events that culminated on Aug. 1, 1944 reveals deeper racial concerns. Inspired by the works of national thinkers and personalities, black Americans had begun to tackle racism on a large scale since the Great Depression. Achieving small yet tangible victories, African-Americans saw hope in New Deal politics. “The long civil rights era,” as historian Nikhil Singh writes, “resides here: in the development of institutional and information networks that linked black intellectuals and activists with a geographically dispersed but deeply concentrated black population who could be mobilized.” This section details the unifying quality of black intellectuals and activists in the 1930s and 40s. Conceptualizing the black worker as a the center of new civil rights agendas, these thinkers condensed various black concerns under the common tropes of educational and workplace egalitarianism. This section traces the changes in black intellectualism during the New Deal Era and situates Philadelphia and the PTC strike as vital settings to the “long civil rights era.”

For many black intellectuals, altering the dominant white belief system in the years leading up to World War II proved challenging. During this period, embedded discriminatory practices such as segregated workplaces and unequal wages as important points of contention to their burgeoning movement, altering the dominant white belief system proved challenging. Thinkers writing in the 1930s and 40s generally believed that social discrepancies that regulated blacks to a secondary position derived from an inept and racist school system. Early twentieth century black scholars felt that attacking the biased curriculum was the most critical step towards true social change. In his classic text, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Carter Woodson criticizes the American school system as discriminatory and oppressive. According to Woodson, a white educational program created for white students not only failed to resonate with African-Americans, but also directly reinforced the notion of black inferiority to black students. He writes, "Negroes, then, learned from their oppressors to say to their children that there were certain spheres into which they should not go because they would have no chance therein for development."

Confined within the racist structure, many black Americans began to envision themselves as ignorant and undeveloped, while inherent divisions in school reinforced racial attitudes of self-loathing within the black population across the country. The legacy of this skewed and anti-black educational framework was an environment of acceptance within African-American communities. To Woodson, African-Americans did not

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question their social and economic position because they were taught to understand themselves as secondary. "When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions," Woodson declares. "You do not have to tell him to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it." Such dominant notions of inferiority perpetuated by an intrinsically biased educational program thus limited economic success, intellectual growth, and succeeded in quelling black class mobility.

Having exposed principal educational frameworks as inherently racist, Woodson introduced his "new program," that emphasized the role of the educated elite in empowering the country's black population. He wrote, "Instead of cramming the Negro's mind with what others have shown that they can do, we should develop his latent powers that he may perform in society a part of which others are not capable." Woodson desired to establish a firmly black industry or economic space in order to both combat poverty and create appropriate avenues for educated blacks to utilize their schooling. Similarly, his work designates educated blacks as pivotal to fostering a more active black public.

In the years preceding the PTC labor dispute community activists in Philadelphia led a particularly effective civil rights initiative centered on educational reform and workers' rights that was reminiscent of Woodson's program. Local writers like Arthur Huff Fauset and Russell Watson organized for Philadelphia to play host to the National Negro Congress (NNC) in 1937. Centered on the economic "crisis" facing black Americans, the NNC "voiced a militant message grounded in a leftist understanding of

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11 Woodson xiii
12 Ibid., 151
economic oppression.”

Inspired by the Congress, Fauset and his wife, Crystal Bird Fauset, utilized its message in her campaign for state legislature in 1940. Fauset believed, like many other thinkers at the time, the true salvation for African-Americans rested on their powers of self-determination. As Wolfinger writes, “The Democratic Party offered a start, in his view, but blacks would never improve their situation unless they controlled their own destiny. As an educator, Fauset honed these skills in the classroom.”

Attempting to curtail the influence of a biased system, Fauset and other black educators concentrated their lessons on empowering their black students by teaching untold histories and overlooked narratives.

By resurrecting cultural artifacts such as slave songs and artwork, Fauset emphasized an alternative history that required unique methods of understanding. In an article for Opportunity magazine Fauset wrote, “Negro song is not something to be looked at; to appreciate it and understand it you must hear it.”

Writing within the larger history of the Harlem Renaissance, Fauset not only reinforced black individuality by illuminating the qualities of slave songs, but also denotes the study of such cultural elements as pivotal to nurturing a collective black identity. While black intellectuals across the country sparred with an unjust educational system, Fauset and other Philadelphia advocates functioned as local agents for national thinkers like Woodson and Du Bois.

New Deal Era Philadelphia also witnessed a major campaign to desegregate public schools. A major goal of black activists in the city, public school desegregation

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14 Wolfinger 71
15 Ibid., 70-71
was intimately tied to national messages of uniting around the black workers. As Philadelphia historian Vincent Franklin writes, “The desegregation of the public schools was part of an ongoing effort to improve social and economic conditions for blacks in Philadelphia, and one of the major political objectives of the city’s newly mobilized black electorate.”\(^7\) Although student segregation remained a persistent problem in Philadelphia, blacks activists found success in the employment of black teachers. With the appointment Mrs. Beatrice Clare Overton at West Philadelphia’s Sulzberger Junior High School in 1935, “the ice had been broken” for a black teacher to work with white students.\(^8\) While this precedent would not be adopted in the city's public schools until two years later, Overton’s hiring not only signaled educational changes, but it also represented broader social shifts that remained consistent with Woodson’s beliefs. With African-American teachers employed in the city, Philadelphia’s black students stood a chance against traditionally white curriculum.

Where Woodson’s work rethinks racist educational frameworks and envisions his “new program” for the black population, W.E.B. Du Bois imagines an educated black elite as the saviors of his race. In his “Talented Tenth” essay, Du Bois establishes educated African-Americans as the most worthy of leadership positions. He writes, “The Negro Race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the


\(^8\) Ibid., 144-145
contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.”¹⁹ By lauding the abilities of the “Talented Tenth” Du Bois’ argument divides the black population. The image of an intelligent and successful minority capable of directing the uneducated masses rejects the egalitarianism and the focus on workers present in the later works of Abram Harris and A. Philip Randolph.

Still, Du Bois was also a well-publicized advocate of not merely supporting black elites, but also creating a separate economy. Similar to Woodson’s concept of clearly defined black industry, Du Bois advocates for an economy fueled by African-American consumption of black products. In an article in The Crisis, Du Bois writes, “What can we do? We can work for ourselves. We can consume mainly what we ourselves produce, and produce as large a proportion as possible of that which we consume.”²⁰ The ultimate supporter of black business for black people, Du Bois changed the way many African-Americans perceived of their local businesses. Just as consumption became patriotic in the 1950s America, Du Bois forged a sense of nationalism in supporting black businesses. For Du Bois, a united black population rested on its ability to support its own economic and business endeavors. Commonly referred to as the “nation within a nation” concept, Du Bois attempted to create a separate space for African-Americans to operate. Whether he wanted this space to be physically manifested or not, Du Bois was criticized by many as elitist and divisive.

*The Harris Plan and the Emergence of the Black Worker*

²⁰ Ibid., 1237
Bursting onto the national scene several years after Du Bois and Woodson, Abram Harris saw a unifying potential in black community groups like the NAACP and NUL. Harris, an NAACP board member, believed that the decentralization of the national office and a reinvigorated grass roots membership initiative would empower local branches while forging a more collective agenda.\textsuperscript{21} Thinking specifically about the economic and employment struggles facing black Americans in the 1930s, Harris attempted to consolidate the mission of the NAACP by focusing on the financial demands and injustices its constituency confronted.\textsuperscript{22} Harris’ plan, however, was not well received by many of the other board members, and drew some of its most fervent opposition from the national NAACP Executive Secretary, Walter White.

The threat Harris’ changes posed to the board of directors limited its effectiveness. As intellectual historian Francille Wilson notes, “The Harris report was formally accepted by the NAACP but never implemented because the national committee rightly saw it as an attempt to reduce its power. Executive Secretary Walter White was able to deflect the growing internal pressure for radical changes by appearing to accept the plan and then ignoring its most sweeping recommendations.”\textsuperscript{23} Challenged with unreceptive NAACP leadership, Harris’ attention to the local trials facing the African-American worker signified an important shift in the political and organizational framework of World War II era race discussions. No longer centered on the potential of

\textsuperscript{22} Francille RusanWilson, \textit{The Segregated Scholars}, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 227.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 229
the "Talented Tenth," Harris’ plan represented a commitment by black leaders to labor disputes and worker discrimination.

Harris’ attempts to reformulate the NAACP’s goals established a precedent of reform within the organization. Although they were not unilaterally accepted at first, his method would eventually give local leaders such as Carolyn Moore more direct control over their regions or cities. As New Deal historian John Kirby notes, “It was not that White needed to accept the plans of Abram Harris or the theories of W.E.B Du Bois; but a more comprehensive economic analysis was necessary as an alternative to the federal government’s response to Negro needs and the problems black workers and farmers confronted.”

Prior to Harris’ attempt to reorganize the NAACP, workers had few proponents. Labor unions were often discriminatory or barred blacks from membership entirely, and with black intellectuals lauding the merits of black business or separate education, factory workers and poor farmers were generally politically isolated. As America resurfaced from intense economic collapse, this financial and political alienation left poor black workers as the Depression’s longest lasting casualties.

In the aftermath of the Great Depression, poor African-Americans suffered particularly acute economic affects. As historian Nancy Weiss describes, the Depression’s lingering consequences for the poor black worker generated popular support for new strategies for employment opportunities and fair wages. She states, “The severity of the Depression’s impact on blacks led certain community leaders to call for an overhaul of the tactics and programs of the principal organizations for racial

24 Kirby 185
advancement." As black Americans failed to recover from economic disaster, leaders such as Harris began to see the situation of the black worker as dire. Harris' devotion to improving the lives of black workers by utilizing the NAACP's power was part of a growing trend during the 1930s. The National Urban League was developing similar worker's education classes that analyzed problems such as wage discrepancy and job discrimination by 1935. These classes, typically held in the League's Workers Councils were designed to familiarize black workers with trade unions and other forms of support that effectively established the worker as the centerpiece of civil rights advocacy groups as a response to the Depression. Not only did these programs educate the black working class, they also nurtured a confidence in national organizations as the African-American community developed political agency during this period.

Beyond his interest in worker advancement, Harris did not emphasize the role of black small businesses. Separating himself from old intellectuals like Du Bois and Woodson, Harris saw cultivating the black sector as problematic and distracting. In his study, *The Negro as Capitalist*, Harris addresses the potential problems inherent in African-American banks supporting black small businesses. "This lack of industrial and commercial undertakings and the predominance of small shops in the Negro business world force the Negro bank to find outlets for its funds in church and fraternal lodge loans, in the development in theatres, in amusements, and in real estate." Harris recognized small businesses in the African-American community as poor investments for banks because they did not retain value through industry. Banks would inevitably lose

money as the local companies and stores did. Seeing potential catastrophe in black small businesses, Harris also disliked the idea of African-Americans supporting businesses based on their race. He writes, “But the payment of this racial tariff by the masses could not long afford the black enterprisers and financiers the protection they needed to survive. For even if the Negro masses had been constrained to adopt this policy as a matter of racial pride their economic poverty would have caused them, in the long run, to patronize cheaper concerns.” For Harris, if blacks supported their local businesses they would lose money and seek out more affordable white opportunities such as department stores. The “racial tariff” would ultimately suppress almost any economic gains within the greater black population by demanding the purchase of more expensive products. Unsure of the best way to develop common interests among African-Americans, many leaders argued over both the means and goals of civil rights dialogues. In 1941, however, America’s black population found a voice to articulate their demands on the national scale in A. Philip Randolph.

A. Philip Randolph and the March on Washington Movement

Though his message was not antithetical to Woodson, Du Bois, or Harris, A. Philip Randolph was a more powerful advocate of mass politics and demonstration in the early 1940s. Invoking rhetorics of democracy, freedom, and liberty, Randolph preached that blacks as Americans were owed the rights ensured by the Constitution. Rejecting notions of segregation of any kind, Randolph’s message was one of inclusion consistent with the “Double V” campaign invoked in later civil rights struggles during World War II.

27 Harris 178
such as the Philadelphia Transit Company struggle in Philadelphia. Deeply devoted to a united African-American population, Randolph preached a message of non-violent activism. As Randolph states, "Freedom is never given; it is won. And the Negro people must win their freedom. They must achieve justice." Characterized by the eloquent blending of American patriotism and black nationalism, Randolph's speeches made him one of the first activists to equate discrimination and racism with fascism. For him, the idea of racism in spite of the Constitution was profoundly paradoxical and unjust. In a speech at the 1937 National Negro Congress (NNC) in Philadelphia he declared,

"Forward with the destruction of the imperialist domination and oppression of the great peoples of Africa! Forward to the abolition of the fascist rule of Italy over the noble independent, and unconquerable men of Ethiopia! Forward to the creation of a united free and independent China! Forward to victory of the valiant loyalist armies over the fascist brigands of Franco! Long live the cause of World Peace! Long live the spirit of world democracy! Long live the memory and love of the Black Revolution of the 18th Century, led by Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Gabriel, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass! Long live the valor of those black regiments of slaves and freedmen whose blood and courage made... Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation a living reality!" 

Randolph's speech at the NNC embodies the principles he believed in. Buried in his narrative of black history is both the impetus and precedent for political action. Envisioning his message as a continuation of the mission of famous abolitionists and black Americans, Randolph created a shared history in the black community that made social progress not merely possible, but imminent. For him achieving freedom and equal opportunity would alleviate the pain of an oppressive and violent history of enslavement, discrimination, and segregation. Randolph's vehicle, following Harris' example, was

28 A. Philip Randolph, "The March on Washington Movement," in Black Protest Thought of the Twentieth Century, eds. August Meier, Eliot Rudwick, Francis L. Broderick, (New York: The Bobbs-Merill Company, 1971), 206. Figure 1 in the study's Appendix is a flier that circulated throughout the country as Randolph and his supporters attempted to gain momentum for their march.

29 Ibid., 212
workers’ rights. By capitalizing on the anguish and frustration many black Americans felt after the Depression, Randolph was able to portray worker advancements as pivotal and necessary to any civil rights agenda. From this perspective Randolph represents a break from the traditional black scholar in that he sought to unite all black Americans under the collective imperative of universal workers rights.

While scholars had previously recognized the power of economics in struggles against racism, Randolph and other advocates saw it as the essential piece to achieving civil rights victories. As Randolph affirms, “But the Negro race is concerned about Negroes being refused jobs in defense plants, or whether the Negro can purchase a lower in a Pullman Car, or whether the U.S. Treasury segregates Negro girls.” The problems facing black workers had become glaring contradictions no African-American could tolerate. Randolph continued, “Thus, the strengthening of the labor movement, the improvement of black labor standards, brings comfort, health, and decency to black as well as white workers.” Randolph’s devotion to achieving civil rights from the ground up derived from his past. Reminiscent of NAACP and NUL cooperation with communist, Catholic, and Jewish organizations, Randolph was experienced in a myriad of activist environments. As Kirby writes, “It was Randolph’s involvement as a Socialist and labor organizer in the twenties and his analysis of the Roosevelt administration in the thirties, as well as experience with the Negro Congress, that determined his approach to the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) and his attempt to separate it from other struggles.”

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30 Randolph 229
31 Ibid., 210
32 Kirby 171
1941, Randolph had the experience and foresight to recognize the March on Washington as something different in the realm of race politics in the United States.

A seasoned speaker and advocate, Randolph is best known for his MOWM, a proposed peaceful demonstration of the collective power of the black electorate. The march was designed to put pressure on President Roosevelt to desegregate the military and create jobs for African-Americans in the defense industry.\textsuperscript{33} With the support of a majority of black organizations and newspapers, Randolph sought to demonstrate the force of an all African-American movement on the national stage. With President Roosevelt intently watching, the march was to be composed entirely of black supporters. As Randolph stated, "The essential value in an all-Negro movement such as the March on Washington is that it helps create faith by Negroes in Negroes."\textsuperscript{34} The implications of the MOWM movement thus displayed the importance and credibility of mass demonstration for black Americans.

After the news that 50,000 or more black Americans had agreed to march on the nation's capital, Roosevelt met with Randolph and made the arrangements to issue Executive Order 8802, which made discrimination in the defense industry illegal, created the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), and obligated Roosevelt to publicly rebuke the tenants of racism that persisted throughout the country. Not only had the President condemned prejudice in the defense industry, but he also made it a significant priority of his administration to fight social evils facing the black community. Viewing

\textsuperscript{34} Randolph 227
the movement as an immediate success, Randolph acquiesced to Roosevelt’s request and cancelled the march.

While the formation of the FEPC as a result of the MOWM pleased Randolph and many of his supporters, some African-Americans felt a profound sense of betrayal when Randolph abandoned the actual march itself. Writing for the New Republic magazine, Ottley denounced the action wholeheartedly. He writes, “The masses of Negroes were bewildered by the sudden turn of events; indeed, many of Randolph’s own colleagues were disgruntled by the easy conclusion of the affair. Nothing tangible had been gained.” Despite this criticism, the achievements of the MOWM and the FEPC had profound influence over black labor history in the immediate aftermath, particularly in the Philadelphia Transit Strike three years later.

Randolph’s influence was clear in the actions of Philadelphia’s civil rights leadership in the PTC labor struggles. In November 1943, angry African-Americans march on city hall to protest the PTC’s unwillingness to hire black trolley operators. Fueled by the rhetoric of democracy and freedom, the marchers saw integrating the PTC as a direct confrontation with racism. As Wolfinger notes, “For the tens of thousands of African-Americans who rode PTC vehicles everyday and saw nothing by white drivers, Jim Crow at the transit company was a blatant reminder of their second-class status.” Evidence of both a dissatisfaction with current racial policies and the impact of Randolph’s mobilizing efforts, the march on Philadelphia city hall served as a racial precursor to the confrontation during the PTC strike.

35 Ottley 614
36 Wolfinger 113
By creating an environment of change within the United States, thinkers and advocates racialized labor politics in the 1930s and 40s. A. Philip Randolph and the support for the MOWM demonstrated the turning point for African-Americans in 1941. In the years leading up to the PTC strike, membership in organizations such as the NAACP and the NUL skyrocketed. With the foundation of the civil rights struggle laid by Randolph, Harris, Du Bois, Woodson, and many others, the years before 1944 would witness an explosion in activism on a local level. The fuse of the civil rights movement had been lit.
A Burgeoning Movement: Expansion of the NAACP and Other Community Groups During World War II

Throughout the 1930s and 40s, the efforts of black advocacy groups on both the local and national level gave African-Americans greater autonomy over their political lives and engendered a culture of activism that would yield crucial victories in the World War II era. No longer dominated by middle and upper class interests, the NAACP branches represented on-the-ground manifestations of the vision of leaders like Randolph and Harris. Rejecting the paradigms of elitism and class restrictions that defined the early civil rights organizations, the "new crowd" of leaders sought to rectify collective workplace inconsistencies and discrimination.¹ As these advocates preached the importance of local civil rights programs, the activities of local and regional branches became focal points in race politics. In Philadelphia, NAACP Executive Secretary, Carolyn Moore, refocused the branch's program on workplace problems facing blacks in Philadelphia and became a vocal supporter of PTC integration. This section highlights internal changes in NAACP policy in the wake of the Great Depression, while demonstrating the significance of the Philadelphia branch in the PTC dispute. Operating within an intensely democratic rhetoric, black community groups used workers' rights to unite black America.

Before activists centered their attention on the black worker in the 1930s and 40s, middle and upper class African-Americans typically dominated civil rights organizations. NAACP members, for example, recognized the entrance fee they paid as an inherent status symbol. Though dedicated to the tropes of American democracy and equality, the NAACP of the early twentieth century was exceedingly focused on maintaining an elite image in the eyes of their community. As Historian H. Viscount Nelson affirms, “The NAACP was one of the solidly reputable organizations available to status-conscious blacks who were concerned to defend the race against white discrimination while avoiding involvement with ‘fly-by-night’ organizations and ‘opportunist’ who would speak for blacks.” As one of the major centers of NAACP action, the Philadelphia branch was also one of its most overtly class sensitive offices.

For members of the Philadelphia NAACP in the 1920s, organizational activities included piano concerts and poetry readings, along with “a medley of Negro spirituals.” While these events were crucial for the Philadelphia branch’s fundraising efforts, they also widened the gap between educated elite African-Americans and the city’s black working poor. As Nelson notes, “To the black masses, membership drives and fundraising extravaganzas held little attraction—primary reason being the branch’s general lack of empathy with the economic plight faced by the negro majority.” For Philadelphia’s poor black residents, programs geared towards elite and educated group

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3 Ibid., 260
members did little to foster enthusiasm in NAACP agendas and left many poorer Philadelphia blacks feeling isolated and disenfranchised.

The case of the Philadelphia NAACP also reflects a financial and status conscious national NAACP office. In Philadelphia, "the acrimony caused by the omissions from contributors' lists during the 1920s suggests that socially ambitious blacks attributed great importance to payment of the membership fees as a status symbol."4 Similarly, on the national level, NAACP board members were concerned about their financial stability. As Nelson affirms, "To bolster its sagging economy, the New York office decided to head an 'all out' membership drive by sending national executives to several NAACP chapters in order to obtain greater profits from the semi-annual membership campaigns."5 Although similar practices would continue into the 1930s, Harris and other new leaders attempted to derail traditionally class conscious NAACP programs by instituting plans designed to expand membership through worker inclusion efforts, not detailed plans to extort more money from its members.

Despite the inherent focus on middle and upper class affairs until the middle of the 1930s, the NAACP and NUL represented positive beacons of leadership for many African-Americans. Initiatives designed to help blacks in legal cases, worker education classes, and most importantly the support of the federal government, contributed to the general support of NAACP initiatives within the African-American community. During Carolyn Moore's tenure with the Philadelphia NAACP, for example, "African-Americans conducted marches from black churches and the YWCA to city hall."6 As the group's

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4 Nelson 258
5 Ibid., 261
6 Wolfinger 117
focus shifted away from the elite interests to the “ordinary” African-American citizen, marches, rallies, and other demonstrations became an effective gage of popular interest and suggest an increased presence of the poor black worker in local politics. Frustrated with the city’s response to the PTC strike, one Philadelphia man “struck the historic liberty bell with a heavy paper weight.” After being arrested George White, an employee at the city’s Frankford Arsenal ammunition plant, stated, “I have a brother who is in camp in Virginia. He has five children, and yet war workers are being kept from their jobs and stopped from turning out equipment necessary to win the war.” Influenced by NAACP democratic rhetoric, White’s actions represent a growing movement within black Philadelphia. Increasingly frustrated with workplace discrimination, working class blacks and activist groups such as the NAACP used the Transit Strike as fuel for their fight equal treatment and opportunity in Philadelphia’s job spaces.

Activism by the previously politically stagnant black working class gave the civil rights agenda a vital surge in membership that allowed organizations to discuss discrimination on a new venue. Indeed, a newly discovered political clout vaulted race relations to the national stage. As civil rights activist Robert J. Norrell remembered, “The central government overwhelmed the states on those matters it chose to rule. Civil rights did not immediately become such a matter, but the stage had been set for the national government to override southern states’ autonomy in the area of race relations.” While the Roosevelt administration attempted to resurrect the United States from economic

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disaster, black Americans were hopeful that their voices would be heard. "Virtually every speech and article by the proponents of the black struggle at the end of the New Deal era looked forward with optimism," Harvard Sitkoff confirms. "They saw in urbanization, in increasing education, in involvement in the labor movement and politics, and in support by white allies the social base for a growing civil rights movement." Though the majority of African-Americans were still confronted by racism and discrimination, they recognized fundamental social change as realistic and attainable at the beginning of the 1940s.

Utilizing the momentum produced by Harris, Randolph and other early civil rights leaders, the NAACP enlarged its scope to include combating the trials facing working class blacks. As Bates demonstrates, the impetus for change had come from within the organizations themselves as younger leaders emerged from their ranks. She writes, "These critics called for a new emphasis to address the primary problems facing black Americans—bread and butter issues. At both the Amenia Conference in 1933 and during discussions over the so-called Harris Report in 1934-1935, they charged that the NAACP ignored issues central to the lives of the 'masses.'" As the NAACP's program expanded in the late 1930s, its focus included a renewed anti-lynching effort, petitioning against discrimination in the courts, fostering a collective identity through the publication of *The Crisis* and conducting mass meetings. These new leaders replaced many of the status-

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10 Bates 352
forming programs that previously defined NAACP initiatives with larger concepts of unity and collective social improvements.

Within this context of institutional change, the Philadelphia NAACP emerged as one of the most important branches advocating for workers' rights in the early 1940s. Chronicling the role of Carolyn Davenport Moore, the Philadelphia branch’s executive secretary, James Wolfinger reiterates the importance of empowering local offices and emphasizes the fundamental restructuring that occurred at these posts. He writes, “In her tenure in Philadelphia, Moore jettisoned the violin concerts and poetry readings in favor of taking up causes that working-class black Philadelphians found vital. In particular, she attacked housing and employment discrimination and did so in such an effective way that ordinary African-Americans flocked to the NAACP.”

Prior to Moore, NAACP membership in the city had been exceptionally low. From the beginning of her time with the NAACP Moore stressed the necessity of working with the “ordinary people.” As Wolfinger writes, “In the early 1940s, the association assisted black workers to press their case for jobs in federal agencies, called for a permanent FEPC, and helped black workers break the color barrier at Brewster Aeronautical Corporation.” Recognizing the FEPC’s impact on the morale of the working class, Moore focused the Philadelphia branch on projects that would instill confidence from the ground up. To Moore, the black worker was not only the most directly affected by racism, but also held the most potential for activism.

Building from the example set by thinkers such as Harris and Randolph,

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12 Wolfinger 117.
13 James Wolfinger, “‘We Are in the Frontlines in the Battle for Democracy:’ Carolyn Moore and Black Activism in World War II Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania History* 72 (Winter 2005): 6. Taken from Philadelphia’s online history website, Figure 2 of the Appendix displays African-Americans in Philadelphia calling for integration in the PTC. Their signs highlight tactics employed by the NAACP at this time to garner support.
Moore consistently emphasized the vital role of the working class to any form of racial integration.

During the transit strike, Moore and NAACP president Theodore Spaulding solidified the organization's authority as a prolific community leader. When the work stoppage began, the NAACP "applied for permission to send out two person sound trucks to broadcast information on the developments and to urge persons to refrain from violence, but city officials refused to grant permits for the trucks to operate."14 Not only does this passage display the NAACP's commitment to nonviolence, but it also articulates the Association's desire to draw itself deeper within the democratic rhetoric it preached. By operating within the frameworks of institutional democracy, the NAACP portrayed itself as non-militant and calm as many white community groups resorted to violence.

Commitment to the Working Class Becomes Universal

As Moore embodied this new attitude on the local level, Walter White and the national branch made changes during this period that signified a profound policy shift. Convinced that giving local branches more autonomy would benefit larger causes, White and the national office tackled everyday discrimination on an individual level. A break the philosophies of the 1920s NAACP that concentrated racial status and white acceptance, the new NAACP conceived of the treatment of black workers as a barometer of overarching racial paradigms in American society. One aim that encompassed the goals of the NAACP in the late 1930s was a campaign endorsed by the national office.

geared towards gaining equal salaries for black teachers. As Scott Baker notes, this program was one of the most important in the segregated south. He writes, "The practice of paying comparably trained and experienced African-American teachers less than whites was a cornerstone of the southern system of caste education and an ideal target for NAACP legal attacks." Though particularly aggressive in the south, similar campaigns advocating equal pay for teachers emerged as a result of pressure from the Philadelphia NAACP.  

A reinvigorated NAACP fueled by the efforts of local leaders and an enlarged membership was demonstrative of the growing relevancy of civil rights. The changes that occurred within the organization itself reflected a conscious mission on the part of new leadership to include a disenfranchised working class. As Bates writes, "In shepherding the association from an organization that largely ignored the interests of black workers to one that by 1941 had adopted a labor-oriented agenda and made demands by employing the power of collective organization, White had come a long way, and so had the NAACP." In changing the association's agenda, White and other national leaders instantly connected the concerns of the masses to the interests of the elite. Through the development of this relationship, the NAACP emphasized the importance of a unified front against racism and discrimination.

One way civil rights associations fostered a collective experience was by appealing to a shared history and culture that was unique to the black community. In the

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16 Countryman 20
17 Bates 375
case of the NAACP, *The Crisis* magazine was the primary tool the group used to raise important issues and publish poems, stories, and songs that lauded the achievements and history of the black race. Though it had been in circulation since the NAACP’s inception in 1909, *The Crisis* became especially important during the rise in political activism in the 1930s. Over time, the magazine became an important mobilizing tool for the association’s leaders, especially during election years. As Walter White acknowledges in his memoir, “*The Crisis*, official publication of the NAACP, listed such senators whose terms expired in 1930, 1932, and 1934, with the prefatory statement: ‘The following Senators have Negro constituents in considerable, if not larger numbers, and against the expressed wishes of these constituents, they voted for the confirmation of Judge Parker…Paste this in your hat and keep it there until November, 1934.’”¹⁸ Not only does this passage reflect a politically conscious magazine staff, but it also demonstrates the role the *Crisis* played in raising political awareness. White’s autobiography depicts a magazine that is active in political avenues while encouraging blacks to hold their representatives accountable for their actions.

In addition to the political influence *The Crisis* possessed, the magazine also wielded considerable cultural agency. By accepting written contributions from many different branches and authors, the magazine functioned as a repository for literature composed by blacks seeking to articulate their experiences of discrimination. By utilizing the *Crisis* to demonstrate the culture of racism in the United States, NAACP leaders used it as a vehicle for social change. Works submitted to the magazine often appealed to large audiences that related to the pleas, laments, or concerns the writers expressed. In her

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1929 poem, *The Proletariat Speaks*, Alice Dunbar Nelson writes, “And so I work/ In a dusty office, whose grimed windows / Look out in an alley of unbelievable squalor./ Where mangy cats, in their degradation, spurn/ Swarming bits of meat and bread;/ Where odors, vile and breath taking, rise in fetid waves/ Filling my nostrils, scorching my humid, bitter cheeks.” A native Philadelphian, Nelson addresses both structural problems and the mood of her people. Her image of the workplace she is confined in reveals the hopeless feeling many working class blacks experienced at this time. As she looks out into the environment she lives in, Nelson’s poem reflects the frustrations and concerns of the overall black community. Although the poem’s speaker is lucky enough to be employed, it is clear that her working conditions are almost dehumanizing,

Similarly, the poem also speaks to her inability to alter her situation. As she systematically identifies the flaws in a racist system, she can only gaze helplessly with “bitter cheeks.” For a member of the African-American working class at this time, reading a poem like this would resonate with the feelings of frustration, disappointment, and pain distinctive of this era.

Although the NAACP was the largest civil rights group at this time, it was certainly not alone in its goals. Echoing the demands articulated by the Amenia Conference, the National Urban League “called for a class alliances across racial lines.” For the League, class cooperation was not merely important for achieving workplace victories but was also a vital prerequisite for fundamental labor restructuring. Because poor whites often experienced similar work place injustices, the League felt collaborating


20 Weiss 282
with whites could both ease racial divides and positively pressure companies to treat black employees equally. Similarly, a local community group called the Armstrong Association felt that the most effective way for blacks to earn and keep jobs was by presenting themselves in a positive manner. As Weiss writes, “In Philadelphia, the Armstrong Association distributed little flyers of tips for chauffeurs on how to behave on the job. The good chauffeur was ‘polite, coolheaded and obliging.’” Though not direct contrasts to the more overt mass organizing efforts of the NAACP, these forms of activism relied on inclusion and acceptance, rather than civil disobedience or picketing. Although the League saw working towards white acceptance as an effective means of attacking workplace injustices, many African-Americans disliked the idea of interracial cooperation.

*Shifting Political Alliances: FDR, Democrats, and the Power of the Black Voter*

Along with developing ideas of egalitarianism, advocacy, and the illegality of discrimination, black leaders also began to question their devotion to the Republican Party in the post-Depression years. In the wake of extreme economic collapse Republicans began to lose their firm grip on the black electorate in the presence of New Deal politics and FDR’s anti-discrimination agenda. As Vincent Franklin affirms, “The New Deal Era, however, witnessed the mass defection of blacks from the Republican to the Democratic Party, and between 1936-1951 the two parties had to compete for the black vote.” As African-Americans became more politically conscious and active, they recognized that an increased power in elections could be a critical tool in the fight against

21 Ibid., 253
22 Franklin186
racism. “The increasing potential of the black vote,” Simon Topping writes, “eventually became the NAACP’s main political weapon, and it was most often employed against the Republicans.”

Later in his work, when speaking about NAACP President Arthur Spingarn, Topping reiterates, “Spingarn made speeches in eight cities where the black vote could be considered important for Democratic victories, including Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Indianapolis, and Philadelphia.”

In the increased activist environment created and cultivated by the NAACP, politicians attempted to develop lasting relationships with African-American voters. Emerging from electoral obscurity, black communities suddenly found themselves to be politically relevant.

Efforts made by the NAACP and other civil rights organizations to advance their own agendas through political involvement denote a moment of distinction in America’s racial history. For an African-American community increasingly involved in local politics, the events in Washington were becoming exceedingly relevant. Many activists at this time recognized that an understanding of national politics, in addition to local elections, was essential to achieving true electoral gains.

Prior to this moment, African-Americans had predominantly followed the party of Lincoln. As political understanding and activism expanded in the black community, however, organizations and coalitions sought to fight racism on both the structural and individual level. Unequal wages for blacks in Los Angeles were no longer conceptually different than the discrimination.

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24 Ibid., 20
25 Kirby 105
faced by PTC employees in Philadelphia and required the same zeal to combat. Political agency in this case also became a unifying principle for blacks throughout the country.

As the notion of an expanding collective black psyche developed during the 1930s and 40s the Democratic party actively attempted to foster a firm and permanent relationship with black voters and organizations. As Franklin displays, “The reemergence of the Democratic Party during the 1930s and the activities of John Kelly, Francis Biddle, and other Democratic leaders to gain black support meant that the two major political parties would not merely refrain from alienating black voters, but would begin to move on black political demands.”

No longer politically stagnant, the relative power black voters enjoyed encouraged members of a community that were traditionally neglected and pushed the periphery by Washington. As Sitkoff notes, “Although the President had carefully avoided publicly condemning Jim Crow in the defense program, his concessions to the Negro leadership accelerated the train of events propelling civil rights to the fore as a national issue.”

Roosevelt’s ability to avoid radical change while still appeasing black voters was a general characteristic of many Democratic politicians at this time. As Selden Menefee wrote, “The Democratic Party has put itself neatly on the spot on the radical question by adopting a plank which sidesteps every hot issue in this field.” Despite attempts by Democratic Party members to garner support from within the black community many still saw their tactics as shallow and lacking political potency. Still, it was undeniable that

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26 Franklin 187
27 Sitkoff 309
during World War II many African-Americans retreated from the Republican camp in favor of Roosevelt's party.

The creation of the Federal Employment Practices Committee in June 1941 after Executive Order 8802 also entrenched black Americans firmly behind the Democratic platform. As Wolfinger notes, "Ultimately, any FEPC successes drew blacks closer to the Democratic Party and in turn made them demand more of their government and society." Similarly, African-American's burgeoning political role on the national stage translated into local elections and campaigns. In Philadelphia, church leaders, politicians, and civil rights advocates all spoke on the importance of political service in addition to voter responsibility. As Matthew Countrymen affirms, "In 1933, the Rev. Marshall Shepard, a Baptist minister from West Philadelphia, organized a group of black community leaders to demand greater black representation on the local electoral slates of each party." Suddenly, black leaders and organizations were consciously pursuing political office. Although most of the South remained behind many Northern areas in this regard, it is clear that an enhanced voting role had expanded to political representation as well.

**Linking Fascism and Racism: The "Double V" Campaign**

While the political empowerment blacks experienced during this period reflects improved racial conditions, the United States' role in World War II and the consequential explosion of the war industry forced America to reexamine its racist history on an unprecedented scale. As the U.S. joined the allied powers in the fight against fascism,

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29 Wolfinger 102  
30 Countrymen 23
domestic racism became an uncomfortable subject. As Norrell notes, "World War II had forced something that has rarely happened in American history: a reckoning with the conflicts among our national values." Juxtaposed with the perceived evils of totalitarian rule, the United States envisioned itself as a beacon of democracy. No internal conflict shattered this exceptionalist trope more thoroughly than discrimination and racism. As White recalled in his memoir, "Hitler's armies were marching across Europe spreading destruction and devastation. Nothing seemed able to stop the Japanese in Asia and the Pacific. But still the doors of war plants, with but few exceptions, remained closed to Negroes." Confronted with what they saw as a glaring and obvious paradox, civil rights groups capitalized on what was deemed the "Double V" campaign, meaning victory over both fascism and racism. As Sitkoff describes, "Together they pricked the consciences of whites by coupling Nazism with white supremacy and by emphasizing the hypocrisy of opposing fascism at home while countenancing racism at home." Forcing many Americans to confront their own "native fascisms," the NAACP's "Double V" campaign highlighted and emphasized the fundamental democratic tenets of equality and liberty.

In the Philadelphia Transit Strike, the notion of Double Victory was utilized as a method of forcing the strikers to return to their jobs. When General Philip Hayes was sent to reinstitute order in the city, he equated each day the transportation system was shut down to the death toll in Europe and the Pacific. He stated, "Delay in restoring full operation is measured in the blood of American soldiers overseas. Those who obstruct

31 Norrell 68
32 White 189
33 Sitkoff 324
34 Ibid., 298
our operations have that blood on their hands.” Hayes’ statement is demonstrative of the strike’s resonance with most Americans. Only moderately concerned with the work stoppage’s racial overtones, the majority of the population rebuked the PTC’s striking workers for their effect on the war effort. Still, many Americans recognized the strike as a white racist reaction to the influx of black political activity that characterized World War II Philadelphia. ADD QUOTES FROM PAPERS HERE.

Directly linked with the “Double V” campaign, Walter White criticized the culture of the south in his memoir and suggested its ingrained social divides infected the war effort. Recalling a meeting with President Roosevelt he writes, “I pointed out to the President that both the Army and Navy were handicapped with the inefficient and prejudiced Southern officers in he higher ranks; that the backwardness of the South was responsible for fewer opportunities to make good in business and the professions for whites as well as Negroes.” White’s passage further illuminates the connection to the war machine was characteristic of “Double V” rhetoric. As black leaders recognized the importance of the war industry to workplace integration, their rhetoric became intimately focused on black discrimination in the war industry.

As the NAACP and National Urban League committed their combined energies to ending worker discrimination in war plants, they were joined by a myriad of local groups in addition to their governmental allies. The Housewives Guild of Pittsburgh, the National Urban League, and the FEPC, all worked together for three years, for example, fighting for equal employment at Philadelphia’s Bell telephone Company. Though the

37 White 191
group did not successfully force the company to integrate and it remained one of the companies most adamantly opposed to hiring blacks in Philadelphia, the coalition provided constant pressure that demonstrated both collective influence and unwavering determination.\textsuperscript{38} Hardly a unique example, the Bell Telephone Company case provides insight into the types of strategies employed by African-American advocacy groups in the post-Depression era. Presenting a more united attack would not only demonstrate influential alliances to businesses opposed to hiring blacks, but would also signify to political observers the potential electoral power these groups possessed. Growing increasingly conscious of this political agency, black Americans in this period joined their local branches of national organizations in record numbers. During a three year period alone, the Philadelphia NAACP increased by eleven thousand members.\textsuperscript{39}

Although the Bell Company and other labor disputes during the early 1940s enabled African-American groups in Philadelphia to utilize their newfound collective political consciousness, no labor struggle had a more pivotal impact on the city’s race relations that the Philadelphia Transit Case. Occurring roughly concurrently with the Bell Company dispute, the P.T.C integration battle and the white workers’ strike that ensued not only illuminates the power of organizations on the local level but also situates Philadelphia within the trajectory of national race relations discourse.

\textsuperscript{38} Reed 366
\textsuperscript{39} Wolfinger 117
CIO, TWU, and the Trials of Interracial Unionism

Along with the support Philadelphia's black workers received from community organizations, the city's African-Americans found unions increasingly open to new members in the World War II era. While the tradition of interracial unions in Philadelphia began as early as 1905 with the Local 8 of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and their fair wage battles, the ascendancy of the Transportation Workers Union (TWU), a Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) affiliate, in the years prior to the PTC strike of 1944 signified a transition for Philadelphia's black population. As civil rights groups and black intellectuals centered their programs on the black working class, African-Americans employed in select industries found sympathizers in union leadership. Beginning with the foundation of the CIO in 1936, Philadelphia experienced a "burst in union activity" that created new avenues into activism for its black working class.¹ This section chronicles the developing role unions played for a newly political black electorate. Representative of related national movements, the TWU's influence in the PTC labor struggle provided a local test for interracial union activity.

A contemporary and ally of the FEPC and a reinvigorated NAACP, the CIO was instrumental in eliminating discrimination in the work place and the incorporation of that philosophy into the CIO offered the first reason for confidence of Negro workers in labor unions."² Similarly, through its outspoken anti-discrimination policy, the CIO established

² White 211
a relationship with prominent African-American community groups such as the NAACP and the NUL. As August Meier writes, “In the middle thirties, however, came the rise of the CIO, whose racially egalitarian outlook made the NAACP and the Urban League more sympathetic to the labor movement.” Union cooperation with these organizations not only bolstered equal rights programs but also further solidified the black worker as the cornerstone of black activist initiatives.

While the CIO was far from universally integrated, the American Federation of Labor’s (AFL) widely recognized racist policies designated the CIO as progressive and accepting of black members. At its very core, the union recruited “younger, politically engaged activists, many from socialist, communist, or radical union backgrounds—men and women who sympathized with the plight of America’s black families and who were eager to build on the country’s real, though episodic, heritage of biracial labor activism.”

In the Philadelphia case, the CIO’s Transport Workers’ Union (TWU) would not only serve as an important supporter of civil rights campaigns, but would also successfully challenge the racial tenets that determined the city’s workplace interactions.

Union Politics and Power Struggles in Pre-War Philadelphia

Before the TWU was elected to represent PTC employees in the spring of 1944, it overcame a fierce power struggle with the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Employees Union (PRTEU) and the AFL’s Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway and

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Motor Coach Employees of America. Despite accusations of communist roots, the TWU was vocal in its desire to integrate the PTC. As historian Allan Winkler writes, “The incumbent PRTEU proclaimed its intention to keep Negroes off the platforms while Amalgamated maintained an uneasy silence on the matter. Only TWU promised promotion of blacks to any job for which they qualified.”

ADD STATS ON MARGIN

OF VICTORY. Though anti-discrimination was not the crux of the union disputes, the TWU’s large margin of victory despite its pro-integration stance suggests were ultimately not the deciding issue for most PTC employees.

Paradoxically, the strike’s genesis can be traced to the PRTEU’s landslide loss to the TWU in the 1944 elections. Led by several members of the PTC’s former bargaining committee including James McMenamin, its president, James Dixon, and Frank Thompson, the striking workers sought to use the city’s racial tensions as a way to shame the TWU. As Walter Ruch wrote in the final days of the walkout, “It appeared that the anti-TWU factions among the employees had seized on the racial issue to provoke a strike to embarrass the majority union.”

Racial explanations for the strike thus obscure a more complicated narrative of union power politics, anger, and dissension. Although most certainly a powerful force in the continuation and expansion of the PTC dispute, race was also a tool utilized by a frustrated group of employees to defame the TWU.

Still, black promotions in the Transit Company were symbolically important to the PTC’s white workers. Beyond obvious fears deriving from questions of job security,

5 Winkler 79
6 Walter W. Ruch, “Philadelphia Strike a Hard Blow”
the white workers felt considerable pressure from a myriad of angles. As Wolfinger affirms, "PTC strikers were bitter about black promotions not just because they would mean workplace access for African-Americans, but also because the federal government was forcing the move, because they believed their union should have protected their prerogatives rather than support black advancement, and because the PTC was just the tip of iceberg in a city going through many racial changes." With the government enforcing, at least in a limited capacity, the president’s Executive Order 8802, McMenamin and the other strikers felt backed into a corner. Alienated from the union and politically isolated from the federal government, striking workers conceived of the strike as a formal stance against shifting racial policies across the country. As a handbill that was posted in several PTC buildings during the strike read:

"Your buddies are in the Army fighting and dying to protect the life of you and your family, and you are too yellow to protect their jobs until they return. Call a strike and refuse to teach the Negroes, the public is with you, the CIO sold you out." \(^8\)

For many of the white PTC workers, conflicting notions of identity and citizenship enveloped the strike’s logic. As black activists circulated claims equating discrimination the fascism, the striking workers symbolically viewed equal access to PTC jobs as a continuation of the regional and national initiatives that eased racial divides in the 30s and 40s. Although the flier overtly expresses anger at the PTC for easing Philadelphia’s racial tensions, it also uncovers deeply buried connections between the war effort, employment, and white activism during this period. Conceiving of the war as an

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\(^7\) Wolfinger 143-144
\(^8\) Ruchames 109. Quoted from Weckler and Weaver *Negro Platform Workers* pg. 12
ideological struggle for the continuation of the American status quo, these workers
rejected the idea that World War II could produce a more egalitarian system at home.

This handbill also romanticizes the American soldier in a way that distinguishes white
from black. When the flier mentions the goal of the Army as “protecting the life you and
your family,” it specifically leaves out black Americans. By excluding the black
community from the security of the American army, the flier perpetuates African-
Americans as sub-category citizens. Thus as black thinkers and advocates attempted to
restructure the American narrative to include them, forces within the white population
sought to reinforce their exclusion from it.

White workers throughout the country saw the workplace as rigidly defined and
divided. Viewing more important jobs as inherently “white” and more menial jobs as
“black,” many poor working class whites felt uneasy when the NAACP, FEPC, and CIO
attempted to disrupt the previously concrete workplace dichotomy. In the PTC dispute,
employees loyal to the PRTEU promised “chaos and impairment” to Philadelphia’s
public transportation system if the company was forced to promote the eight black
employees.⁹ Calling for educational campaigns among the PTC’s workforce, the PRTEU
saw an integrated trolley drivers division as both a breach on their union contract and an
unwanted racial change. As one worker said, “It would be a violation of a contract clause
and it’s my belief that the men might do anything.”¹⁰ Nearly a year before the transit
strike commenced, opponents of integration were hinting that the promotion of African-

⁹ Philadelphia Record, “Employees’ Union Protests PTC’s Hiring Negroes,” Philadelphia
Record, Dec. 9, 1943.
¹⁰ Ibid.
Americans would cause a significant disturbance in Philadelphia’s racial arena. Although many anticipated a violent response to the promotions, the public threat of white resistance was a particularly alarming thought in the shadow of the Harlem and Detroit race riots in 1943. Often used as strike breakers, blacks drew especially militant responses from white immigrant communities that they competed with for unskilled jobs. As Zieger notes, “Schooled in the dog-eat-dog world of racial job competition, immigrant workers had learned to disdain blacks just as they were disdained in the nation’s schools, churches, courts, and political organs.”\textsuperscript{11} While these conflicts never erupted in the way like similar disputes across the country, extremely volatile white immigrant-black relations kept the city on edge throughout the PTC strike.

\textit{The PTC Strike, TWU, and the Implications of Black Promotions}

Formally admitting blacks into unions became a problem for labor organizers despite CIO and TWU devotion to the promises of racially integrated union activity. Fears of white workers’ reactions to black union members often quelled CIO grand schemes of biracial unionism. As activist Blanche Paget worried in a 1936 issue of \textit{Opportunity} magazine, “If the employer just hires a Negro and sends him to work in with white people who have not been warned by their union, there may be trouble.”\textsuperscript{12} Similarly, although the CIO was overtly committed to racial integration, institutional realities often reduced the impact of union membership for many black Americans. Even

\textsuperscript{11} Zieger 114
as AFL divisions remained “bastions of white privilege,” CIO unions often failed to uphold many of their promises to black workers. Indeed, as Zieger confirms, “Unions in the rebel CIO, though generally more responsive to the concerns of black workers, often held narrow views of workplace justice, and sometimes pursued bargaining strategies that had the effect of locking African-Americans into low-wage insecure jobs.”

Similarly, several prominent black figures were cautious in endorsing the CIO. Ralph Bunche, for instance, did not believe that there was much ground to be gained in union politics for the black community. As Kirby notes, “Although he felt that blacks should continue to demand entry into these organizations, he was pessimistic that anything would be achieved given the structure of organized labor.” By presenting inconsistent policies towards African-American members, the CIO reinforced concerns over union participation in the black community.

The TWU’s involvement in the drama leading up to the Philadelphia Transit Strike illuminates the role unionism played in integrating the company. Prior to the CIO’s creation in 1936, PTC employees were members of the PRTEU. Adamantly opposed to black promotions, the PRTEU was served essentially as a “partner” for PTC management and routinely implemented bad worker contracts. Although PTC employees were often dissatisfied, they remained silent because PTC became a kind of “inheritance” that could be transferred from father to son. As Wolfinger affirms, “These workers counted on their jobs, counted on passing them down to their kids, and having just come

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13 Zieger 106-107
14 Kirby 212
through the Depression, they wanted every driving job reserved for themselves. That sentiment gave the PRTEU its power." With the support of the company and by protecting the jobs of white employees, the PRTEU held its position firmly by serving as the ultimate buffer to outside forces that might threaten the jobs of the PTC's white employees. As World War II progressed abroad, however, worker shortages in Philadelphia made the prospect of PTC integration a reality.

Most encouraging for an anxious black labor movement was the union's sustained commitment to integration throughout the duration of the strike. As the Washington Post wrote, "The CIO Transport Workers' Union, the official bargaining agency, has denounced the strike, and has refused even to sit in conference with a committee chosen by the strikers." By refusing to meet with the strike's leaders, the TWU demonstrated that it would not only keep its promise to Philadelphia's black workers, but it also remained undaunted by building pressure from white workers. As community organizations deployed rhetoric of democracy and the 'Double V' campaign, the TWU was seen as institutional proof that democratic frameworks could uphold fundamentally "American" concepts like equal rights and access. Applauding the accomplishments of the TWU's president, Michael Quill, the New York Times reported, "The efforts of Mr. Quill and officers of the Transport Workers Union were characterized as having demonstrated the sincerity of this labor organization in its desire to extend the rights of

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15 Wolfinger 115
16 Washington Post
collective bargaining to all American workers." Not retreating as the strike materialized, the TWU and its president, Michael Quill, became powerful figures for blacks still hesitant to join the union.

The Roots of Interracial Unionism in Philadelphia and the Legacies of Integration

Although the TWU’s role in the PTC worker negotiations represented a foundational shift in the city’s labor politics, union history has deeper roots that establish the framework for interracial unionism during World War II. Part of the IWW, Local 8 was created as a “radical alternative to the AFL” in the early 1900s. Dissatisfied with union leadership and its inherently capitalist framework, local 8 “was dedicated to the proposition that all workers regardless of race, color, creed, national origin, sex, and skills should be organized into One Big Union.” Despite the IWW’s influence in various industrial centers, the “Wobblies” held particular significance in Philadelphia’s longshoremen network because “1,369 of the 3,063 dockworkers were black.” Though unions had traditionally been a tool of segregation and racist policies in Philadelphia prior to this moment, the Local 8 and the IWW became “facilitator[s] of interracial solidarity, social equality and empowerment.” Similarly, Local 8 was instrumental in engendering an atmosphere of activism for the city’s black community. In May of 1914,

20 Ibid., 216
21 Howard Kimeldorf and Robert Penney, “‘Excluded’ By Choice: Dynamics of Unionism on the Philadelphia Waterfront.” 50
for example, Local 8 members went on strike “to celebrate their first anniversary and to make this a L-e-a-g-e-a-l holiday under our jurisdiction.” Not only does this reflect a growing agency within a largely uneducated black work force, but also foreshadows the role unionism would play in the outcome of the PTC dispute.

Although the efforts of the IWW and the Local 8 union were isolated exceptions to a largely racist union system, it is vital to see their roles in Philadelphia as precursors to the formation of the CIO in the mid-1930s. Two decades before the CIO competed with the AFL for control of Philadelphia’s workers, the IWW rejected racist union polices in favor of integrated membership. As Peter Cole affirms, “The IWW preached interracial unionism, primarily due to its commitment to class struggle.” Disregarding racial differences, “Wobblies” are the close relative of revolutionary CIO affiliates like the United Auto Workers Union in Detroit. Frequently called the “lamp of democracy,” the CIO incorporated blacks not only as members, but also as union officials. Ultimately, the “strong basis for biracial unionism” allowed the CIO to instill union confidence in a traditionally disenfranchised black population.

Although African-American participation in the arena of union politics had been historically limited, the formation of the CIO signified a new era for black activists. Working together with the NAACP and the FEPC, the CIO affiliate TWU expanded the scope of black unionism in Philadelphia by acting as a persistent ally to civil rights discourses. Committed to utilizing the whole of the PTC’s workforce, the TWU

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23 Ibid., 52
supported the FEPC directive that recommended the company promote eight black employees to the motormen training program. United with the FEPC and expanding on intense activist fervor in the city, the TWU proved to be an important proponent of interracial unionism and black justice. Despite visible weaknesses and inconsistencies, the TWU's involvement in the PTC strike reflected a growing national trend that indicated an increased black presence in traditionally white unions. Along with the NAACP, the TWU helped to firmly establish another new avenue for black workers to vent their frustrations. In the Philadelphia situation, these new outlets would function symbiotically with the FEPC as the fight for an integrated PTC endured.
"Faith By Negroes in Negroes": The Evolution of the FEPC in the Philadelphia Strike

As the NAACP and NUL gained momentum in the early 1940s, A. Philip Randolph’s MOWM forced President Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 8802, which effectively created the Fair Employment Practices Committee. Seeking to avoid the "embarrassing march," Roosevelt acquiesced to the demands of Randolph and his supporters by establishing the Committee directly under his auspices and power. Although it had limited legislative authority, the FEPC proved to be an important symbol for an increasingly politically conscious African-American community. Against the backdrop of World War II, the FEPC became a representation of democracy at work as the United States engaged in an ideological struggle against Nazism. As Eileen Boris affirms, "The FEPC laid the foundation for later anti-discrimination efforts, including affirmative action, embodying in its practice the tension between non-discrimination and positive action that characterizes this history. Lessons learned during the WWII administration of the FEPC led future advocates of anti-discrimination to push for an independent agency with enforcement powers." While the FEPC could not avoid controversy for much of its existence, the Philadelphia Transit Strike and the notion of "genuine democracy" established workplace discrimination as the primary focus of the civil rights groups and activists.

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1 Randolph 227
Violence, Militancy, and the PTC strike

The FEPC’s impact on Philadelphia’s race relations were some of its most crucial. As labor shortages during World War II threatened one of the country’s largest war industry centers, African-Americans in Philadelphia sensed an opportunity to not only obtain jobs, but also a chance to enter work spaces they were traditionally barred from. Still, unemployed blacks did not universally inherit the void created by workers leaving for war. As the PTC suffered from intense worker shortages, the company distributed handbills and pamphlets to its workforce that promised ten dollars for each new employee they recruited. Similar ads circulated around the city claiming, “Here are some of the jobs that keep vital war transportation going!” While these initiatives did not directly note the racial requirement for “car operator” and mechanic’s helper” positions they advertised, the fliers targeted Philadelphia’s white population.

When recruiting campaigns failed to solve the company’s employment troubles, PTC officials turned to Philadelphia’s white female population. In spite of its refusal to upgrade black workers, the company felt that opening jobs to women was evidence of a progressive action that demonstrated its commitment to American values. As one flier reads, “You may know of women who have never worked before but now wish to play an active role in the war effort. If you can persuade such women to take a job with PTC, you will not only be rewarded but you will have the satisfaction of knowing you are making still another contribution to Victory.” For a company desperately attempting to maintain worker transportation for “war-essential industry jobs,” hiring white women was an acceptable and logical solution to employment deficiencies.

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5 PTC flier from NAACP papers 1939-1946.
6 Ibid
Still, as problems associated with an inadequate number of workers made hiring blacks a reality, racial tensions in the city were tested. In an article for the *Washington Post*, Ben Gilbert exposes the conflict work place integration caused. He writes, “Philadelphia, a major war production center, has just been classified as a Group 1 labor shortage area by the War Manpower Commission. As in other labor-short cities, wartime pressures have increased job opportunities for Negroes and aggravated racial tensions.”

As the FEPC increased its role in Philadelphia, feelings of apprehension could erupt into violence. Indeed as Harvard Sitkoff notes, “The establishment of the FEPC, and all that it implied, intensified the belligerence of the black community.”

Writing specifically about the militancy of the black community at this time, Sitkoff articulates the volatility of the Philadelphia context. In the midst of the strike, “a wave of fear spread throughout the city with the outbreak of a series of disorders soon after night fell.” During the first few days of the strike, threats of violence from an angry black population loomed, with national news coverage focusing on black unrest. As the *Evening Courier* in Urbana, Illinois reported, “Gangs of armed Negroes roamed a residential section of northwest Philadelphia today, smashing 500 windows and attacked and seriously injured eight white persons.”

Skewed perceptions of the violence surrounding the strike reflects the general racial trends of the. Despite the well-publicized facts about the *white* workers strike,

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8 Sitkoff 323
Americans throughout the country implicated Philadelphia's black population for the violence.

As the NAACP and other community groups attempted to quell widespread violence, the FEPC utilized the War Manpower Commission (WMC) to force PTC integration. Although trolley jobs officially became open to black workers on July 31, 1944, "company officials made it clear that they were complying not FEPC directives, but with the WMC order."\textsuperscript{11} By making this distinction, the PTC attempted to distance itself from the controversy surrounding the FEPC. As white workers threatened action, company officials sought to definitively display their loyalty to their white workforce and actually came to the aid of the strike's leaders. During the strike, corporate officials cancelled a board of director's meeting that could have helped bring the stoppage to a close and "declined to join TWU, FEPC, and Red Cross representatives on a radio program urging workers to return to their posts."\textsuperscript{12} Amidst the adamant protests of the PTC leadership and its striking workers, the coalition of organizations working in conjunction with the FEPC proved to be a positive sign for the city's black population.

Although black workers in Philadelphia enjoyed benefits as a result of WMC and TWU involvement in the transit strike, the FEPC's inability to carry the same political power revealed many of the agency's inadequacies. As Winkler affirms, "Beyond production losses and their effect on the war effort, the strike exposed the limits of FEPC's power. The committee lacked final authority to enforce its decisions. Only with


\textsuperscript{12} Wolfinger 144
strong executive backing could it hope to achieve its aims.’’ Along with concerns of the FEPC’s political prowess, many within the black community feared that the gains achieved during war would be meaningless once Hitler was defeated. After World War I, many of the employment gains blacks had earned were promptly eradicated as soldiers returned home and the racial status quo resumed. As the FEPC and black organizations equated wartime employment with the promise of democracy, concerns that war-time employment would not translate to eras of peace surfaced in black communities across the country. As Anna Arnold Hedgeman reported, “Frustration and insecurity, it was demonstrated, still haunt millions of minority group Americans; for although they have made tremendous gains through employment in war industry, they have made practically no advance in any industry which is basic to peace-time economy.”  

Similarly, in his analysis of African-American employment in the aircraft industry Weaver worried, “Despite this action, there was only a slight relaxation of the color bar in aircraft in the months immediately following.” General discussion of the level of worker integration and FEPC influence led many within the black community both during the war and after to question the agency’s overall effectiveness.

**Federal Involvement and Rethinking “Americanism”**

The WMC’s involvement in the PTC disputes signaled a more intimate federal role in Philadelphia. Although the WMC’s participation in the Transit Company case

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13 Winkler 89
14 Anna Arnold Hedgeman, “FEPC,” *Washington Post*, July 5, 1944. Figure 3 in the Appendix demonstrates one way pro-FEPC movements took in the 1940s.
certainly contributed to the eventual promotion of eight African-American employees, many historians have incorrectly linked the necessity of WMC intervention to FEPC failings. For blacks in the “northernmost southern city,” the FEPC functioned as an important symbol of optimism that coalesced a budding civil rights movement that inspired a community that was traditionally isolated from their local and national governments. The confidence and support of the Roosevelt administration through the FEPC established important precedents for federal intervention in race related labor disputes. As Weaver wrote, “The Federal government, hesitantly and belatedly, gave such evidence through the creation of the FEPC, and that wartime agency has become a symbol to Negro Americans.”

Although his passage directly addresses the FEPC, his rhetoric implies an expanded notion of black identity. The term “Negro Americans” not only reflects the association of democracy and worker equality characteristic of the Philadelphia Transit strike, but also suggests a loosening of racial divides that separated white and black America.

Classifying the black community as “American” Weaver’s passage reflects an expanding notion of Americanism characteristic of the World War II era. As speeches, articles, and movies advanced the importance of democracy and freedom in the face of the Nazi threat, African-Americans began to see themselves included in the American frame. Quoting Roosevelt in a speech in Louisville, FEPC Executive Secretary George Johnson states, “‘Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry.’” By redefining the American identity to include blacks, the FEPC was the crucial piece in

16 Weaver 308.
17 George M. Johnson. May 23, 1943 Delivered before the Louisville Pan-Hellenic Council
empowering the African-American community. For Malcolm Ross, the agency’s black president, the African-American worker was the vehicle through which shifting black consciousness would manifest itself. As Reed confirms, “The FEPC would strike down the barriers, Ross promised, by using specific evidence that ‘here stands a worker whom is country needs.’” By demonstrating the value of the black worker the United States’ overall employment landscape, the FEPC consistently asserted the tropes of democracy, equality, and “Americanism” to both white and black citizens. The FEPC was thus permanently linked to the activism that became an increasingly integral part of the developing black identity.

As the product of a growing movement in the black community, the FEPC at its core was the culmination of a mobilizing and politically active base that attempted to propel civil rights to the foreground of the American consciousness. As Robert Weaver notes, “Early in its development, FEPC established a procedure of basing its operations upon the receipt of specific complaints alleging discriminatory employment practices.” Depending totally on grievances filed on an individual basis, the FEPC represented and formally endorsed a space for blacks to voice frustrations and anxieties. Consequently, from its inception the FEPC was fueled by community involvement and support. Without active participation, the FEPC would be powerless to come to the aid of black workers. Still, inherent problems often skewed these complaints. As Weaver continues, “When a few establishments were open to them, the majority of Negroes flocked to these ‘sure’ plants. This meant that few applied at the establishments which continued to discriminate

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18 Reed146
19 Weaver 143
against black workers.\textsuperscript{20} Because black workers were eager to obtain jobs at businesses or companies known for hiring African-Americans, the FEPC was never able to address many of the most aggressive and overt discrimination cases. In Philadelphia, black workers limited their formal complaints to select companies where they felt the FEPC could attain real results. The FEPC was also in constant conflict with the United States Employment Service (USES), the federal agency that traditionally handled workplace complaints. As the USES claimed to be sensitive in discrimination cases, the FEPC consistently contended that the organization refused to discipline employers known for racist hiring policies.\textsuperscript{21} As Weaver notes, "In Philadelphia, for example, some USES staff members were still asking employers if they would accept Negroes as late as the spring of 1945. But FEPC has constantly put pressure on the United States Employment Service and the practice slowly declined."\textsuperscript{22} As the President's committee battled external discrimination, the FEPC also combated unsympathetic USES members within the government.

\textit{FEPC Actions During the Strike}

The FEPC suffered from institutional and enforcement problems that limited its effectiveness as a remedy to the iniquities facing the black worker. Most apparent was the lack of legal enforcement power the agency had as a result of its status as an executive order.\textsuperscript{23} Additionally, the system of relying on complaints against specific companies left significant room for workplace discrimination to slip through the cracks. Along with

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ruchames 47
\textsuperscript{22} Weaver 149
\textsuperscript{23} Wolfinger 100
inadequate legislative power, the Committee itself was prone to infighting and power struggles that endangered its overarching goals. As Merl Reed affirms, “There was also friction on the staff. Will Maslow, the director of field operations, remained a constant irritant to many blacks in the agency. According to his detractors, Maslow came to the FEPC with such limited racial experience that he spent weeks reading books on the subject.” Ultimately, “the FEPC did not speak with one voice, however, especially under the regional structure of the second committee. The case by case basis also generated contradictory rulings.” Without a more solid foundation and legal support system, many feared the FEPC would be meaningless against the deeply ingrained racism it sought to disrupt. As Reed continues, “The FEPC’s spirit was commendable, but it could not ‘prevail against such forces with no more than presidential prestige and moral force behind it.’” As the FEPC continued to work towards rectifying individual situations, many African-American activists felt that a restructured and permanent Committee with legal authority was the only way to achieve true gains in the realm of workers’ rights.

While black leaders debated the role and power of the FEPC, white southern politicians took steps to disrupt and discredit the agency. Virtually from its inception the FEPC drew considerable criticism from southern congressmen who rejected both the notion of worker equality and failed to recognize the need for policy changes on the matter. In the Philadelphia Transit Company case, one Georgia Dixiecrat even blamed the FEPC for the strike itself. As the Washington Post reported, “If there had been no FEPC,”

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24 Reed 150
25 Boris 147
26 Reed 140
Senator Russell said, "not a single man-hour would have been lost and there would have been no racial disturbances or bitterness." The Senator’s statement is not merely a reflection of the general southern democratic position, but rather an ironic reaffirmation of the principles and beliefs the FEPC was fighting. To Senator Russell, the Committee was created to deliberately exacerbate racial apprehensions rather than to alleviate worker discrimination during the war. Russell’s comments also designate Congress as an ominous enemy civil rights groups often had to contend with.

Although the senator’s position is demonstrative of a discriminatory agenda, other powerful political opponents frequently clashed with the FEPC. As the transit strike in Philadelphia crippled the city’s transportation services, the Howard Smith Committee served as an ardent and stalwart opponent to worker integrations at Philadelphia’s defense industry plants. During Philadelphia’s transportation crisis the strike became a public forum for debate with Smith as a primary instigator. As Wolfinger notes, “Howard Smith was one of the New Deal’s bitterest opponents. He detested big government and social welfare programs but reserved even more venom for supporters of black rights and organized labor.” His Smith-Connelly Act, passed only a few months before the strike in Philadelphia had severely reduced labor’s rights during wars. During a series of hearings in 1944, Smith berated Committee members and many feared that his tactics were particularly poisonous as the House prepared to debate the legality of the FEPC. Though the supporters of the President’s Committee held firm against the southern congressman’s attacks their protests often were overlooked or unnoticed by Smith and the

28 Wolfinger 130
29 Ibid., 131
House Committee. As Winkler writes, "They refuted Smith's contention that FEPC had no power because it was not grounded in law, but failed to convince either union representatives or members of the House Committee who disagreed. The hearing resolved no difficulties; it only exacerbated existing tensions." Not only did these hearings fail to produce results on the FEPC, the discussion in the meeting often strayed from the legality of the agency entirely and revealed the divisive nature of civil rights efforts. As The Washington Post reported, "Debate strayed far from the merits of the agency and delved into abstract and irrelevant questions of race relations." Although the Post chronicles them as "abstract and irrelevant," the questions raised at the FEPC debates in 1944 not only foreshadow later civil rights disputes, but also place the FEPC and the Philadelphia case at the center of an intense ideological battle on the House floor. Despite its eventual defeat in 1946, the FEPC jumpstarted legal dialogues about racism that would culminate in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Although in Washington FEPC hearings during the strike were generally unproductive for an anxious and frustrated black community, local meetings and forums demonstrated the potential power and support the FEPC could provide. In Philadelphia, "through citywide and regional hearings, private meetings, and administrative determinations against firms and unions, the FEPC was more effective than its low budget and limited authority might suggest." Despite outspoken opponents and institutional weaknesses, the FEPC enjoyed success on the grassroots level. Dedicated Committee members strove to create an agency that was much more than symbol for

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30 Winkler 78
32 Boris 145
African-Americans. Indeed, as the Washington Post reported, “Its continuance is hedged about with certain frustrating amendments which are obviously mischievous – and were intended to be so. The FEPC can be counted upon, nevertheless, to hew quietly yet persistently, as it has in the past, at formal discriminations which all believers in democracy must regret.”

In order for the FEPC to survive, its strongest advocates recognized the necessity for compromise. Building on the mantras of democracy and freedom perpetuated and trumpeted during World War II, the FEPC negotiations and hearings served as importance venues for civil rights advocacy that would be expanded upon in the years to come. While the association between anti-discrimination and democracy only ensured the FEPC’s temporary survival, it also acted as an additional step for the reexamination of the United States’ racial practices. The influence of the FEPC was particularly acute in Philadelphia where “even after Congress killed the federal committee in 1946, black Philadelphians continued to believe that the FEPC was a valuable ally and engaged in a decade-long campaign to establish city and state organizations.”

Along with the FEPC’s success in the Transit Strike, the Committee’s involvement in the Sun Shipbuilding Company displays the agency’s power in Philadelphia. A stalwart opponent of workplace integration, the Sun Shipbuilding Company was one of the first employers in the city to comply with FEPC requests. Coupled with the later PTC victory, the Sun Shipbuilding began a new era for Philadelphia’s black workers. As Alfred Baker Lewis wrote, “Together with the opening up of jobs for 9000 Negroes in the Sun Shipbuilding Co’s plant at Chester, PA, it shows

33 Washington Post. FEPC Survives
34 Wolfinger 101
that at long last some genuine, if belated, progress is being made toward giving Negroes the same rights as all of our other citizens."\textsuperscript{35} Through the agency's involvement in the Philadelphia Transit Strike and the Sun Shipbuilding case, the FEPC entrenched itself within the city's racial debates and remained a prominent figure in Philadelphia's racial history.

"Double V" and the FEPC

For the black community, the FEPC represented a triumph of the tenets of democracy. As the United States prepared to enter World War II, civil rights groups capitalized on anti-Nazi rhetoric and interpreted their cause as both essential for the survival of democracy and America as a whole. As \textit{The Washington Post} writes, "To Negroes, the minority most urgently in need of its protection, the agency symbolizes the Government's recognition of their plight. Through the activities of the FEPC, war employment otherwise barred to them because of racial prejudice has been open up to them."\textsuperscript{36} Closely linked to the defense industry and American victory in Europe, the jobs the FEPC helped African-Americans obtain were as much about upholding the tenets of American democracy as they were about breaking free from traditional barriers.

While blacks welcomed these new jobs as rewards for generations of oppression, many whites supported integration programs because of the impact worker shortages could have on America's war effort. As Rear Admiral Richard Byrd claimed in 1941, "In the name of human freedom, in the name of common sense and fair play, in the name of America's future, I call upon the people of the United States to help eliminate such

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\item \textsuperscript{35} Alfred Baker Lewis, "Ending Discrimination," \textit{The Washington Post}, July 1, 1942.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Washington Post May 27, 1944.
\end{itemize}
discrimination wherever it may be found, and especially in the defense industries of America."\(^{37}\) Still, Byrd was not totally blind to the problem race posed for a country claiming ideological superiority over a fascist dictator. Speaking further about discriminative practices in Naval plants, Byrd continued, "If we are to preserve our American heritage, such policies must stop," he continued. "We cannot build freedom on discrimination."\(^{38}\) Similarly, Dr. Robert Searle equated discrimination with "treachery." He stated, "The nation needs the enlistment of every pair of hands, and ‘whoever rejects the skill of any man on the basis of race of creed comes perilously near treachery,’ Dr. Searle said."\(^{39}\) With the help of the support of prominent military, social, and governmental figures like Admiral Byrd and Robert Searle, the FEPC's goals were related to the "Double V" campaign being propagated by the NAACP and other activists at this time.

In addition to the myriad of allies the FEPC enjoyed, President Roosevelt's support helped advance the agency's agenda. While Roosevelt's creation of the FEPC was primarily driven out of self-preservation and saving face in the global sense, his outspoken support for abandoning discrimination in the workplace made him an important ally for civil rights leaders. In a letter circulated throughout his entire administration, Roosevelt states, "No loyal citizen of the United States should be denied the democratic right to exercise the responsibilities of his citizenship, regardless of his ancestry."\(^{40}\) Throughout his political career Roosevelt had expressed sympathy and


\(^{38}\) Ibid


\(^{40}\) George M. Johnson speech
sadness for the suffering African-Americans continued to endure, but the activism of the early 1940s surprised him. As Sitkoff notes, “To Roosevelt, the Negro always remained an unfortunate ward of the nation- to be treated kindly and with charity as a reward for good behavior. Nothing in his political past prepared him for the new black assertiveness.”41 Incidentally, “his decision to establish the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practices reflected the intensification of Negro militancy as well as the importance of the black vote in national elections.”42 Despite self-fulfilling motivations, Roosevelt genuinely believed in the FEPC and felt worker discrimination should be eradicated. In a 1942 letter he wrote, “I look for an acceleration of this improvement as the demand for labor in our war industries increases and as the Committee of Fair Employment Practice develops its means for meeting specific situations.”43 Whatever the impetus behind Executive Order 8802, Roosevelt denoted the workplace as the arena where the opening battles of the civil rights struggle would be fought.

Although the FEPC had a strong presence in several major cities, the Philadelphia Transit case was its most crucial test. While the work stoppage did not occur until August 1944, as early as November 1943, “the FEPC issued directives to the Philadelphia Transportation Company and to the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Employees’ Union instructing them to cease and desist from discriminating on the basis of race in hiring and upgrading.”44 Nearly a year before the strike began, the FEPC was involved in a bitter clash with the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Employee’s Union (PRTEU) over the issue of

41 Sitkoff 676-677
42 Sitkoff 334
44 Weaver 159
upgrading black employees to trolley driver positions. While the PRTEU adamantly opposed these actions ostensibly because of the threat they posed to worker seniority, neither the FEPC nor leading advocates called for a disruption of the PTC's promotional system. Company officials, however, did not relay this information to their employees. As Weaver notes, "It seems evident, however, that union officials did not transmit this fact to the rank and file of PTC employees but continued to use the false seniority issue as a means of rallying employee resistance to the up-grading of Negroes." Used as a justification for resistance to FEPC worker integration programs, the seniority issue was a powerful weapon instituted by strike leaders to unite and angry and fearful workforce.

The roughly 2,000 white PTC employees that actively participated in the Philadelphia's transit strike reflected national concerns that were demonstrative of the era. In a letter to the NAACP, one Philadelphian voiced his opposition to the FEPC because he believed it threatened his sons' jobs. The letter's author states that his sons should be entitled to PTC jobs when they return and provides a vivid example of the ethos Double V campaigns critiqued. He writes, "My sons told me that if they should come home and find Niggers on the PTC they might mistake them for Japs and shoot them between the eyes." In his letter, this father reveals not only the concern for individual job security but also likens the PTC situation to the Detroit riots that occurred only a few months earlier. He proclaims, "What happened in Detroit last June? There is a city where there are 1500 Negroes as motormen, conductors, and bus drivers on the DSR...Riots, that is what will happen if the PTC hires Negroes." Fearing violence, the

45 Weaver 160
46 Letter to the NAACP January 6, 1944. NAACP papers
author is thankful that “the PTC does not have to depend on the Nigger vote like the politicians are doing in Philadelphia.” Concerned about the political ramifications of African-American activism, this father saw the FEPC and black empowerment as a rejection of the principles he believed in.

Reminiscent of the concerns of the strike leaders, this father looks apprehensively on Philadelphia and is alarmed by the expanding activism of the black community. As one striker stated, “This is a case of the white race keeping its place.” Conceiving of expanding African-American political power, through the efforts of the NAACP and FEPC, as an affront on their own interests, many white Philadelphians saw themselves backed into a corner. These Philadelphians saw their worst fears manifested in the PTC dispute. With the presence of the FEPC and the U.S. army in Philadelphia, the government’s response to the strike confirmed their belief that the government had deserted them.

Not only did the outcome of the PTC strike threaten profound changes on the local level, but it also hinted at broader national restructuring. At a grand jury hearing on August 9, Judge George A Welsh stressed the importance of seeking justice in the Philadelphia situation. He worried, “Something that happens in Philadelphia today-something wherein the truth did not prevail- could have its repercussions in the length and breadth of the land and have its effect on the national election.” The concern that the Philadelphia strike could establish a precedent that would be followed by other America cities is a corollary to broader debates about race relations in general. Fearful

48 Ibid
whites saw the events in Philadelphia as a threat to their survival. Not only had the President issued the directive that created the FEPC, but his administration also ordered 5000 troops into the city. Although order was eventually restored, it was the combination of factors in the PTC strike that propelled the FEPC and the black community. As Wolfinger notes, "Without the FEPC, the army, and the president behind them, they could not have won their fight against Jim Crow at the PTC."\(^{51}\)

While the FEPC certainly lacked the legislative potency to conquer workplace discrimination in World War II, its role in Philadelphia Transit Strike makes it not only politically relevant but also demonstrates its national value. Apart from its more than significant symbolic quality, congressional debates on the FEPC’s legality designate the agency as revolutionary in greater civil rights narratives. On the local level, the FEPC made the aims of organizations like the NAACP and NUL more realistic while confirming the visions of Harris and Randolph. As Wolfinger affirms, "While the committee had its flaws, it opened employment opportunities in Philadelphia and other northern cities and made the government’s commitment to democracy a little more real, a little more palpable, to African-Americans."\(^{52}\) Although it did not act alone, the FEPC remains a vital signifier of progress for the developing civil rights movement.

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\(^{51}\) Wolfinger 173  
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 100
Conclusion

In an era defined by World War II, the Philadelphia Transit Strike and the PTC work related debates situate Philadelphia as a vital center of the “long civil rights” history. Encompassing federal, local, and union activism, black Philadelphians during this period developed new political avenues to achieve their goals and recognized a electoral power that been previously underutilized. Working within these bounds, African-Americans across the country employed non-violent tactics to achieve political and social gains. As ‘Double V’ campaigns equated Nazism to discrimination, blacks in Philadelphia saw their cause as intimately connected to the American narrative. As the war progressed, African-Americans on the national level ushered in a new age questioning their inclusion in the story of America.

As an anti-progressive act, the strike was an attempt to curtail the civil rights movements taking place in Philadelphia. Sensing the coming changes, white PTC workers acted on the racist impulse to preserve the status quo. They saw racial developments as threats to their way of life. Employing counter interpretations of democratic rhetoric, the striking workers were representative of working class whites across the country.

Once President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802 was enforced, however, white attempts to maintain Jim Crow would be largely futile. Bringing discrimination to end in the workplace became a stated policy of FDR’s administration and signaled the beginning of real civil rights victories. With government support, community groups such as the NAACP could pursue their interests with the knowledge that their government was, at least in some part, behind them. While PTC integration certainly did not bring an end to
racism on a national level, it did mark a turning point in Philadelphia’s civil rights history.

On the surface, the PTC strike appears small in the grand scheme of civil rights history. With little violence, historians and scholars often overlook the Philadelphia situation in favor bloodier racial conflicts of this period. Evidence of large-scale activism, however, permanently solidifies the PTC labor dispute as a prominent in civil rights dialogues. The combination of the emergence of the NAACP, the friendship of the TWU, and the emergence of the FEPC make the PTC strike the ideal narrative of the long civil rights history.
Appendix

Figure 1:
Flier for the March of Washington Movement (1943)

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohtml/aopart8.html

Figure 2:
African-Americans in Philadelphia protesting discrimination at the PTC.

Source: John Mosley Collection, Courtesy Charles L. Blockson Afro American Collection, Temple University Urban Archives

Figure 3:
http://us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/photos/html/1008.html
What Are Our Immediate Goals?

1. To mobilize five million Negroes into one militant mass for pressure.
2. To assemble in Chicago the last week in May, 1943, for the celebration of "WE ARE AMERICANS - TOO" WEEK.

And to ponder the question of Non-Violent Civil Disobedience and Non-Cooperation, and a Mass March On Washington.

WHY SHOULD WE MARCH?

15,000 Negroes Assembled at St. Louis, Missouri
20,000 Negroes Assembled at Chicago, Illinois
23,500 Negroes Assembled at New York City
Millions of Negro Americans all Over This Great Land Claim the Right to be Free!

FREE FROM WANT!
FREE FROM FEAR!
FREE FROM JIM CROW!

"Winning Democracy for the Negro is Winning the War for Democracy." - A. Philip Randolph
If his right to work is taken away...

YOU'RE NEXT!

MAKE CONGRESS STOP STALLING ON FEPC LEGISLATION
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