THEY SAW THEMSELVES AS WORKERS: INTERRACIAL UNIONISM IN THE INTERNATIONAL LADIES’ GARMENT WORKERS’ UNION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK LABOR ORGANIZATIONS, 1933-1940

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ABSTRACT

“They Saw Themselves as Workers” explores the development of black membership in the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) in the wake of the “Uprising of the 30,000” garment strike of 1933-34, as well as the establishment of independent black labor or labor-related organizations during the mid-late 1930s. The locus for the growth of black ILGWU membership was Harlem, where there were branches of Local 22, one of the largest and the most diverse ILGWU local. Harlem was also where the Negro Labor Committee (NLC) was established by Frank Crosswaith, a leading black socialist and ILGWU organizer. I provide some background, but concentrate on the aftermath of the marked increase in black membership in the ILGWU during the 1933-34 garment uprising and end in 1940, when blacks confirmed their support of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and when the labor-oriented National Negro Congress (NNC) was irrevocably split by struggles over communist influence. By that time, the NLC was also struggling, due to both a lack of support from trade unions and friendly organizations, as well as the fact that the Committee was constrained by the political views and personal grudges of its founder. Yet, during the period examined in “They Saw Themselves as Workers,” the ILGWU and its Local 22 thrived. Using primary sources including the records of the ILGWU and various locals, the NLC, and the NNC, I argue that educational programming was largely responsible for the ILGWU’s success during the 1930s, not political ideology, as others have argued. In fact, I assert that political ideology was often detrimental to organizations like the NLC and NNC, alienating many blacks during a period when they increasingly shifted their allegiance to the Democratic Party. Conversely, through educational programming that
brought unionists of various racial and ethnic backgrounds together and celebrated their differences, the ILGWU assimilated new African American members and strengthened interracial working-class solidarity. That programming included such ostensibly apolitical activities as classes, dances, musical and theatrical performances, sporting events, and trips to resorts and places of cultural interest. Yet, by attracting workers who wanted to expand their minds and enjoy their lives outside of work to combat the misery of the Depression, the ILGWU cemented their devotion to the union and its agenda. Thus, through activities that were not overtly political, the ILGWU drew workers into the labor movement, and ultimately into the New Deal coalition in support of President Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. As the union flourished, part of an increasingly influential labor movement, it offered African American workers a better path to political power than the Negro Labor Committee or the National Negro Congress during the mid-late 1930s.
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At the end of the long process of writing my dissertation, I realize just how many people there are to thank for their advice, assistance, and support. I am particularly indebted to my doctoral advisory committee, spearheaded by the indefatigable Bettye Collier-Thomas. Her knowledge is boundless and her insights on the dissertation were profound, but perhaps her greatest gift to me was one of confidence-building; that not only helped steel me for the long, hard slog of writing a dissertation, but will be of help to me throughout my career. Kenneth Kusmer values strong writing much as I do, and his guidance has improved my work in that respect. Beyond that, his assistance with exploring the relevant historiography and with understanding conceptual frameworks was invaluable. Michael Alexander was my biggest cheerleader when he taught at Temple. He helped me to think about black-Jewish relations in new ways, and even after his move to California, he remained an active, supportive advisor. Annelise Orleck has been extraordinarily kind and generous with her time, and has reminded me to bring a human element to my work. I hope in the future to explore the lives of some of the historical actors in this dissertation—doing so will be a tribute to Dr. Orleck’s influence.

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Of course, I don’t think I could have completed my dissertation without the encouragement of my family and the confidence they instilled in me. I love my brother Eric more than he knows, and I miss my sister Stephanie who is far away, but who I always want to be proud of me. But it is my parents, Anita and Hilary Oestreich, who are at the center of my world and at the core of who I am. I am a better historian for the stories they have shared with me about my family and about their own experiences of the past, but more importantly, I am a better human being having been raised by such kind, caring people. I will love them forever. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to Erica Schmitt. On my good days and on my worst days, she remains my greatest inspiration.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td></td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td></td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER INTRODUCTION</td>
<td></td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>AFRICAN AMERICANS AND ORGANIZED LABOR, 1909–32: THE INTERNATIONAL LADIES’ GARMENT WORKERS’ UNION SETS ITSELF APART</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>UPRISING! THE 1933–34 GARMENT STRIKE AND THE INFLUX OF AFRICAN AMERICANS INTO THE ILGWU</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>TOWARD A TENUOUS UNITED FRONT: PROGRESSIVE DOMINANCE OF THE ILGWU, 1935-1937</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>ENRICHING WORKERS’ LIVES AND ENCOURAGING INTERRACIAL SOLIDARITY: ILGWU EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING, 1935-1940</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>SUCCESS AND FAILURE: BLACK LABOR-RELATED ORGANIZATIONS OF THE MID-LATE 1930s</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td></td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td></td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

In early 2011, teachers filled the Wisconsin State House protesting against a budget bill that aimed to cut their salaries and strip their collective bargaining rights. While many people around the country were sympathetic to the teachers’ plight, pundits across the media vilified the teachers’ union, which became a catalyst for going after unions in general. The teachers were called greedy despite their open willingness to take the budgeted salary cuts and union officials were labeled thugs. As governors across numerous states considered enacting similar bills that stripped public employees of collective bargaining rights, the very future of unions in America seemed to be growing ever more tenuous. In an increasingly hostile environment, what have unions been doing to encourage increased labor activism and restore political influence?

In January 2010, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the main umbrella group for the nation’s labor unions, turned to an old strategy to try to strengthen its ranks: education. The organization announced that it was joining with the National Labor College and the Princeton Review to create an online college for its members and their families. The college is now part of the National Labor College, making it the first and only accredited degree-granting online institution devoted exclusively to educating union members. It offers both professional degrees in construction, business, and emergency management, as well as Bachelors’ degrees in labor studies, labor education, labor safety, labor history, union leadership, and the political economy of labor. By expanding into online education, the AFL-CIO is demonstrating how seriously it takes the education of its members, echoing an approach first taken by the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) 80 years ago.
The National Labor College’s website states that it upholds the values of the labor movement, which include:

- that working people should have equal protection under the law and the freedom to bargain collectively to advance and protect their interests
- that education is the key to a free and democratic labor movement
- that for working people to fully realize their potential and that of their children, they must have equal access to high quality education at all levels

Clearly, in the current American labor movement, it is believed that education can serve as a crucial bulwark against attacks on collective bargaining and as a tool to ensure the continuing health of the movement and the prosperity of union members.

Yet, the final value the college refers to, which addresses the nature of labor education, is particularly noteworthy: that labor arts and culture are an essential part of education, “as they provide the labor movement with its soul and spirit.”¹ This is certainly a value passed down from the 1930s, when unions like the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union pursued labor education on a wide scale with programming that integrated coursework and lectures with music, dance, drama, sports, cultural trips and tours, and special events such as balls and parades. At many events, union members dressed in costume, putting on another race or ethnicity in celebration of the ILGWU’s growing diversity. While there was more than a hint of condescension in such rituals, they did promote a union atmosphere where members not only viewed fellow members of different racial and ethnic backgrounds without fear or a desire to treat them as

“other,” but also consciously embraced such members for the cultural assets they brought to bear.

If educational programming encompassed culture and the arts because of the belief that they provided the labor movement with “soul and spirit,” such a belief can also be traced to the ILGWU in the 1930s, as an influx of African Americans led to frequent celebrations of the spirit black members brought to the union with their “music,” energy, and cheer. Once again, the sentiments were certainly condescending, but as a union trying to prove its diverse cultural credentials, the ILGWU was glad to have some soul. That made the ILGWU quite different from most other unions, which at that time explicitly or implicitly barred African Americans from their ranks.

“They Saw Themselves as Workers” examines the period from 1933 to 1940, when blacks began joining the ILGWU in large numbers. It analyzes the reasons blacks joined up during the 1933-34 strike known as the “Uprising of the 30,000” and the ways in which the union solicited their membership, but it focuses primarily on what happened once blacks encountered white union members in their locals. I focus on New York City’s ILGWU Local 22, as it was the most diverse local of the union in the nation during the 1930s, and because it had a branch in Harlem, the most important locus of African American culture during that same period. I examine the local’s educational programming, which incorporated social, recreational, and cultural activities into ILGWU life, and follow it as it was implemented union-wide.

This programming became the union’s main tool for negotiating its increasing diversity, and the pluralistic approach embodied by events such as concerts that incorporated European Jewish folk songs with Irish ballads, Italian arias, and Negro
spirituals signaled to garment workers of all races and ethnic backgrounds that the ILGWU would advocate for their working-class interests without requiring them to suppress their ethnic or racial identities. For African Americans, who wore their race on their skin and suffered the harshest and most blatant employment and workplace discrimination, suppressing their racial identity would have been impossible and would have caused their particular interests as workers to be ignored. Instead, the ILGWU celebrated their racial difference, which allowed black members to make their own contributions to union culture and put their concerns on the union agenda.

In discussing the cultural strategy of the CIO, historian Lizabeth Cohen describes an approach like that of the ILGWU’s, which was designed to create a shared culture to reinforce workers’ common ground and spur organizing, what she deems a “culture of unity.” This could be done because workers in the 1930s were more likely to see the same movies and newsreels in the same chain theaters, shop for the same items in the same chain stores, and listen to the same radio shows on the same radio networks available to them. Cohen focuses on the notion that the CIO emphasized that which workers had in common, but this wasn’t exactly true. First the ILGWU, then the CIO, used what workers had in common, which were cultural apparatuses such as music, dance, and sports to bring workers together. Yet, the ILGWU often used those tools to emphasize what workers did not have in common.

While Cohen points out that the CIO made strike signs in different languages and held Polish dances, Mexican fiestas, and performances of Irish ballads, she still insists
that the ultimate goal of the Congress was to transcend ethnic and racial distinctions.\(^2\)

This seems tantamount to viewing the CIO “culture of unity” as promoting a “melting pot” theory of unionism. While I believe that the ILGWU had a common culture to promote, I believe that culture was still inclusive, meant not to transcend ethnic and racial distinctions, but to embrace them. The ILGWU’s approach again seems pragmatic here; in a time when increasing numbers of workers from an increasingly diverse set of backgrounds were joining the union, it would have been unrealistic to create an ethnically and racially neutral, or even post-ethnic, post-racial union identity. I argue that the ILGWU’s culture was not monolithic, but was purposefully flexible, able to change with the union’s changing membership and with constantly evolving political circumstances.

At the same time African American garment workers were joining the ILGWU, African Americans sought to initiate the creation of their own organizations to insure that the unique concerns of their community’s working class were on the national political agenda. In 1934 in Harlem, Frank Crosswaith established the Harlem Labor Committee, which soon became the Negro Labor Committee (NLC), while a number of civil rights, religious, and labor leaders formed the National Negro Congress (NNC) two years later. In “They Saw Themselves as Workers,” I examine why these independent black labor-related organizations generally achieved no more than a few small-scale successes, and were already crippled by 1940.

Whereas the ILGWU was increasingly focused on activities that were ostensibly apolitical, the NLC and NNC were strongly associated with socialism and communism respectively, which led to internal conflict and repelled many members of the black community. Thus, while interracial unionism was becoming a vehicle through which black workers could achieve increasing political power, new independent black labor-related organizations were not providing similar benefit. Besides a few dissertations, little scholarship exists on these organizations, and while the National Negro Congress is often mentioned in passing as a black civil rights or labor organization, the Negro Labor Committee is rarely mentioned in the historiography at all. While I explain that these groups ultimately failed in pursuing their agendas, they mark an important point in history when black working-class activism increased as black workers became more aggressive in making their concerns a part of the national black political agenda. Thus, it is important that history not neglect the NLC and NNC.

Little has been written about interracial unionism in the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union besides the fact that it existed as an approach the union utilized from the New Deal era on. When the ILGWU of the 1930s is mentioned, it is often lumped in with other CIO unions as one of a number of progressive unions. Some historians go a bit further, acknowledging that the ILGWU was far ahead of every other

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major union in organizing blacks and Hispanics, but even that important fact is usually left unexplored. Dan Katz’s recent dissertation, “A Union of Many Cultures,” is the first to address this gap in the scholarship by taking on the interracial unionism of the ILGWU as its subject. Katz, in the tradition of historians such as Susan Glenn, focuses on Jewish unionists and the traditions carried with them from Europe, as well as those shaped by immigrant life in America, to explain their approach to unionizing. He points to cultural socialism as the ideology many Jews held that encouraged a pluralistic approach to union organization and union culture. While it is unclear as to what the main argument in Katz’s book *All Together Different* (forthcoming, fall 2011), which is based on his dissertation, will be, his research has made a significant contribution to an understanding of the Jewish motivation behind interracial unionism.

In the years that I have researched interracial unionism in the ILGWU in the 1930s, however, I have come to believe that while one can look to socialism and other leftist ideologies as having laid a foundation for unionists to embrace cultural pluralism within union ranks, such ideologies tended to hinder interracial unity and impede the ILGWU and independent black labor-related organizations from inspiring their members and achieving their goals. A pragmatic agenda buoyed by a strong union culture was responsible for the ILGWU’s success in the 1930s. Hence, I would argue that focusing on leftist ideologies that have their roots in Europe places the emphasis in the wrong place.

The prevailing industrial, economic, and political conditions of the time were most

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responsible for dictating the pragmatic choices of garment workers during the
Depression, and educational programming and social events helped those workers escape
from and cope with those conditions more so than any political ideology did.

Moreover, a focus on the Jews of the ILGWU only advances the myopic view of
the literature on the union up to this point. The historiography of the ILGWU must better
reflect the increasing diversity of the union over time. Historians have too often focused
on the Jewish leadership of the union. While such an approach makes some degree of
sense for examining policy formation, it ultimately narrows the historical focus to a small
group of unionists who may not be representative of the broader rank and file. As Jewish
unionists increasingly had to work with unionists of other ethnic and racial backgrounds
in order to pursue their agenda, their fate became increasingly and inextricably linked to
the choices and actions of these fellow unionists. From the Uprising of the 30,000 on,
non-Jews constituted a majority of the ILGWU’s membership. Therefore, in order to
understand how the union managed to attain significant political power in the 1930s, one
must explore the motivations and concerns not only of its Jewish leaders, but also of the
various ethnic and racial groups that made up its rank and file.

As this work will demonstrate, African American garment workers had different
reasons for joining the ILGWU than their co-workers had. Their priorities, as well as
their cultural influence, helped to shape the ILGWU agenda and create a foundation for

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political success from 1933 on. While it is important to note why Jewish unionists in the ILGWU slowly but surely came to embrace interracial unionism, history must also reflect why African Americans were willing to join the ILGWU and participate in the creation of an interracial culture that celebrated difference. As social history itself would dictate, one must not focus merely on those who headed the union, but should also seek to learn the stories of union members whose service on picket lines and in labor classrooms, and whose attendance at parades, dances, and sports events truly dictated the union’s success or failure.\(^7\)

The choices these members made to engage in such activities were made in light of everyday circumstances, which was ultimately why the practical gains workers made under the New Deal attracted them to the Democratic Party over the utopian visions of the Communist, Socialist, and Workers’ Parties. This was generally true even for Jewish members of the ILGWU who, by 1940, were solidly behind President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Yet perhaps it was most true for African Americans who—as the group that suffered the worst rates of unemployment during the Depression, and lived in neighborhoods such as Harlem with the highest rates of poverty and crime—had to make calculated daily decisions for their own survival.

Yet such a pragmatic mentality aimed at surviving the nadir of the Depression did not exclude the possibility of joy, and interracial unionism provided a means for sharing joy through cultural and educational activities. These activities offered both temporary

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\(^7\) Joe Trotter makes a similar argument about labor history more generally, criticizing works about blacks that focused too much on unions or on white workers’ attitudes, and not enough on the experiences of black workers from their own cultural, institutional, and political perspectives. “African-American Workers: New Directions in U.S. Labor Historiography,” *Labor History* 35 (Fall 1994): 495-523. This is one of the shortcomings of Dan Katz’s “A Union of Many Cultures” and is also a flaw of Lizabeth Cohen’s *Making a New Deal*, which by focusing on white ethnic workers sacrifices a thorough analysis of the black workers she also studies.
relief from the oppression of poverty and discrimination, and also hope for the eventual achievement of socioeconomic equality. This helped union members keep their eyes on the prize and on the horizon at the same time, perpetuating a focus on bread and butter goals that ultimately complemented a larger vision of a society where workers not only would be treated fairly relative to their bosses, but also would be treated equally regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion. In perpetuating interracial unionism, black and white ILGWU members created a microcosm of the idealistic world they wanted to become a reality, where the color of one’s skin or the nation of one’s origin was a source of strength, not a basis for division. The story of how blacks came to be part of constructing this world within the ILGWU and the contributions they made to that world is just as important as the story of how and why white ILGWU members invited their participation and came to embrace diversity as a source of unity. The story of black ILGWU members needs to be told—this dissertation is meant to begin telling that story.

However, it is also meant to explain why, in the mid-late 1930s, the ILGWU was ultimately more successful than African American independent labor-related organizations were and provided a better path to political power for African American workers than those organizations. As Local 22 pursued an unprecedented program of educational, social, and recreational activities that set the model for the ILGWU, and eventually the CIO, the Negro Labor Committee and National Negro Congress remained fixed on their platforms, seeking to help workers on the ground, but often getting mired down in political infighting. This is not unlike what happened to the Socialist Party in Detroit in the 1880s as it sought to advance the cause of labor, according to historian Richard Oestreicher. He described the party as becoming so absorbed in internal debates
that it ended up ignoring the workers it had pledged to help. He explained that labor politics, while capable of cutting across ethnic lines to create class unity, became a battleground between rival factions and individuals.  

Indeed, both the positive and negative aspects of labor politics significantly impacted the ILGWU, NLC, and NNC. Yet, with its growing educational program and the tenuous détente between its left and progressive factions in the late 1930s, the ILGWU’s increasing de-emphasis on overt politics helped it to avoid being crippled by conflicts within its ranks. The Negro Labor Committee couldn’t get past the identity and personality of its founder Frank Crosswaith. With Crosswaith being such an ardent socialist, it was difficult to separate his ideology from that of his organization, and most blacks in Harlem simply couldn’t identify with either. Meanwhile, Crosswaith’s vendetta against the Harlem Labor Union, Inc. became somewhat of a spectacle in Harlem labor politics, undermining both organizations and harming attempts at labor organizing in Harlem. The National Negro Congress was vulnerable to the drawbacks of labor politics from its inception, as it battled being associated with communists while being largely influenced by them. The NLC was thus marginalized, while the NNC suffered a split in 1940.

Despite their failures to make a broad-based impact, though, both organizations assisted thousands of workers in organizing and negotiating favorable agreements with employers. The NLC provided both a physical and metaphorical center for labor activity.

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8 Eventually, Detroit labor leaders decided that unions should avoid participating in politics altogether because political activities were too divisive, while even some socialists agreed that socialism should be separated from union affairs. Richard Oestreicher, *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 93, 123, 132, 241.
in Harlem that raised consciousness and promoted activism, helping to pave the way for labor-related organizing on a larger scale, much like that which occurred with the formation of the NNC. Though wrought by conflict, the Congress was African Americans’ first non-partisan national labor-related organization and it sent the nation a message that black workers would take the lead in fighting for their own rights. By 1940, African Americans were certainly no longer strikebreakers, but they were also not simply obedient union members. They had gone from deciding to participate in the labor movement to making attempts to shape it, and this would impact black political activism through the Civil Rights Movement, as Martin Luther King, Jr. would describe years later:

> Labor had to bring the law to life by exercising its rights in practice over stubborn, tenacious opposition. …

> Negroes in the United States read this history of labor and find it mirrors our own experience. We are confronted by powerful forces telling us to rely on the good will and understanding of those who profit by exploiting us. They deplore our discontent, they resent our will to organize, so that we may guarantee that humanity will prevail and equality will be exacted. They are shocked that action organizations, sit-ins, civil disobedience, and protests are becoming our everyday tools, just as strikes, demonstrations and union organization became yours [AFL-CIO’s] to insure that bargaining power genuinely existed on both sides of the table.\(^9\)

The interracial unionism of the 1930s left a legacy that lasted long after World War II.

> Despite that legacy, most historians of the black urban experience ignore the 1930s, examining the United States through the 1920s or concentrating on the post-World

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War II period.\textsuperscript{10} For instance, Nancy Green argues for the importance of the postwar period, saying that the “real” mass migration of African Americans to the North didn’t occur until the 1950s.\textsuperscript{11} Even though the number of African Americans who migrated during this time is greater than the number who migrated during World War I, that doesn’t render the earlier period of migration insignificant. It is a mistake for so many historians to focus solely on the postwar era, because patterns of political behavior and labor activism, and methods of coping with and combatting poverty and racial discrimination arose well before World War II and merged with the labor movement especially during the 1930s. If historians can agree that the New Deal coalition affected American politics profoundly and provided working-class, African American, and some white ethnic Americans with previously unprecedented levels of political influence, then we must be willing to examine the coalition’s formation. Using the postwar era as a starting point to explore African American and interracial social action movements


Periodization is not the only challenge to studying the history of working-class blacks in the city. While many portraits of Harlem have been published, for instance, few of them are guided by significant primary research and are thus of questionable scholarly value. Perhaps the most prominent of these works, Gilbert Osofsky’s *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*, became a leading example of the “ghetto synthesis” in urban history. While Osofsky wrote a layered, fundamentally factual portrayal of urban declension and the effects of particular socioeconomic phenomena on Harlem’s black community, he treated that community as a victim of forces largely beyond its control. Joe Trotter argued that blacks had far more agency in *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45*. In place of the “ghetto synthesis,” he offered up a “proletarianization” model that consisted of the increasing movement of blacks to the industrial sector, residential segregation, and the rising activism of blacks on their own behalf. Though Trotter’s approach not only ascribes blacks the necessary historical agency, but also fits the circumstances of the black urban working class particularly well, there are no histories of Harlem that apply his model. In examining the Harlem branch of Local 22 and the development of the Negro Labor Committee, my work follows the “proletarianization” model, describing not how blacks coped with deteriorating urban

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conditions, but how black workers acted to address their socioeconomic positions from race and class perspectives.\textsuperscript{13}

It is also critical to explore both Jewish and black motivations for interracial unionism in the ILGWU as a way of bettering our understanding of black-Jewish relations. The scholarship in this area has been troubled, often shaped by the biases of the authors who have written on the subject. While strides have been made in reaching back further than the 1950s and ’60s to an earlier period in the American black-Jewish relationship thanks to scholars such as Hasia Diner, such work, often grounded in finding the early roots of the Civil Rights Movement, paints an overly rosy picture of relations between African Americans and Jews over time.\textsuperscript{14} The best work to come out on the subject in terms of tone, periodization, and analysis is Cheryl Lynn Greenberg’s recent \textit{Troubling the Waters}. Her book, while wonderfully nuanced, focuses on national black and Jewish civil rights organizations, and thus doesn’t address some of the gaps in the scholarship on the history of black-Jewish relations that John Bracey and August Meier


\textsuperscript{14} Hasia R. Diner, \textit{In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935} (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977). While much of the literature on black-Jewish relations that covers the time period examined in this study fails to pass scholarly muster, a number of books that fall under “whiteness” studies offer useful frameworks for analyzing black-Jewish relations in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, when Jews arguably underwent the process of becoming white. These books include Eric Goldstein’s \textit{The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Karen Brodkin’s \textit{How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); David Roediger’s \textit{Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White} (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
referred to almost 20 years ago in their article “Towards a Research Agenda on Blacks and Jews in United States History.”\textsuperscript{15}

They noted that few scholars had examined the interaction between Jews and African Americans in urban political arenas that have been home to large numbers of both groups. They wondered if the kinds of coalitions that voted for New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in the 1930s, made up of Jewish, black, and Italian voters were related to the rise of a liberal Jewish political bloc during that same time. My examination of Harlem blacks joining the Jewish-led ILGWU, my assertion that cultural experiences helped to mediate the relations between blacks and Jews in the union, and my conclusions about how implications for the formation of the New Deal coalition help to address Bracey and Meier’s questions vis-à-vis urban and political history. They also pointed out that while the role of Jews in radicalism and socialism is well-worn scholarly territory, few have examined either the extent to which Jewish radicals exhibited concern over the conditions of blacks or the nature of relations between blacks and Jews in the Socialist and Communist Parties. By examining the historical approach the ILGWU and some of its more radical splinter unions took toward organizing blacks, some of this gap in the scholarship on blacks and Jews can be bridged.

Finally, Bracey and Meier note that there has been little exploration of black-Jewish relations within the trade union movement. When I first decided to research the topic of blacks and Jews in the ILGWU, it was this gap in the scholarship I initially set

out to fill. Bracey and Meier naturally pointed to the garment unions as a good place to start in addressing that gap, and I agreed, since these unions contained large Jewish memberships and were led primarily by Jews. Thus, to begin to understand how blacks and Jews interacted in unions and then incorporate that into the broader historical narrative of black-Jewish relations in America, I look at the ILGWU, that most of Jewish of unions, and focus on its members in Harlem, that most quintessentially black neighborhood.

My work also complicates the often-interlaced narratives of unionism and leftist politics. While most historians acknowledge that a majority of union members never belonged to a radical political party, and that most members in fact became devotees of the Democratic Party during the 1930s, they remain fixed on exploring the relationship between unions and socialist, communist, and other left-wing elements. In fact, these elements tried and failed to cement lasting alliances with unions, so in my work, I seek to paint a fuller picture of the political preferences of unionists, even if that results in demonstrating that they were more moderate than their activism might have implied. And while there has also been superlative work done on the attempts of radical parties to reach out to the African American community particularly in the 1920s and ’30s, the analysis of Henry Williams is most accurate:

Indeed, of all the groups in the American political spectrum, only the Marxist Left paid much heed to the black population, and, even its attention was never constant or excessively strong. However, even when radical activists did launch intensive campaigns to attract black support,

16 Bracey and Meier, “Towards a Research Agenda on Blacks and Jews in United States History.”
they were unable to affect anything more than temporary alliances with small sections of the black population.\footnote{Henry Williams, \textit{The Black Response to the American Left: 1917-1929} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Department of History, 1973), i.}

This analysis is a reminder that even radical leftists, much like the ILGWU, had trouble living up to their rhetoric, which ultimately undermined alliances with the black community. However, such rhetoric did lay the groundwork for the ILGWU to capitalize on real benefits African Americans reaped as a result of the New Deal and the labor movement in the early-mid 1930s. When Section 7A of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which made it illegal to fire employees for unionizing, became law and the Uprising of the 30,000 began, many African American garment workers were drawn to the ILGWU because its past behavior, no matter how inconsistent, had demonstrated its potential for alliance with the black community.

Though much of “They Saw Themselves as Workers” focuses on issues of race, class, and ethnicity, gender plays an integral part in the story of interracial unionism in the ILGWU, as well. Paula Baker has said, “‘Woman’ was a universal category in the minds of organized women…. ‘Motherhood’ and ‘womanhood’ were powerful integrating forces that allowed women to cross class, and perhaps even racial, lines.”\footnote{Shelton Stromquist, \textit{Reinventing “The People”: The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism} (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 107.} In

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item[17] Henry Williams, \textit{The Black Response to the American Left: 1917-1929} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Department of History, 1973), i. Mark Naison’s \textit{Communists in Harlem during the Depression} is particularly laudable with respect to scholarship on communist attempts to build relationships with the black community. Mark Solomon’s \textit{The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936} (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) is also enlightening on this subject, as is Robin D.G. Kelley’s \textit{Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression} (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) with respect to Southern blacks.
\item[18] Shelton Stromquist. \textit{Reinventing “The People”: The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism} (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 107. Susan Glenn has disagreed with this notion, arguing in \textit{Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation} that group loyalty was more compelling to immigrant women than cross-ethnic gender solidarity. However, Daniel Bender has argued against this assertion in such works as \textit{Sweated Work, Weak Bodies: Anti-Sweatshop Campaigns and Languages of Labor} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), and other scholars such as Lizabeth Cohen in \textit{Making a New Deal} (204) and Nancy Green in \textit{Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work} (222) have echoed Baker’s argument about female solidarity.
\end{itemize}}
fact, being a woman did allow many garment workers in the ILGWU to cross racial lines. Women were underrepresented in union leadership, but they found power in organizing social and cultural activities and particular women, like ILGWU Educational Department Secretary Fannia Cohn, did more than most men in the union to promote and fill attendance at educational programs.

The ILGWU woman’s desire to play a role in shaping union culture reflected her knowledge that she had special gifts to offer, and would be allowed to offer, by union men. As historian Daniel Bender has put it: “Women created an alternative community within the union that spawned non-traditional leadership opportunities. If women did not become local business managers, they organized lectures, shop floor clubs, and gatherings.” It was acceptable for women to arrange social events instead of serving on the General Executive Board, but this actually brought women closer to the rank and file and gave them a better idea than union leaders had of what ILGWU members wanted from their union experience. Most white women didn’t mind working with black and Hispanic women in the union if that helped them gain more power and reach more members with their activities. Women of all backgrounds in the union knew that they made a stronger force as women and as workers if they worked together across racial lines. In terms of both creating the programming that would bring ILGWU members of different races and ethnicities together, and also setting the example of crossing racial boundaries to work together, women started interracial unionism in the ILGWU.

19 Bender, Sweated Work, Weak Bodies, 157. Carolyn Daniel McCreesh argues that, in fact, industrial unionism offered female workers greater opportunities than craft unionism had to develop programs suited to their special needs: “The spirit of innovation and idealism characterized the new unionism, while practical business principles continued to direct the craft unions.” This spirit led the women of the ILGWU to create a broad educational and social program. Women in the Campaign to Organize Garment Workers, 1880-1917 (New York: Garland Publishers, 1985), 217.
Alice Kessler-Harris believes that gender is a necessary category of analysis for labor history. If class formation and the development of class relations are to be understood as political, cultural, and economic processes, then labor history must take into account the “central organizing principle of human life, the sexual division of labor, and all that that implies for social relations.” As the fundamental paradigm of human organization and relations, then, gender relations must be understood in order to have an understanding of all other forms of social organization and relationships, such as class, or even race. Unfortunately, the process by which gendered differences emerge and the political role they play is often obfuscated by the fact that such differences seem to exist naturally. Hence, such differences are not interrogated enough, and the power dynamics those differences create often go unanalyzed.20

Kessler-Harris explains why fully integrating a cultural concept such as gender into labor history can enrich notions of class: gender is an analytic category for examining the culture of working people that transcends class divisions. For that reason, I view the category of race as also being critical to understanding class. Kessler-Harris goes on to say that, like class, gender is “ideational and normative—a creator of consciousness” that can tell us about people’s worldviews. Indeed, race also creates consciousness and can give us an understanding of the way people see themselves and the world. Also like class, gender is a process, Kessler-Harris explains. Paraphrasing E.P. Thompson’s definition of class, she asserts that gender could also be viewed as a “historical phenomenon” not as a structure or category, but as something that happens in

human relationships. Certainly, race could be viewed this way, as well. Just as, by complicating class, gender helps us understand how labor struggles between workers and their employers are influenced by the different needs and expectations of the male and female workers involved, race helps us understand how such struggles are influenced by the different needs and expectations of black and white workers.

In the end, categories like gender and race give a fuller picture of working-class life, while helping facilitate a more critical investigation into structures of power. As Kessler-Harris argues, it is no longer enough to simply explore and describe culture and its affect on the labor movement, but historians must ask why worker resistance has ultimately failed to alter the structure of power in our society. Examining gender and race could provide new ways to think about the working class that transcends class and ultimately sheds light on issues of race and ethnicity as well, as we come to better understand the way certain categories narrow and expand access to power. Finally, Kessler-Harris insists that gender, race, and even ethnicity and religion are crucial as analytic categories for putting cultural content into class and clarifying the link between class and social action. Certainly, when one understands how race affected the lives of the African American working class in the 1930s, the link between their class status and their decision to join unions becomes clarified.

Kessler-Harris ultimately fears that the existing historiography has done little to advance not only our understanding of how power is structured in our society and why workers have not been successful in subverting that structure and gaining more power for themselves, but also our perception of how workers have at least attempted to do so and the changes that have resulted. Understanding how African American workers gained

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greater power within the labor movement, and thus within the American political system, in the 1930s can only make us more aware of how workers have shaped the distribution of power in America even if they haven’t been able to change structures of power from their foundation. I would also argue that a better understanding of the formation of the New Deal coalition and labor’s role in that process can similarly help us understand how workers have been able to assert some control over the way power has been structured and distributed in America even if the coalition could not fundamentally change the American political system. Gender, race, ethnicity, and religion will continue to provide challenges to understanding the relationship between class and working-class culture, but they provide us with a critical opportunity to broaden our perspective.²¹

As this dissertation focuses on the formulation of a pluralistic ILGWU culture and African American participation in that formulation, the question of culture in labor history becomes critical to the analysis herein. In her article “A New Agenda for American Labor History,” Kessler-Harris traces labor historiography in the postwar era. She argues that some historians have viewed workers’ central concern as preserving tradition because their most powerful loyalty was to their ethnic roots. To those historians, culture was a means to maintaining ethnic identity. Yet, in the 1960s, historians cleaved to a theory called “workerism,” which held that a political agenda was inherent in individuals’ identification of themselves as workers, thus taking the focus off of cultural continuity and placing it on activism and working-class identity. In fact, Kessler-Harris claims that labor historians of the 1970s and ’80s built on this theory, coming dangerously close to romanticizing workers from the past, viewing acts that

²¹ Ibid., 220, 222-3, 226, 231-32.
could have been mistakes, accidents, or acts of desperation, laziness, or irresponsibility as acts of resistance or intentional sabotage.22 While my work certainly doesn’t go that far, I argue that agency does take non-traditional forms such as leisure, and that culture was as much a means to forging interethnic and interracial alliances as it was a tool for ethnic preservation.23

My attention to the rank and file goes against the approach of economists, economic historians, and labor historians who, Kessler-Harris argued, urged reliance on analyses of economic trends and structural changes to explain the behavior and consciousness of working people. However, viewing labor history through structural approaches tended to result in workers’ culture being subsumed into larger social patterns, thus drowning out visions of working-class resistance.24 Instead, we must return the focus to the workers themselves. While structural change is, of course, important, I take the “bottom-up” approach of social history, viewing culture through that lens. Thus, I turn to the work of Richard Oestreicher, who creates the term “subculture of opposition” in his work Solidarity and Fragmentation. He defines this subculture as “an interlocking network of formal institutions and informal practices based on an ethic of

22 Ibid., 223.

23 In Making a New Deal, Lizabeth Cohen emphasizes the role of leisure in spurring labor activism, asserting that engaging in some of the leisure activities more often available to the middle-class did not pacify workers. One might assume that as the ILGWU offered its members more opportunities to relax, learn, and play, that members would have become more content with their conditions and their relative lack of power in the capitalist system. However, as Cohen asserts, partaking in the leisure of the middle-class was part of the creation of working-class culture, and as workers shared in that culture, their bonds grew closer and their identities became increasingly intertwined. (257) See also Roy Rosenzweig, Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

24 Kessler-Harris, “A New Agenda,” 220.
social equality, cooperation, mutual trust, and mutual assistance.” The “subculture of opposition” and Robin D.G. Kelley’s complementary notion of “hidden transcripts” provide useful frameworks through which to view the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union’s approach to interracial unionism.

Oestreicher’s subculture of opposition concept described an atmosphere of workers “working, agitating, learning, socializing, shopping, and relaxing within a cultural milieu that was consistent with their convictions.” The subculture thus complemented the beliefs of its participants without having to shape them. In the ILGWU in the 1930s, workers of various racial and ethnic backgrounds built and participated in a union culture together that was successful both because of its inclusivity and its careful avoidance of political ideology. Their culture complemented the ideology of the union, thus making them more receptive to the union’s political messages, encouraging activism without indoctrination. This cultural pull was particularly salient in a community like Harlem, where the members of the Harlem (English-speaking) branch of ILGWU Local 22 all lived, worked, went to church, and participated in their neighborhood’s famed culture together. The sense of community African American workers of Harlem shared infused their solidarity with an even more intense meaning.

Oestreicher describes how during the late 1870s and early 1880s in Detroit, the labor-based subculture of opposition was girded by socialist-sponsored activities such as concerts, balls, public debates, and lectures much like those that would take place in

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25 Oestreicher, Solidarity and Fragmentation, xv.

26 Ibid., xvi, 103.
Harlem 50 years later. However, the subculture Oestreicher focused on struggled due to its largely socialist foundation. As the Socialist Party’s fortunes went, so went Detroit’s subculture, leaving it weakened after the mid-1880s. In Harlem, although socialists or Lovestoneites (who had branched off from the Communist Party) mounted many of the ILGWU’s activities, many participants had no such political leanings, and the activities officially held under the auspices of the ILGWU Educational Department were often devoid of political overtones. Thus, the subculture perpetuated within the union, especially by Local 22, was not vulnerable to changing political tides. The network of institutions and practices the union created once it established educational programming gave rise to a subculture of opposition that would endure, defining the ILGWU for decades, and influencing the New Deal coalition its members were becoming a part of.

Historian Robin D.G. Kelley lays out a framework for understanding the nature of the ILGWU’s subculture when, in his work *Race Rebels*, he describes the argument of political anthropologist James C. Scott, who holds that

…and despite appearances of consent, oppressed groups challenge those in power by constructing a “hidden transcript,” a dissident political culture that manifests itself in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural practices. …Together, the “hidden transcripts” created in aggrieved communities and expressed through culture, and the daily acts of resistance and survival, constitute what Scott calls “infrapolitics.”

Kelley insists that the political history of oppressed people cannot be understood without this notion of infrapolitics, as the daily acts it encompasses affect power relations. This jibes with his argument that we cannot presume that unions and similar labor institutions

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27 Ibid., 87, 129, 163.

were the “‘real’ harbingers of black working-class politics.” He asserts that, even for organized black workers, such institutions were probably only part of “an ensemble of formal and informal avenues through which people struggled to improve or transform daily life.”

Thus, the entire notion of a working-class subculture of opposition is complicated, while the importance of the songs ILGWU members sang, the dances they attended, the games they played, and the vacations they took is magnified.

In fact, subcultures of opposition provide for the type of inclusivity the ILGWU practiced. As Richard Oestreicher has said, “If workers were to come together into a single culture of opposition, they had to build on these common experiences without threatening the values or institutions any particular group of them found important.” Workers didn’t choose class identity over ethnic or racial identity when they joined unions; they simply balanced the various aspects of their identities. Subcultures of opposition like the one the ILGWU created promoted the creation of the “hidden transcripts” Robin D.G. Kelley has described, which allowed garment workers the creativity, the leisure, and the power to fashion their own multifaceted identities and use them to their greatest political advantage.

This complex subculture doesn’t lessen the power of unions by bringing other important factors to bear in shaping working-class life and activism. In fact, Bang Jee Chun argues that “multiple organizational involvement” marked by a “web of

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29 Ibid., 8, 34. This view ultimately defines politics in its broadest sense, as Lizabeth Cohen does in Making a New Deal, where she explains, “How people live, work, spend leisure time, identify socially, and do a myriad of other things shapes their political perpectives…” (9)

30 Oestreicher, Solidarity and Fragmentation, 39-40.

31 Ibid., 60; Cohen, Making a New Deal, 6.
affiliations” with voluntary organizations, religious institutions, and family positively affects union activism.\(^{32}\) In other words, unions were strengthened by feeding into the cultural traditions and predilections of their members, making themselves into cultural as well as political institutions and reinforcing the threads in their members’ webs of affiliation. Labor studies scholar Paul F. Clark explains how culture plays a central role in an effective organization. Culture, he says,

> communicates and reinforces the values, priorities, goals, and objectives of the organization among its members and prospective members. In doing so, an organization’s culture gives members a sense of organizational identity, togetherness, and purpose that promotes commitment to, and influences attitudes about, the group. In a sense, culture is the glue that binds members to the organization.\(^{33}\)

Thus, by emphasizing cultural experiences, the ILGWU helped to fortify unity among its members, deepening their class identification.

This analysis backs up E.P. Thompson’s pathbreaking argument in *The Making of the English Working Class* that class is “a cultural as much as an economic formation.” He was concerned with how class experiences are handled in cultural terms as embodied through traditions, ideas, and institutions.\(^{34}\) “They Saw Themselves as Workers” examines how the ILGWU handled the working-class experiences of its diverse membership in cultural terms. In doing so, the union created a homogenous class identity

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\(^{32}\) Bang Jee Chun, *The Impact of Solidarity or Conflict on Participation in a Labor Union* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997). This matches up to Oestreicher’s description of a “subculture of opposition” as being defined by a “pattern of broad concurrent participation in a variety of organizations…,” *Solidarity and Fragmentation*, 103.


amongst its members while promoting a heterogenous racial and ethnic identity, enabling
the forging of productive interethnic and interracial relationships.

Those relationships would be the basis for the union’s increasing power
throughout the 1930s. They would also help to generate and set a model for a much larger
interethnic, interracial, and heavily working-class coalition that would serve as the
lynchpin of support for the Democratic Party for the following 30 years. As Richard
Oestreicher explains, the New Deal offered economic benefits free of cultural
preconditions, suggesting an America that didn’t dictate what traditions citizens should
embrace, but that accepted all people regardless of religion, birthplace, and “maybe even
color.”^35 Only through inclusivity could the ILGWU’s and the Democrats’ ascendancies
have been possible. In the 1930s, workers raised their voices in protest and in song to
assert their voices in American politics, but for the first time, black garment workers were
included in the chorus.

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“Why should Negro working girls pull white working girls’ chestnuts out of the fire?”¹ This question was posed in an editorial in *The New York Age* in 1910, as much of the garment industry of New York City was paralyzed by a massive strike, known as the “Uprising of the 20,000.” Discrimination caused many blacks to look upon unions with indignation, such as that which is evident in the *Age’s* question. However, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union’s attempts to court African Americans, even if somewhat superficial, allowed it to be viewed as a different kind of union. The “Uprising of the 20,000,” from the summer of 1909 through early 1910, seemed to provide a perfect opportunity for the few African American women working in the garment industry in New York to join unions. The Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) were critical in fomenting the massive labor action that took place, and it seemed that their efforts could result in the improvement of garment workers’ conditions. However, for a number of reasons, African American women almost uniformly decided not only not to join the strike or any of the unions involved in calling it, but also to act as strikebreakers and work in the shops as replacements for the women who were on the picket lines. Hence, the *New York Age* editorial was not just a rejection of pleas to join the garment workers’ strike, but also a justification for scabbing.

The editorial focused on unions’ discrimination against blacks, saying that without the promise of equal treatment, black women had no allegiance to those unions involved in the garment workers’ uprising. It is clear from the editorial that many African Americans felt that their exclusion from unions went hand-in-hand with whites’ resistance to working with them in the shop. Therefore, there was a potent feeling that white pleas for interracial labor solidarity were opportunistic calls for bodies on picket lines, not calls for better working conditions and employment opportunities for all workers regardless of race. This led to demands that the Women’s Trade Union League promise to admit African American women in return for a promise that African American women would stop taking positions vacated by strikers. The Age reported that the WTUL never made the promise that was asked of them.²

The silence of the WTUL was treated in the editorial as an example of unions’ prejudice against blacks, which placed black workers at a constant economic disadvantage. Strikebreaking, therefore, was not something to be ashamed of, but an act of resistance against unions’ discriminatory practices. Indeed, while workers saw factory owners as villainous figures, African American garment workers saw unions as the prospective heroes, providing the key to better wages, conditions, and employment opportunities. It was because of this potentially beneficial role that unions’ rejection of blacks was particularly damaging to black workers. To be turned away from unions was to be cut off from a crucial avenue for socioeconomic mobility. African Americans

² The Women’s Trade Union League was founded in 1903 by William English Walling, a settlement house worker, and Mary Kenney O’Sullivan, a long-time organizer of women workers. Unlike the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, the League from its genesis was more focused on education, investigating industrial conditions, and securing legislation than on labor organizing. Philip Foner, Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I (New York: Free Press, 1979), 226-29, 298-304.
viewed strikebreaking highly because it was a means of fighting back. If they managed to effectively hinder unions from carrying out successful strikes, unions would have to admit them to stop their strikebreaking. The Age editorial showed that black workers knew the power they held:

The Negro will continue to be the pivot upon which future strikes will turn so long as labor will ignore his right to work and thwart his ambition to advance in the mechanical world. The friends and leaders of labor should consider the Negro in days of prosperity as well as in those of adversity.  

African Americans used their power as strikebreakers, and few joined the picket lines during the “Uprising of the 20,000.”

The Women’s Trade Union League fought back against this editorial, however, arguing that it had African American members. Yet, their numbers were pitifully small. Margaret Dreier Robins, president of the WTUL, wrote to Survey, insisting that the union had one black member in New York and two black members in Philadelphia. In fact, the black woman in New York had joined the union early in the “Uprising of the 20,000.” Robins claimed that she was not only welcomed by white union members, but that she also had been elected by white co-workers to the position of chairman of her shop’s union committee. Elizabeth Dutcher, an officer of the New York WTUL went even further in discussing the union’s attitude towards African American women in a letter written to W.E.B. Du Bois’ Horizon:

In New York, colored girls are not only members of the union, but they have been prominent in the union. One colored girl has been secretary of her shop organization all through the strike and has been very frequently at the union headquarters doing responsible work. The editor should also know that meetings were held during the strike….and that in both,

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members of the Ladies Waist Makers Union said definitely and publicly that colored girls were not only eligible but welcome to membership. Despite Robins’ and Dutcher’s statements, however, the WTUL must have been embarrassed at its lack of African American membership, because at the meeting of the union’s National Executive Board following the “Uprising,” the organization passed a resolution pledging to organize black women, and to work with the National Association for the Protection of Colored Women to accomplish this goal. As would become the ILGWU’s practice, the WTUL took a stand embracing black female membership and promising proactive measures to organize black women, but ended up doing little work to carry out such measures.

Sections of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union courted black membership during the “Uprising.” Local 25 members went to black churches in Brooklyn and Manhattan to urge black teenagers and young women to join their ranks. As a result of such efforts, a number of black women participated in the garment strike as pickets, and at least one was elected to be a union official in her shop. In fact, numerous ILGWU locals recorded their first black members in 1910, including Local 91, the Childrens’ Dress, Bathrobe and House Dress Makers’ Union. This represented the genesis of African American female participation in the ILGWU, but at that time such participation was clearly the exception to the rule. Union discrimination against, and

4 Foner, Women and the American Labor Movement, 340-41.


indifference toward, the black community, would only begin to abate around the end of the 1910s. Until then, African American garment workers would have to decide whether to cast their lot with unions, to try and organize themselves, or to go against unionism altogether and act as strikebreakers. Their dilemma would not be resolved until another massive uprising swept the garment industry in 1933.

*African Americans and Labor in the 1910s: Unionism Versus Strikebreaking*

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, black workers were generally employed in only semi-skilled and unskilled trades, but the American Federation of Labor organized solely in skilled trades for decades. It is unclear whether the race question influenced this approach, but Southern white workers generally opposed the inclusion of blacks in their unions, and this couldn’t have helped in changing the policy toward organizing semi-skilled and unskilled trades. Eventually, in each of its national conventions from 1916-1918, the AFL officially supported the organization of African American workers. However, at no time did the organization put any policies in place to help make that happen. As a result, the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes (which changed its name to the National Urban League shortly after) passed resolutions at its January 1918 annual meeting in New York City urging that black workers be organized, but protesting against the Federation. In fact, a group of black organizations including the National Urban League (NUL) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sent a letter to the 1918 AFL convention quoting AFL President Samuel Gompers, who had said that the Federation welcomed African Americans.
To try to hold Gompers and his organization to their words, the NUL and NAACP suggested in their letter that the AFL should release Gompers’ welcome as a written statement to be widely distributed in the press, that the Federation should employ qualified black organizers and encourage cooperation with black organizations, and that it should take a more progressive stance overall on the issue of unionizing blacks.

According to records of the 1918 AFL convention proceedings, this letter was referred to an organizational committee, which issued a report finding no fault with the way the AFL had been handling the issue of organizing black workers, but still encouraging President Gompers to give special attention to the matter. This report was unanimously adopted by the convention, but resulted in no further action.\(^8\)

Despite the AFL’s indifference, in 1919, the National Urban League adopted a resolution at its convention calling upon African Americans to join trade unions. As one of the League’s officials stated in a speech made in Detroit that year:

…the tide has turned and the trend is now in the direction of a wide open door to the colored men and women who work side by side with the white workers. …

Much will depend upon the awakening of the colored public, especially in the churches to see that the open door must be kept wide open by the coming in of the colored workers, in large numbers. The colored working people and their best friends cannot afford to harp continually on the past delinquencies of the Unions, but ought to put their minds and their energy to the education of the blacks and whites.

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From this point in time, even though labor organizations such as the AFL were not keeping their promises to support unionizing African American workers, the League defended the concept of interracial unionism. Its leaders believed that black and white workers needed to come together to successfully defend labor’s interests and defeat racial prejudice.

Unions cannot take full responsibility for the lack of African American union membership before World War I. Before the war, over 70 percent of African Americans lived in rural areas, and African American women were overwhelmingly employed in agriculture and domestic service. Even when these women moved to northern cities before the wartime surge in black northward migration, employment agencies that catered to black women placed them in domestic service. When one examines the small numbers of African American women who ended up working in the garment industry before World War I, however, it becomes clear that they weren’t just unwelcome by unions, but that they made a conscious decision to remain unorganized and often to serve as strikebreakers. Most strikebreaking by African Americans occurred in the North, and after the “Uprising of the 20,000,” they had plenty of opportunities to act as scabs in the garment industry.

On an individual level, African Americans feared that joining unions would put their jobs in jeopardy, but remaining at a shop during a strike could allow a worker in an unskilled, low-paying job to move to a job with higher skills and better pay that had been vacated by a striker. Scabbing was an employment opportunity for many, as well.

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10 Ibid.

Unemployed blacks rarely cared that they might be hindering a strike if scabbing allowed them to pay their bills and put food on the table. Indeed, strikebreaking was often just as much a means of economic self-interest as it was a protest against discriminatory union practices.\(^\text{12}\) Strikebreaking was also, however, a matter of communal concern for African Americans. At the 1918 National Urban League convention on discrimination, a major issue had been whether or not the League should go on record as endorsing African American strikebreaking activity. Though the League decided to support cooperation with white unions when “conditions are favorable,” it said that, when necessary, black workers should “band together with employers and organized labor alike.”\(^\text{13}\) In other words, blacks themselves would have to decide whom it was more advantageous for them to side with in labor disputes. Yet, only a year later, the official stance by the Urban League was that strikebreaking should be abandoned in favor of full-fledged participation in the labor movement. Indeed, by this time, black women were becoming a presence in a number of unions in various industries, including the garment industry. For instance, in Chicago, not only were black women prominent in Local 100 of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, but also a black woman was elected chairwoman of her shop.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{12}\) Indeed, Abram Harris said that experience led many blacks to feel that working for a lower wage than a fellow white worker was not as great an obstacle to advancement as ostracism from or deception by unions was. However, he felt that as blacks migrated northward and increasingly found industrial employment, they would become more acclimated to cycles of unemployment and industrial hazards. This would lead them to a greater desire to address some of the disabilities they suffered as workers in a capitalist system. John Brueggemann argues that this is exactly what happened during the Depression, a time of unprecedented instability in the workforce and heightened exploitation. John Brueggemann, “Realizing Solidarity: Comparative Historical Analyses of Inter-racial Labor Organizing in the Coal, Steel, and Auto Industries, 1927-1941” (PhD diss., Emory University, 1994), 124, 190; Whately, “African-American Strikebreaking,” 539.


\(^{14}\) Mary C. McDowell, “Negroes in the Trade Unions” (speech), I:J12, Folder 1919, National Urban League Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; T. Arnold Hill, Director, Department of Industrial
The rise of black radical leaders, and publications to spread their ideas to the black community, helped foment a class-consciousness amongst blacks that drew them away from strikebreaking and toward the labor movement. *The Crusader*, the organ of the African Blood Brotherhood, a revolutionary socialist black organization, called on blacks repeatedly to stop breaking strikes, and to start joining them. A June 1919 editorial advanced the concept of working-class identity:

> That the Negro’s place is with Labor is evident to all who recognize the truth that the Negro is essentially a worker. …The interest of workers is then the interest of Negroes and vice versa and the sooner that this is recognized by black and white the better for Labor.\(^{15}\)

If the discriminatory policies of labor unions were abolished, the editorial further argued, nothing would keep blacks and the labor movement apart because their interests were so closely tied. Another editorial later that year warned blacks not to function as scabs during strikes since, “Every defeat inflicted upon organized labor is a victory for the enemies of the working class, organized and unorganized.”\(^{16}\)

As blacks began to enter northern industry in higher numbers, and socialist ideas made an impact on the labor movement and the black community, the idea that black workers and union members could find common ground on the basis of their interests as workers began to have an impact on black labor organization. During the 1910s, the migration of African Americans from the rural South to Northern cities had accelerated. The black urban population rose from 2,684,797 to 3,559,473 between 1910 and 1920, an

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\(^{16}\) Ibid.; “Don’t Scab!” *The Crusader*, December 1919, 544.
increase of 32.6 percent. In New York, the black population rose from 91,709 to 152,467, an increase of 66.3 percent. Chicago saw an increase from 44,103 to 109,458 black residents, an increase of 148.2 percent. In Detroit, an even bigger influx occurred, increasing the black population by 611.3 percent, from only 5,741 to 40,838. The height of the migration occurred between 1916 and 1919, when a wartime labor shortage created industrial employment opportunities for blacks. The rise of the Northern black industrial workforce was matched by the ascendance of African American leaders, such as A. Philip Randolph, who advocated for unionism. These factors helped to turn black workers toward joining and creating unions, and away from strikebreaking.

_African Americans Look to Labor_

A. Philip Randolph, an African American, became one of the most critical figures in the American labor movement, which made the movement considerably more attractive to African American workers. Not only did Randolph become the leader of a successful black union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and eventually the President of the National Negro Congress, but he worked closely with a few unions, particularly the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, to secure black labor organization across many different trades on a national level. His relationship with the ILGWU actually began in the late 1910s, when he attended the Rand School for Social Science. The school was a socialist hotbed that counted numerous Jewish labor radicals among its student body. Randolph became acquainted with radical unionism there, and

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began a friendship with Morris Hillquit, a founder of the United Hebrew Trades, a Jewish labor union. Hillquit was also a close advisor to the ILGWU, and would remain so for years to come.  

He demonstrated to Randolph that unions could be used to advance socialist ideas, even in the black community. The friendship of Randolph with various labor radicals allowed him to feel that leftist unions were open enough to black participation that they could effectively spread their ideology amongst blacks, and fight for the kind of society in which race and class would not be used as divisions to hinder the pursuit of equality.

Together with Chandler Owen, Randolph founded The Messenger, which was described as the “only Negro publication in America which supports the organized workers both on the industrial and political fields.” From 1922, the ILGWU praised Randolph’s activities at each convention. Through the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and The Messenger, he proved himself a key figure in the labor movement, and therefore, an important ally for the ILGWU. The union voted year after year to give money to the Brotherhood, The Messenger, and Randolph’s other activities aimed at organizing black workers. In fact, committees representing The Messenger attended meetings of the ILGWU General Executive Board. Individual ILGWU locals also gave to the Brotherhood, while Justice, the official organ of the union, often praised Randolph’s fellow labor publication: “If you want the Negro workers in your shop to join the Union, to become members of the great army of organized labor, ask them to read The

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Indeed, *The Messenger* attributed racial prejudice to capitalism and called for interracial worker solidarity.  

In the early 1920s, Randolph and Owen set up the National Association for the Promotion of Labor Unionism Among Negroes. Owen served as president, and Randolph served as secretary, while prominent Jewish labor activist and President of the New York Women’s Trade Union League Rose Schneiderman served as a member of the advisory board. The association was to educate and organize black workers, so they would join unions and create an interracial force for economic and political change. However, despite numerous unions’ cooperation, Randolph and Owen’s association never managed to get anything accomplished. The unions were willing to give rhetorical support to black labor organization, but didn’t give the necessary financial support or institute policies to ensure that they could increase their own black membership. Black workers saw little point in supporting the National Association for the Promotion of Labor Unionism Among Negroes when they experienced the indifference of the labor movement to their plight.  

Further proof of this indifference was evident at the 1920 American Federation of Labor convention in Montreal. Aware that blacks were now a sizable presence in the urban industrial workforce, the AFL argued that, as blacks had fought honorably in World War I for the cause of freedom, they should not be denied participation in the labor movement where they could fight for their freedom as workers. The Federation thus

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passed a resolution ordering all of its affiliated unions to accept African Americans as full and equal members, but it then tabled the issue for a future meeting.\textsuperscript{21} This led leaders like A. Philip Randolph to pursue relations with unions such as the ILGWU, which had already proved itself willing to take some degree of action toward supporting black labor and black socialist activity. In June 1923, A. Philip Randolph spoke to the General Executive Boards of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, recommending that they each employ a black organizer to function on the national level, as well as local black organizers. He also suggested that they conduct a series of lectures on the question of black involvement in the labor movement in their schools, forums, and educational centers, and that they create and distribute educational propaganda pointing out labor’s achievements. This propaganda was also to demonstrate how race prejudice thwarted labor’s ability to achieve economic democracy.\textsuperscript{22}

By this time, the number of black workers in the garment industry had increased. The Industrial Information Service of the New York State Industrial Commission’s Bureau of Women in Industry made a report in July 1923, showing that in Manhattan and Brooklyn alone, 89 different garment and white goods companies employed African American women, most commonly as pressers. In addition, 33 other firms had advertised


\textsuperscript{22} \textit{The Messenger}, July 1923, 758.
that they were looking to employ black females as of late 1922. Of the garment firms that employed or solicited black women, many were owned by Jews, which was not surprising as Jews were so prominent in the industry, and approximately 10 of the firms were located in Harlem.²³

Signs that the ILGWU wanted to reach out to the black community began to appear shortly after World War I. As Abram Harris and Sterling Spero described in The Black Worker, the union realized that black women were now a permanent part of the garment industry, and should be encouraged to organize. Beginning in the late 1910s, a number of black women were elected by fellow workers, both black and white, to be chairwomen in their shops. The approach of the ILGWU to the black community in the early 1920s is demonstrated by Harris and Spero’s description of the union’s activities at that time in Philadelphia:

Union representatives visited the Negro editors, ministers, and professional men whose word carried weight. A meeting of some of the most prominent colored citizens in the city was arranged at which the union made a plea for support. It explained that it was not only willing to accept the Negro and give him an equal chance, but that it was eager, now that he had won a permanent place in the industry, to guarantee him his position and protect him against exploitation. These pleas gradually won important Negro leaders, including ministers and editors, to the union cause. ²⁴

Indeed, reaching out to the black community required holding meetings in black neighborhoods, wooing black leaders, and promoting an image of the ILGWU as a staunch defender of equality. In an effort to encourage this, organizers such as Rose


²⁴ Harris and Spero, The Black Worker, 337-38, 340.
Schneiderman began to change the nature of the union’s meetings. Schneiderman insisted that Local 62, the Undergarment Workers organization, switch from holding its meetings in Yiddish to holding them in English, so that black women could understand and participate.\(^{25}\)

On a national scale, however, the ILGWU also took notice of new African American female members, and of the growing numbers of African American women working in the garment industry. At its 1920 convention, President Abraham Schlesinger discussed the increase of young black women who were, as he dramatically described, “invading” the ladies’ garment trades in New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Chicago.\(^{26}\) This led the union to discuss adopting a policy to bring more African American female garment workers into its ranks. In fact, in the proceedings of the convention, the ILGWU claimed that its General Executive Board had initiated an organizing campaign among black workers.\(^{27}\) The union claimed that black workers were drawn to its ranks because of the “friendly attitude of the members of our locals towards them, the fact that they have treated the colored women in a friendly and equitable spirit, has aided materially in revealing to the negro women workers where their true interests lie.” At the 1922 convention, the union singled out African American girls for their participation in a strike that year.\(^{28}\)

\(^{25}\) Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, 211.


\(^{27}\) *Report to the 1920 Convention*, 106-7 reprinted in Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, 213.

Special meetings for African American workers in the dress and waist shops began in New York in 1922. Julius Hochman, the Vice President of the ILGWU, Grace Campbell, a black garment worker, and A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters all addressed the first such meeting. In 1923, three mass meetings were held for black workers to attract them to the ILGWU, all of which Randolph spoke at.\(^\text{29}\) The ILGWU also used other important black figures to attract potential members. For instance, Reverend Charles Miller, a popular Harlem minister, appeared at several ILGWU meetings during the 1920s. As part of an educational program aimed at black women workers in West Harlem in 1923, Local 22 arranged for black trade unionists and lecturers to promote the ILGWU to the women and their families. During the summer of 1923, blacks helped organize Local 132, the Button Workers’ Union of the ILGWU. The following winter, Local 22 noted the strong support black members gave to a general strike they were conducting.\(^\text{30}\) The ILGWU also became a physical part of the black community, using Harlem churches and social halls for union meetings and organizing drives.\(^\text{31}\) However, the resolutions adopted by various conventions in the 1920s in support of organizing blacks were difficult to implement. Indeed, in the decade following the

\(^{29}\) Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, 215-16.

\(^{30}\) It wasn’t surprising that Local 22, which had only recently been chartered in 1921, was already open to African Americans. The local had been created when the union’s General Executive Board voted to split Local 25 in two because of its associations with communists. Local 22 consisted of the dressmakers from Local 25 and then expanded, meaning it could push left-wing policies, such as outreach to the African American community. This leftism led to the suspension of 19 members of the local’s General Executive Board in 1923. Further suspensions would occur during the following two years, but all officers were reinstated due to fears of a split within the union. Laslett, *Labor and the Left*, 128-29; Will Herberg, “The ILGWU Civil War,” in *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle For Industrial Democracy*, ed. Leon Stein (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1977), 214-15; Report to the 1924 International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union Convention, 107-8 reprinted in Katz, *A Union of Many Cultures*, 160.

\(^{31}\) Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, 216.
1920 convention, where the issue of organizing black female workers first arose, the ILGWU struggled to live up to its rhetoric.

In addition to the Urban League, socialists, and the ILGWU, the NAACP also advocated that the AFL actively pursue organizing black workers. It complained about the AFL’s inaction, taking the Federation to task in a public statement made at the NAACP’s 1924 convention. The organization claimed that blacks remained largely outside of the labor movement for two reasons: whites did not want blacks in their unions or their workplaces, and blacks stopped seeking admittance to unions and found value in being non-union workers and even strikebreakers. The combination of African American migration to the North and legislation restricting immigration also led to an increase in the proportion of industrial workers who were black. Thus, the black worker now had significant power. Yet, the NAACP echoed the Urban League’s stance that blacks could no longer serve as strikebreakers because any actions that damaged the labor movement ultimately harmed black workers. This led the organization to pose a simple question: “Is it not time, then, that black and white labor get together?”

The NAACP’s suggestion for promoting interracial unionism was to form an Interracial Labor Commission made up of the NAACP, the AFL, the railroad unions, and other organizations. The Commission would study the attitudes and practices of national labor organizations and union locals toward blacks, and those of blacks toward unions. It would also create propaganda against racial discrimination for distribution at labor meetings in unions across the country. The NAACP sent the AFL a letter asking for its cooperation, which was met with only a polite acknowledgment. The Interracial Labor
Commission never became more than an idea, but the National Urban League picked up where the NAACP left off.32

The League decided to take matters into its own hands by establishing a Department of Industrial Relations in 1925 to generally encourage African American support of the labor movement and to specifically promote African American membership in unions. T. Arnold Hill, Director of this new department, engaged in a lengthy exchange of communication with AFL President William Green on the matter of organizing black workers and hiring black organizers. This led to Hill making two appearances in front of the AFL Executive Council and the Urban League in the spring of 1925, where he argued that the fates of white and black workers were inextricably linked. If whites received high wages and blacks did not, that ultimately meant that all wages were vulnerable, and Hill asserted that the same principle extended to all benefits that workers received. Therefore, blacks should not be discriminated against in the workplace, nor should they be shut out of the labor movement, where they would be motivated by their own interests:

The Negro must know that he is wanted within the ranks of the labor movement and efforts must be employed to get him in. The recalcitrant trade organizations must be shown the folly of their untenable position of segregation and discrimination.33


As an enticement to cooperation, Hill offered that the League would raise one-half of the expenses for a black AFL organizer. The Federation’s response was that it did not have the funds to cover the other half.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{The Black Community Responds to Indifference}

The indifference toward blacks demonstrated by much of the mainstream labor movement compelled the black community to take matters into its own hands. At a conference of African American trade unionists in the Lower East Side on May 23, 1925, A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen met the New York Urban League and representatives of liberal unions like the ILGWU to launch the Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers (TUCONW). Frank Crosswaith, a prominent socialist, was elected its Executive Secretary. The executive board consisted of six white and five black unionists, at least one of whom was from the ILGWU. Once this organization helped blacks to gain union membership, it was meant to act as a “United Negro Trades,” ensuring that blacks were treated fairly by fellow union members and workers.\textsuperscript{35}

The Trade Union Committee made it clear that it viewed the most pressing problems of the black community as being tied to the treatment of black workers. One of its flyers from 1925 stated:

\textsuperscript{34} T. Arnold Hill, Director, Department of Industrial Relations, National Urban League to David Dubinsky, 16 December 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 27, Folder 7; “The Urban League and the A.F. of L.: A Statement on Racial Discrimination,” \textit{Opportunity} (August 1935); “Organized Labor Listens to Plea For Negroes” press release, May 9, 1925, I:E33, Folder ’25–’27, National Urban League Records, Library of Congress.

Lynching Is NOT the Negro’s Greatest Problem
Since emancipation, about 5,000 Negroes have been lynched. More than
5,000 Negro babies die every year from lack of good food and healthy
surroundings, because, the wages of their fathers and mothers are too low.
Negro workers, join the union of your trade, and reduce the mortality of
the race.\textsuperscript{36}

Though the TUCONW only engaged in organizing activities for four months, Crosswaith
demed the organization a success, claiming it had helped hundreds of black workers join
unions. Indeed, with the ILGWU’s participation, a number of blacks were funneled into
its ranks through the TUCONW during the organization’s first five months. Randolph
and Owen also sought to get blacks into the Teamsters, Machinists, Bricklayers, Furriers,
Bookkeepers, Stenographers and Accountants, and Printers unions, but only a few were
accepted by only some of these unions. Without widespread support, the TUCONW fell
apart within a year. Besides not accepting many black members, the unions who’d
promised financial support did not make the financial contributions necessary for the
organization to survive, despite their rhetoric in support of organizing black workers.
Years later, TUCONW Vice President Elise McDougal Ayers would argue that the trade
unions had been firmly behind her organization, both philosophically and monetarily.
Yet, she said that the neglect of the AFL ultimately led its member unions to follow,
causing their support to collapse.\textsuperscript{37}

Meanwhile, African American membership in the ILGWU was clearly growing.

This fact was demonstrated in the first study of black membership in the union, which

\textsuperscript{36}Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers flyer, 1925, Schomburg Center, The New York
Public Library; Frank R. Crosswaith (speech), \textit{Proceedings of the First Negro Labor Conference}, July 20,

\textsuperscript{37}Kornweibl, \textit{No Crystal Stair}, 186-87; De Reid, \textit{Negro Membership in American Labor Unions}, 131-32;
Frank R. Crosswaith and Elise McDougal Ayers (speeches), \textit{Proceedings of the First Negro Labor
Conference}, 7, 10.
was carried out by the National Urban League in 1925 as part of a larger study of blacks in trade unions. The study examined nine ILGWU locals. While three stated they kept no records of the racial composition of their membership, the other six reported a total of 1,348 black members, which constituted 1.7 percent of their total membership.\footnote{Diner, \textit{In the Almost Promised Land}: 210.}

Considering that in the 1910s, the ILGWU tried to demonstrate its diversity by pointing to locals with one or a few black members, black membership in the 1920s had truly mushroomed. While blacks were still not well represented in the ILGWU, the union was markedly more diverse than ever before.

Communists, who were waging a struggle for control of the ILGWU and trying to build ties to the black community, took a particularly aggressive approach to organizing black workers, establishing the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC) in October 1925. In one of its earliest pamphlets, the Congress claimed that African Americans now held a large role in industry and therefore their greatest weapon for economic advancement was mass organization of the black working class. The ANLC explained that the reason for its existence was to bring the most powerful elements of that working class together for discussing and acting on the most oppressive social problems facing African Americans, especially those of the working class. Another element of its agenda was to fight for the abolition of racial discrimination across the country in every facet of American life.

Yet, the ANLC’s focus was not only on issues solely affecting the black community, but also on interracial relations. The Congress argued that racial antagonism sprang from the economic inequality plaguing society. The wealthiest Americans were
seen as controlling the mechanisms of shaping public opinion and using them to cultivate hostility between workers of different races and religions. By dividing the workers, it became easier to exploit them without fomenting resistance. Thus, not only did leaders of the black working class need to come together to address workers’ issues, but also black and white workers needed to work together to effectively address those issues, as well.

The Congress was therefore made up of delegates from both independent black unions and unions with mixed racial memberships. Delegates also came from the large pool of unorganized black factory workers, black agricultural workers, and individual advocates both black and white who were known for championing the cause of the black working class. Though the ANLC would last for a few years under a number of different names, it never became widely influential or successful in advancing its agenda.

If black workers were to resist the advances of communists, they would have to be able to turn to the American Federation of Labor, as it now stood as the central organization of the mainstream labor movement. Thus, the AFL’s ongoing discussion of whether or not to support and pursue organizing black workers had grown increasingly important. This was recognized across the black community, as demonstrated by a February 1926 letter to AFL General Organizer Hugh Frayne that was co-signed by A. Philip Randolph, T. Arnold Hill, and the Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers’ Frank Crosswaith, as well as Rienzi Lemus, President of the Grand Council of the Brotherhood of Dining Car Employees, TUCONW Executive Board member Gertrude E. McDouglas, and NAACP Secretary James Weldon Johnson. As had been argued to the AFL so many times over the previous few years, the letter contended that

African Americans now made up a substantial portion of the industrial workforce and had become a sizable economic force in northern cities. They also represented a stable labor supply with immigration having been so harshly restricted. However, they were working for wages that were far below the standards set for the occupations in which they were employed. The letter’s authors claimed that this situation would open the door for communists to manipulate black workers, and that it could lead to major conflict within the ranks of labor, as blacks were a source of cheap labor competing with whites for employment. In fact, communists were already making headway recruiting blacks, as only they were making the effort to do so.\footnote{In the book \textit{Conversations with Maida Springer: A Personal History of Labor, Race, and International Relations} by Yevette Richards (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), Springer describes how communists established a strong presence in Harlem by waging campaigns against employment discrimination, police brutality, and lynching: “They were not going to use me, but they had \textit{all} of the angles for capturing the hearts of a disturbed and a distressed and a downtrodden people.” (86) However, many Harlem residents were suspicious of communists who were so willing to take to the city streets and visit people’s houses to push their agenda, but who did not live in Harlem themselves. In the end, Springer and many other blacks felt that communists were patronizing them, but others were attracted to the party’s vision of a society where workers controlled the means of production. See chapter 2, “In the Cauldron of Local 22 Politics.”}

The letter went on to explain that the discriminatory practices of many AFL unions served to discredit the rhetoric the Federation used expressing support of racial equality. However, the leaders who signed the letter believed that labor activity on the part of African Americans through the Pullman Porters’ Union, the Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers, and membership in locals of AFL unions made them more attractive to the AFL as potential members. That belief led them to make a number of suggestions: that the AFL officially endorse and support the TUCONW; that it make every effort to secure the affiliation of existing black trade unions and labor organizations; and that it also employ a capable black executive,
preferably a trade unionist who would sit in on AFL Executive Council meetings on matters of importance to black workers. This executive would establish organizations like New York’s Trade Union Committee in other cities across the country and be allowed to assist all organizations under the AFL umbrella in addressing racial problems. A body of representatives from organizations interested in organizing black workers would also be created, largely to counsel and review the work of the executive.41

T. Arnold Hill kept up his correspondence with AFL President William Green in an attempt to make sure the AFL appointed black organizers. In March 1927, they had an exchange over Thomas L. Dabney, a graduate of Brookwood Labor College who had approached the Urban League looking to secure employment. Hill approached Green asking if Dabney might be utilized as an organizer for the AFL. Green’s response read in part:

If I knew some opportunity in some city for Mr. Dabney to serve in recruiting and organizing Negro workers for the trade union movement I would do my utmost to assist Mr. Dabney in taking advantage of such an opportunity. At the present time it does not seem possible to avail ourselves of the opportunity to secure the services of Mr. Dabney as an organizer among Negro workers.42

The next day, AFL General Organizer Hugh Frayne wrote Hill that the Federation could keep Dabney’s name on file for consideration for a future position if Dabney provided the AFL with evidence of his experience. The AFL continued to act as if it was interested in


hiring an African American organizer, but it never came through on actually hiring one in
the 1920s.\textsuperscript{43}

However, the increasing presence of African Americans in the labor movement
was being recognized beyond labor circles. At the end of 1927, the \textit{New York World}
published an article that pointed to the remarkable change in the attitude of the black
community toward trade unions. Perhaps more important than the change in attitude
amongst workers was the change occurring amongst African American professionals and
businessmen. They had demonstrated indifference and even hostility toward their
community’s working class in the past, but now were offering their support. The article’s
author recounted the events of a meeting of the Urban League in Harlem as evidence of
blacks embracing the labor movement. The leaders of the community, including the
pastors of New York’s largest churches, lawyers, realtors, physicians, social workers, and
representatives of fraternal organizations, were in attendance. The meeting almost
unanimously went on record in support of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and
against blacks taking work as strikebreakers.

Further evidence of changing attitudes was the position taken by one of the
country’s leading black newspapers, the \textit{Chicago Defender}. The paper had previously
been neutral, and some would say antagonistic, toward the labor movement. Yet, by the
end of 1927, it had come out in support of blacks’ full participation in the movement. The
author saw these changing attitudes as evidence that a national conference on blacks and
the labor movement would soon be held. That conference, like the meeting in Harlem,

\textsuperscript{43} Hugh Frayne to T. Arnold Hill, 15 March 1927, I:D37, Folder AFL, National Urban League Records, Library of Congress.
would focus on the goal of mobilizing public opinion behind the Pullman Porters and financing them in any conflicts they might have with the Pullman Company.

However, the article could be viewed as having been overly optimistic. Not only was no such conference in the offing, but the article claimed that AFL President William Green and New York General Organizer Hugh Frayne had given blacks generous assistance, collaborating with A. Philip Randolph and Frank Crosswaith amongst others. Correspon
dence had certainly occurred between these parties, but the AFL offered little in the way of aid to black labor organizations and black workers. The *New York World* article asserted that AFL officials had long fervently desired blacks to soften their attitudes toward labor unions. However, they didn’t desire this change for black workers’ benefit, but for their union’s benefit. The article may have been correct that the black community as a whole was embracing unionism, but the unions’ attitudes toward blacks were changing more slowly.

The article’s depiction of the Urban League’s activism in Harlem, however, was accurate. The New York branch of the League continued to lead pro-labor activities. In its 1928 annual conference, the organization had an entire session devoted to discussing blacks in industry that included talks by Chairman of the Brookwood Labor College faculty A.J. Muste and the New York Urban League’s Industrial Secretary Ira De A. Reid. In late 1929, William Green wrote a letter to the National Urban League’s journal *Opportunity* to dispute an editorial that had been published in the November issue about the AFL. He asserted that, as blacks had been so exploited, it was of the utmost

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44 The article pointed out that the needle trades, once exclusively Jewish, now had a discernable number of African American workers. However, unions generally still seemed slow to accept black members. John J. Leary, Jr., “Negro Changes His Attitude Toward the Trade Unions,” *New York World*, December 11, 1927.
importance that they have all the facts about his organization, as it might be of service to them. He then recounted why *Opportunity* should show more support of the AFL. He admitted that the Federation had been far from perfect in its record regarding blacks: “In no organization do we find that all members live fully at all times to its ideals… Constructive progress is usually slow but definitely pointed toward the ideal.” Its goal, however, remained the unionization of all workers, white and black.

Green argued that it was largely the workers themselves who were to blame for the AFL’s slow progress on racial issues. Blacks were taking a long time to attain the consciousness necessary to unionize. He said that it took a long time for workers to appreciate their own production capabilities and their resulting place in industry, but the AFL could not “effectively carry the gospel of unionism until workers are ready to hear and act.” And if workers faced discrimination from an AFL union, if they truly had the correct consciousness, they would organize an independent union and obtain a charter of affiliation with the AFL. Green also noted that at that year’s AFL convention in Toronto, A. Philip Randolph gave an address that was well received, as convention delegates demonstrated avid appreciation for the work of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Yet, he also mentioned that Randolph’s address was given during the closing hours of the convention, after most convention business had been completed.45

In May 1929, on the eve of the Depression, T. Arnold Hill, Executive Secretary of the National Urban League paused to evaluate the changes in African American labor

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that had occurred over the course of the 1920s. In his article, “The Present Status of Negro Labor,” he highlighted the marked population and occupational shift that had occurred in the African American community:

Between 1920 and 1925 the farm population declined about 2,000,000, or an average of 400,000 a year…. Between 1920 and 1925 there was a decline of about 120,000 in the number of colored farmers in the South. There was an absolute decrease of close to 80,000 in the farm tenant class….In 1920 Chicago and New York could boast of having some colored workers in all but one of the principal occupations listed in the census classification. Our next census will probably show Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, St. Louis and other cities equally as prosperous.  

However, despite gains by blacks in northern industrial cities and the fact that nearly 100,000 blacks were affiliated with some form of labor organization, Hill went on to argue that whites were still resistant to working with and organizing blacks. Besides the radical wing of the labor movement, which some ILGWU locals fit into, unions still discriminated against blacks.  

*The ILGWU Distinguishes Itself on Race*

The garment unions under the American Federation of Labor umbrella were more progressive on the issue of organizing black workers than the AFL as a whole was. With a general strike looming in the garment industry in 1929, the logic of organizing black workers became clear, and the members of the ILGWU laid out an official plan to attract blacks to join the union. In the summary section of the *Report of the General Executive Board to the Twentieth Convention of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’*

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Union, the significance placed on organizing African American women in preparation for the general strike was clear:

That the Union is planning to make a complete job of the present organizing campaign, leaving out no section of the industry or the workers, is evidenced by the special drive the leaders in charge of it are making to interest the three or four thousand Negro women workers employed in the dress shops.  

The summary went on to explain that Florida Pinkney, a Brookwood Labor College graduate, had been appointed a special organizer to lead the campaign to recruit African American women workers. Pinkney’s appointment got the African American community’s attention, as her appointment and the ILGWU’s drive to organize black female workers were publicized in African American publications such as Opportunity. Vice President of the ILGWU, Julius Hochman, was quoted in the journal as saying: “We[the ILGWU] are out to organize all the workers in the industry and we will not neglect Harlem. We shall call meetings, distribute literature and do everything to reach the colored workers.”  

Another aspect of this drive announced at the union’s 20th convention was that the Joint Board had inaugurated a series of meetings in Harlem in order to attract black dressmakers to union activities. The first meeting was on September 26, 1929 at St. Luke’s Hall and was addressed by Pinkney, Hochman, and A. Philip Randolph. At this meeting, the union took a clear stand on the side of equality, admitting to the inequity blacks suffered in the shops, and vowing to fight against it. However, instead of

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admitting to any inequity blacks may have suffered in the union, the language at this meeting, and at the convention, matched that which the union would use time and again:

The International, as the Negro workers know, has never made any distinction as to race or color in accepting members and will insist that the scales of wages and hours and other work conditions are alike for every member of the Union. \textsuperscript{50}

The ILGWU saw its past with rose-colored glasses.

Another resolution was also set forth at the conference pertaining to a letter A. Philip Randolph sent to the union. In his letter, he proposed that if the ILGWU made a contribution to the Sleeping Car Porters, that they would actively assist the ILGWU in organizing black workers. Here, Randolph made a crucial connection between his union and the ILGWU:

Their victory is your victory and their defeat your defeat. The victory of the Pullman Porters is not only significant from the point of view of the great results of their organization; but it means the stimulation of interest in organizations among Negroes in all industries. It means that it will hearten and encourage the thousands of Negro girls and women in the garment industry to join the International Ladies’ Garment Union and fight side by side with their white brothers and sisters for a better day. \textsuperscript{51}

The board of the ILGWU saw this connection, too. Helping a black union to succeed would demonstrate solidarity with black workers. The convention adopted Resolution 99, in which it pledged to continue moral and financial support of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and thanked Randolph for his support of the ILGWU. \textsuperscript{52}

Once she was appointed as an organizer, Floria Pinkney carried on the message of the ILGWU in the black community. In a speech to the New York Urban League soon

\textsuperscript{50} Report of the GEB to the Twentieth Convention of the ILGWU, 1929: 85-86.

\textsuperscript{51} Proceedings of the Twentieth Convention of the ILGWU, December 9, 1929, 139-40.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
after the International established a permanent committee to organize black workers, she explained that the union had never discriminated against black workers, and that the increase in black workers in the garment industry had been so dramatic over the previous eight years, that the union had appointed her an organizer for the African American community. This was largely a result of the fact that, by the end of the 1920s, despite the presence of 4,000 or so black women in the garment industry, less than 200 of them had joined the ILGWU. Just since she had begun organizing, however, Pinkney claimed another 300 had either joined the union or expressed an interest in joining. She projected that the number of black ILGWU members would double just within the first few weeks of 1930.

The union was taking other new measures toward organizing blacks that were proving successful. For instance, garment workers who lived in Harlem but worked in other parts of New York City would not leave work and go home only to have to leave their neighborhood again to attend a union meeting, so the ILGWU began promoting meetings in Harlem for members and non-members. The union also had representatives visit with other workers’ organizations and often sent speakers to those organizations to promote the ILGWU. Additionally, during its drive to attract African American members, the ILGWU lowered its dues by more than two-thirds. Pinkney additionally pointed to the union’s participation with the New York Urban League and the NAACP in the new committee to organize black workers, and also lauded Local 22, the leader of the union’s
racial progressivism, as it had two black workers on its Executive Board, meaning they had a voice in all policies governing the local.\textsuperscript{53}

In November 1929, Harlem church and media figures, and representatives of various benevolent associations and organizations such as the New York Urban League, the NAACP, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters held a conference in support of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union’s efforts toward organizing black workers and fighting racial discrimination in the garment industry. ILGWU Vice President Hochman and Floria Pinkney spoke at the conference, detailing conditions in their industry. This included information that non-union black dressmakers earned approximately half of the wages that unionized black workers were paid, and that they worked on average between 52 and 56 hours a week, as opposed to the 40-hour week schedules that unionized black workers averaged.

Hochman explained that most of the 4,000 black women in the garment industry were not organized and, therefore, their jobs were not secure and they were commonly victims of discrimination. Additionally, he claimed that most black female garment workers could expect to make only $15 a week, as opposed to the $40 a week that was the standard wage in union shops. The conference demonstrated the faith that many in Harlem had in the ILGWU, as it voted to establish a permanent committee for organizing black workers in the garment industry. To launch the new committee into action, the conference voted to establish permanent headquarters in Harlem and to use churches and

\footnote{Floria Pinkney, “Negro Women in the Garment Industry,” (speech, 11\textsuperscript{th} Annual Meeting of the New York Urban League, 8 January 1930), National Urban League Records, Library of Congress.}
the press to get its message out. It set the first meeting for the permanent committee for December 17 at the Harlem offices of the Urban League.54

Local 22’s Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman often appeared at black labor events, and when the National Needle Workers Industrial Union (an offshoot of the Needle Trades Workers’ Industrial Union, the radical organization battling with more moderate forces in the garment unions) joined with the American Negro Labor Congress to launch a strike in 1929, he helped galvanize black garment workers. For these workers, the strike was an opportunity not only to improve conditions across their industry with a 40-hour, five-day work week and the abolition of piecework and sweatshops, but also to improve their own conditions relative to white garment workers. Blacks saw that they held the jobs that required the least amount of skill and garnered the least amount of pay. Making matters worse, they suffered discrimination, which drove their wages down even further, while crushing hopes of upward mobility into higher-skilled positions.55 When the 1929 strike failed, it not only damaged efforts for black equality and participation in the labor movement, but also hamstrung the left wing of the garment unions. These repercussions would be felt when those unions launched the next large strike in their industry in 1933.

To make matters worse, when the stock market crash that would delve the country into a Depression occurred in 1929, it changed the stakes for all workers. Though strikes were still held over the next few years, they occurred with much less frequency and

54 “Harlem Organizations Come to Aid of Exploited, Unorganized Dressmakers,” The New York Amsterdam News, November 27, 1929.

55 “Negro Workers!” flyer, 1929, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 2.
support than those that had occurred in the 1910s and 20s. The ILGWU membership plunged to its lowest point ever, and with black women desperate to protect their jobs, many who had recently joined the union left. The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union couldn’t have predicted that they would finally make a serious attempt to reach out to African American women at the worst possible time. The Depression soon stopped the recruiting efforts altogether.

The Urban League managed to maintain its position as a leader on labor issues throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s partially due to T. Arnold Hill’s ongoing relationship with AFL President William Green. However, as the years passed, with the AFL remaining resistant both to instituting any policies outlawing discrimination and also to hiring black organizers, the relationship became increasingly contentious. In the February 1930 issue of *Opportunity*, Hill published an open letter to Green, castigating the AFL for its inaction on bringing blacks into the labor movement. At the same time, the organization went out of its way to brand blacks as strikebreakers, and to blame the lack of black union membership on black workers because they weren’t willing to accept being union members under unequal conditions. As a result, from 1919 to the beginning of 1929, the number of black union locals under the AFL umbrella across the country dropped from 169 to 23. As Hill put it, blacks never felt “welcome” in unions.

Hill also went on to explain that there was no way the Urban League could meet its goal of trying to improve conditions for black workers if they were always battling white workers for an advantage. Standards could only be raised for one group when all groups of workers came together regardless of race, color, or creed to raise the standards for all. Thus, Hill argued, it was his and Green’s responsibility to insure peace between
all workers. Discrimination undermined that peace by continuing to drive a wedge between workers of different races. Hill thus demanded that blacks be included in the AFL plans for organizing drives and that discriminatory policies that made it difficult or impossible for blacks to join AFL unions be dropped.56

Yet, the only union that seemed to respond to Hill’s demands was the ILGWU—Local 22, specifically. By the early 1930s, Local 22 was already one of largest and most diverse locals of any union in the country. With branches around New York City, including in Harlem, its leadership realized that for any of its organizing drives to be successful, it had to reach out to workers of various racial backgrounds. On July 18, 1931, for instance, Local 22’s Executive Board decided to add more members to the local’s organization department in order to more frequently send representatives out to speak to black and Hispanic workers, and to reawaken a spirit of militancy in union members. Shortly afterward, the Board decided to call a meeting in Harlem to be conducted in Spanish for all garment workers, both ILGWU members and non-members, who were Spanish-speaking. They also agreed to call an English-language meeting in Harlem aimed largely at black garment workers, but open to garment workers of all races who lived in the neighborhood.57

It was undeniable that such efforts by the union were hampered by the Depression. For instance, at the 21st ILGWU convention, held in 1932, Vice President Hochman told the Joint Board of how he had approached Local 22 with a plan to assist


57 Minutes, meeting, July 18, 1931, and Executive Board meeting, July 29, 1931, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 25, Folder 12.
them in organizing an African American workers’ branch and a Spanish branch for Hispanic workers, and with suggestions for activities to help organize African American and Hispanic workers. According to Hochman, Local 22 did nothing about his suggestions, demonstrating that the Depression paralyzed even the ILGWU’s most active branches, and that there seemed to be little hope of organizing blacks during this time of economic crisis.\footnote{Proceedings of the Twenty-First Convention of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union. May 12, 1932, 268.}

Despite the Depression’s crippling effects, the ILGWU still attempted to make an impact on racial matters. When the Scottsboro Boys case occurred in 1931, the union protested loudly. In March 1930, nine African American boys were arrested for assault in Scottsboro, Alabama, and later charged with raping two white women. All nine were tried in April, with eight being found guilty and sentenced to death. The speedy trials, youth of the defendants, and severity of the sentences led to nationwide protest. The case remained in litigation when the 21st ILGWU convention took place in May 1932. One of the first orders of the convention was to send a letter to the Governor of Alabama protesting the Scottsboro Boys’ convictions and urging that they be granted a pardon or a retrial.\footnote{Proceedings of the Twenty-First Convention of the ILGWU, May 3, 1932, 38.}

On the second day of the convention, the union proposed three separate resolutions related to the Scottsboro case. Resolution No. 8, “The Scottsboro Frame-Up,” asserted that the nine boys were facing execution solely because they were black. The resolution called for the convention to condemn their arrest and trial, demand that the Governor of Alabama pardon them, and condemn “all manifestations of racial prejudice
and oppression, race discrimination, jim-crowism, and lynching.” Resolution No. 9, “Scottsboro Case and Anti-Lynching,” compared the plight of the Scottsboro Boys, and of all blacks, to other groups who were oppressed based on ethnicity and class, clearly drawing a comparison between blacks and the mostly Jewish working-class members of the ILGWU. The actions it called for mirrored those set out in Resolution No. 8.

Resolution No. 10, “Scottsboro Anti-Lynching,” harped on the notion that employers continued discriminatory practices in order to divide blacks from whites and to prevent blacks from developing labor consciousness. It called for the ILGWU to protest to the federal government, for the Scottsboro Boys to be released, and for an end to the lynching of black workers.60 On the ninth day of the convention, all three of these resolutions were unanimously carried, and the General Executive Board was urged to lend the Scottsboro Boys’ defense “all assistance possible.”61

Ironically, the Scottsboro resolutions demonstrated how easy it was for the union to claim a certain kind of attitude towards race. Implementing policies to back up those attitudes would have cost money that the ILGWU did not have during the early years of the Depression. Perhaps more importantly, though, policy requires the desire to turn ideology into action, and as has been previously shown, the desire of many union members to promote equality in the garment shops and in union ranks was questionable. However, the ILGWU’s vocal reaction to the Scottsboro case perpetuated the image the union had tried to portray to the black community throughout the 1920s, that the union cared about their interests, and was willing to defend their rights. By the early 1930s,

60 Ibid., 42-43.

Local 22 was making the most aggressive attempt of any organization inside the labor movement to organize blacks. This represented significant progress from the early 1910s, but with relatively small numbers of black workers in the garment industry, even this progress was slow and ineffective in remedying discrimination. However, after 1933, that would change.

_The Politics of Race and Labor_

The participation of blacks in the labor movement was in many respects a political issue, as the Socialist Party (SP) sought to be a leader in organizing black workers. On October 30, 1923, Eugene V. Debs gave a speech, “The Negro Workers,” at the Commonwealth Casino in Harlem. The speech was then published widely as a pamphlet by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen’s Emancipation Publishing Company. Socialist Frank Crosswaith had chaired the event where Debs spoke and introductory speakers included Randolph. Debs began by claiming how sympathetic he was to the plight of the African American:

> I am more than glad to see the colored people represented here tonight. From the beginning of my life my heart has been with them. I could never understand why they were denied any right or privilege or liberty that the white man had a right to enjoy. I never knew of any distinction on account of the color of the flesh of a human being. Indeed, when I think of what the colored people have been made to suffer at the hands of their supposedly superior race, every time I look a colored brother in the face I blush for the crimes that my race has committed against his race. (Great applause.)

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In fact, he explained that one reason for his becoming a socialist was because he was opposed to racial discrimination, which the Socialist Party had battled against. However, he acknowledged that being in the Party would likely not win him any political office.

He argued, though, that he and the Socialist Party couldn’t do anything for African Americans that they couldn’t do for themselves. His message to black workers was to stand united to amass the greatest strength and effectively assert their power. He also advocated for education, which would become central to socialist-influenced garment unions that had racially mixed membership. Not surprisingly, Debs also attacked capitalism, saying that it kept blacks in servitude. To him, both the Republican and Democratic parties were staunch defenders of the capitalist system, and thus neither could be trusted to defend the interests of black workers. In later years, both Frank Crosswaith’s socialist-affiliated Negro Labor Committee and the American Communist Party would espouse the same argument.

Expanding on his economic analysis, Debs went on to explain that black workers were part of the working class, the class that produced the country’s wealth, and that they worked tireless hours in dangerous conditions, risking life and limb. The capitalist system demanded more cheap workers, white or black, to increase production and resulting profits. Debs described capitalist wage earners this way:

Your interests are all identical; you do all the useful, productive work but you do not work for yourselves; you have no legal right to work; you can work only if you are permitted to work by the owners of the tools with which you work. You made the tools and use the tools; but they own them and they might almost as well own you; for as long as you work with their tools, what you produce belongs to them; they become fabulously rich

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63 Ibid., 9-12.
producing nothing while you remain poor producing everything. And this applies to white and black alike.\textsuperscript{64}

Socialists believed in a different system, but Debs didn’t so much advocate for the radical overthrow of capitalism as he argued that workers should be empowered to fight for greater economic equality. He also felt that both black and white workers should be equally empowered, and he explained that the Socialist Party allowed this to happen by admitting blacks to the party on an equal basis with other members. This meant that black members participated in party councils, conferences, and conventions.

However, black workers couldn’t rely on the Socialist Party, but had to do things for themselves. Debs appealed to them to build their own press because the mainstream press sided with capitalist owners during strikes, while blacks would only be able to trust their own press. Furthermore, the press served to educate the community, and education was at the core of insuring blacks could make economic progress. Debs also told black workers to unite with other workers in unions and in the SP to develop their industrial and political power, as their voices would never be heard until they garnered such power. Industrial workers could only wrest control of their economic conditions from their bosses if they organized regardless of race.\textsuperscript{65}

The stance of the socialists was particularly important in the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, where they made up a large segment of the left wing. In fact, in the mid-1920s, the left wing won control of the ILGWU New York Joint Board. However, the ILGWU national leadership then expelled the Joint Board from the union from late 1926 to the end of 1928 after the left wing led a disastrous general strike in the

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 26-27, 29.
cloak industry. The expulsion led to the creation of the Needle Trades Workers’
Industrial Union (NTWIU), which represented the left wing forces in the ILGWU. The
communists were overwhelming the socialists at this point, co-opting the left wing.
However, in 1929, a number of factors led to a split in the left wing. Firstly, the NTWIU
led a strike that was largely unsuccessful and didn’t garner wide-scale support, damaging
the organization’s credibility. Cloakmakers thus joined the ILGWU in large numbers in
1929, and when dressmakers went on strike in 1930, the ILGWU was in full control and
successfully recruited the vast majority of those workers. Then, the NTWIU broke with
left-wing tactics, expelling rank and file workers, which led many socialists to bolt. Some
of them, like Charles Zimmerman, then managed to regain some influence in the
ILGWU. In the meantime, communists made an even more aggressive push to gain
control of the labor movement by establishing the Trade Union Unity League.66

The Needle Trades Workers’ Industrial Union actively sought to attract African
American members, and surpassed the ILGWU’s progressivism on race by having two
blacks on its general executive board, in a position of substantial power.67 Socialists
responded with their own campaign to court African Americans. James O’Neal, who had
been the editor of the socialist newspaper The Call, published a booklet in 1929 that was
distributed by the Negro Labor News Service. The Next Emancipation picked up on
themes from Eugene Debs’ speech to the black workers of Harlem six years earlier,

66 “The Situation in the Socialist Party and the Tasks of the Communists,” 1935, ILGWU records,
#5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 41, Folder 7; Charles S. Zimmerman, “To All Needle
Trades Workers,” ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 33, Folder 12; “Memorandum on the Basis for Peace
Negotiations between the A.F. of L. and the C.I.O.,” ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 5, Folder 8; Daniel
E. Bender. Sweated Work, Weak Bodies: Anti-Sweatshop Campaigns and Languages of Labor (New
Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 174-76; Will Herberg, “The ILGWU Civil War,” in Stein,

67 Harris and Spero, The Black Worker, 343.
touting the benefits of socialism, but also encouraging blacks to do for themselves. The booklet began with a foreword written by Frank Crosswaith that advocated interracial unionism. O’Neal also argued that while the Republican and Democratic Parties represented capitalism and inherently agreed to the economic and racial inequalities that came with it, the Socialist Party represented the true interests of workers regardless of race.

However, O’Neal made it clear that, in his mind, race wasn’t the issue. Using examples of slavery and indentured servitude, he discussed cases of blacks owning blacks and of whites owning whites. The point was that employers are willing to exploit workers of their own race because what they fundamentally want is cheap labor. Because of this motivation, employers also didn’t discriminate based on religion or nationality. To O’Neal, the only real division between people was between those who are masters and those who are slaves; in other words, between employers and employees:

The capitalist master is a capitalist master, whether his skin is black or white. The wage worker is a wage worker, whether his skin is black or white. If the black worker works for a white master he does not improve his lot by working for a black master. The white worker is not a free man because a white capitalist employs him. He is robbed just the same as the Negro worker is.

_The great fact for both white and Negro workers to understand is that as wage workers they have common interests._

Employers merely used the false divisions of religion, nationality, and race to pit workers against each other and make it harder for them to unite against exploitation. For this reason, socialists claimed opposition to all forms of race prejudice.

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68 James O’Neal, _The Next Emancipation_ (New York: Negro Labor News Service, 1929), ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 150, Folder 3A.
Certainly, O’Neal wanted African Americans to join the Socialist Party, but in *The Next Emancipation* he also encouraged them to join unions and constantly advocate for the abrogation of racial discrimination and the integration of separate black and white unions, so that unions would be more socialistic in nature, like the ILGWU. Yet, he also bluntly attacked the two major American political parties. He pointed to a speech former President Warren G. Harding made in 1921 as being representative of the Republican Party’s view on race: “…‘this is not a question of social equality, but a question of recognizing a fundamental, eternal and inescapable difference.’” The focus was not to be on what whites and blacks had in common, and certainly not on equality, but on racial difference. To Republicans of the 1920s, blacks and whites couldn’t be treated the same because they weren’t the same. Although it was the party of Lincoln, O’Neal pointed out that the Republican Party had been pandering to the Southern vote by casting aside any allegiance to black voters.

However, the Democratic Party was ultimately just as bad, as O’Neal recognized no difference between it and the Republican Party, seeing them both as the political enemies of all workers, white and black. That is because these parties represented the interests of the country’s capitalists, those who staked their fortunes on exploiting labor. If the capitalists were uniting in the Republican and Democratic Parties, then the workers had to unite in the Socialist Party and in labor unions. Workers would also have to vote accordingly. Only through unity and socialist political action could workers achieve “the next emancipation,” which was the liberation of all humans from servitude, exploitation, unemployment, poverty, and war. That emancipation is something progressive unions
like the ILGWU would fight for over the ensuing decade, even if they did not present the entailed goals in such socialistic language.

Of course, O’Neal went further, pressing for the full socialist program: public ownership of utilities and industry, control of industry by the mass of workers as opposed to a few powerful owners, and democratic leadership in industry instead of an autocracy run by capitalist owners and their agents. If this program were achieved, in his words, “Instead of industry being managed to enrich a few great owners, we would have industry operated, controlled and directed by the useful workers for the general happiness of all.” Certainly, this would benefit black workers, but the point was to get blacks to support policies that would uplift and empower all workers by making them realize that such policies ultimately had a positive effect on the black community.69

Frank Crosswaith tried to capitalize on socialist efforts to make inroads with African Americans by running for office in Harlem on the Socialist Party ticket in 1929. However, he was one of three black candidates running to represent the 21st New York District in Congress. Hubert Delany ran on the Republican ticket and Richard Moore ran as a candidate for the Workers Party. It was believed that the election of an African American, Oscar DePriest, to Congress from Chicago in 1928 would inspire Harlem’s blacks to elect one of their own. Crosswaith said that if a black socialist were elected from Harlem, that would awaken America to the fact that “the good-old-darky type of Negro has happily passed off the stage of action and with him has gone the tradition…that every Negro is a Republican in politics and a Baptist in religion.” Not only would this signal critical political change in America, but it also would be a sign that

69 Ibid.
blacks were no longer willing to fall in line. Yet, electing an African American would also have concrete practical results. Crosswaith said that if he were elected, he would work to secure passage of an anti-lynching bill, a bill to reduce Southern representation in Congress, and a bill to commission an investigation into racial discrimination in the federal government.

However, even though political activism and race consciousness was prevalent amongst Harlem’s blacks, the demographics of the 21st district meant that a candidate there could not win with the support of the black community alone. The only white candidate, Joseph A. Gavagan, already had an advantage. As the Democrat, he had the Tammany Hall machine working on his behalf, and he already had held the office since the death of the incumbent, Royal Weller, earlier in the year. He made sure, though, to appeal to the black community for votes, stating that the oppression of blacks in America was not only un-American, but also dangerous. Much as Crosswaith had done, Gavagan promised to advocate for legislation to punish and prevent lynching. Gavagan won the election and would represent the 21st district until the mid-1940s. His closest opponent was Delany, the black Republican. Considering the history of black support of the Republican Party, and the fact that he had the resources of one of the mainstream American political parties behind him, Delany’s strong showing was no surprise. However, he still got only about 26,500 votes compared to Gavagan’s almost 40,000, and Crosswaith received only 3,600 votes. 70 Although no black socialist victory was in the offing, Gavagan did help pen and advocate for anti-lynching legislation throughout his tenure as a Congressman.

Yet, as tough as conditions seemed for socialists, communists were also facing challenges. As the influence of the Needle Trades Workers’ Industrial Union waned after the 1929 strike, representatives of established garment unions such as the ILGWU and the Amalgamated proposed a détente that would allow NTWIU members and officials to construct an organized left wing within the established unions. The Needle Trades Union rejected this proposal, and continued on as a small, independent group. Various union locals were struggling with financial problems in the midst of the Depression, but at least in the ILGWU, the battle against communists was still a major focus. For instance, in October 1930, Local 8 appealed to Local 22 to send it some money and place an ad in its souvenir program for an event it was holding that fall. It blamed its financial situation on communists, who the local accused of trying to steal its members, stealing funds and office equipment, and resorting to unscrupulous tactics to smash the local. Local 8 claimed to have practically eliminated the communists from its ranks, allowing it to launch an aggressive organization campaign without fear of interference and to begin recovering financially.71 Communists were losing ground in the ILGWU local by local.

Then, in 1931, the Joint Board of the Dress and Waistmakers’ Union and its affiliated locals (10, 22, 35, and 89) launched an attack on the communists, who were making another attempt to launch a strike in the dressmaking industry. The Joint Board released a statement pointing out that the communists had called many strikes over the years, but had settled none of them. In other words, they had never improved the conditions of workers in any way. What they had done was “make a lot of noise, a lot of

71 Charles S. Zimmerman, “To All Needle Trades Workers”; Executive Committee Cloak and Dressmakers’ Local 8, ILGWU to Dress & Waistmakers’ Union Local 22, ILGWU, 30 October 1930, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 20, Folder 6.
rash promises, get plenty of publicity, drag innocent workers into strikes, starve them for many weeks, and then desert them, betrayed and helpless to shift for themselves.” As a result, the Joint Board argued, no one took the communists seriously any longer or was under any illusion that they had the slightest interest in the actual welfare of the dressmakers who they were asking to strike. Still, the Board felt it necessary to launch a campaign imploring all garment workers to disassociate from the communists completely, indicating their recognition that communists still had considerable influence.72

There were others who agreed that the communists were deleterious to the labor movement, but who also felt that the mainstream unions, such as the ILGWU, were paralyzed by bureaucracy and not concerned enough with the everyday plight of their members. Charles Zimmerman, who had been prominent in Local 22 until he was expelled from the ILGWU in 1925 for communist affiliation, had helped to organize the Needle Trades Workers’ Industrial Union. However, he was a follower of Jay Lovestone, who was expelled from the communist Party in 1929, and so he was also expelled from the Party shortly thereafter. This led to his expulsion from the NTWIU in 1930, but by that time, he was already becoming disillusioned with the organization because of its unsuccessful strikes and its rejection of the rank and file. He wanted to rejoin Local 22, but he saw the ILGWU membership as being disillusioned and dissatisfied with union leadership that seemed content with the status quo. These members had to be mobilized to struggle against both their bosses and union bureaucrats. Only left wing workers could make that happen, so Zimmerman argued that left wingers should join the ILGWU for

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72 “To All the Dressmakers!” flyer, Joint Board Dress & Waistmakers’ Union, 1931, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 20, Folder 2.
the purpose of militarizing its members and strengthening the union. He thus rejoined the union, arguing that militant left wingers needed to go where the masses of workers were and work with them in order to influence and inspire them to struggle against their conditions.

In April 1932, Local 22 elected Zimmerman to its executive board. Though right-wingers sought to have his election nullified, the ILGWU General Executive Board rejected their demand, leaving them to raise the issue at that year’s convention. Hostility toward the left wing was evident when the convention delegates refused to allow Zimmerman to speak in his own defense. Secretary-Treasurer and soon-to-be President David Dubinsky lashed out: “You are…ready to knife and to destroy anyone else, who is not of your faction, no matter how deserving his case may be.” He insisted that no one was to be denied the right to join the union nor the opportunity to become active, to ascend to positions of leadership, or to merely have his or her say. It is fascinating to see one of the union’s leaders taking such a firm stand against political antagonisms when they seemed part and parcel of union life at that time. In the end, Dubinsky’s position on welcoming Zimmerman was adopted with only one vote in dissent, but as if to prove that his return was no sign of détente, Zimmerman reacted to Dubinsky’s words by accusing the leader of trying to fool the membership with the appearance of impartiality and beneficence.73

Despite the rancor being directed at them, communists pressed on with plans to call a strike in 1932. A group calling itself the United Front Committee publicized a mass

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shop delegate conference for the end of January to adopt a final list of demands and make
the final decision as to whether to call a general strike of dressmakers. The Committee
billed itself as being made up of dressmakers of all races and of varying political opinions
who sought to mobilize their fellow workers for a strike to secure a 40-hour, five-day
work week, a minimum guaranteed wage scale, a wage increase for those working below
the minimum wage scale, unemployment insurance, equal pay for young workers, and
equal pay and the right to work in every craft for African American and Latin-American
workers. Workers from all shops were called upon to discuss these and other demands
and to elect delegates from their shops to take part in the January conference.

The communist influence here was clear, as the United Front Committee argued
that it needed to take immediate action to fend off attempts from the ILGWU to mount a
general strike. The Committee accused the union of being a company union whose strike
was merely a ruse to lock workers out and extort money from them, and it sought to beat
the reigning union leadership in that year’s elections in the dressmakers’ locals. They
took aim at former NTWIU leader Charles Zimmerman, calling into question the tactics
of his “Progressive” campaign across Local 22. For instance, the United Front Committee
claimed that those campaigning in Harlem for the progressive slate called it the “Colored
slate.” They also claimed that in Spanish Harlem, a girl was given the task of snatching
United Front slates from dressmakers’ hands and ripping them up. When the progressives
won, the United Front Committee first pointed out that they managed to garner an
impressive 40% of Local 22’s vote. Then, they accused the progressives of rigging the
election with the blessing of David Dubinsky by refusing to allow a rank and file committee to supervise the elections.74

The antagonism was mutual. In June 1932, when Dubinsky ascended to the presidency of the ILGWU, he issued a statement banning communists from union ranks. He claimed that although they were not welcome, they did not constitute a threat, as their efforts had been effectively counteracted by the union’s own anti-communist propaganda. Yet, his animosity toward communists was not surprising, as he was an avowed socialist and openly opposed the policies of the Soviet government. Dubinsky wanted to dismantle the prevailing economic system, but he felt that the best way to bring tangible benefits to employees of the garment industry was to strengthen the industry, which often meant advocating policies that would benefit employers. As the ILGWU was already planning for another strike, its members felt that political divisions were the main reason working conditions remained poor, wages were still low, and unemployment was at an all-time high. The Needle Trades Workers’ Industrial Union’s underwhelming record with regard to strike participation and results also led its members to conclude that in order to insure greater success in the future, they had to join with the ILGWU. The NTWIU members wouldn’t be betraying their cause; as Charles Zimmerman had suggested, they could try to influence the ILGWU from within toward pursuing more left-wing policies.

On September 13, the International held an open conference, so that delegates from the NTWIU could attend. The 40 delegates that showed up declared their readiness to immediately enter into a joint organization campaign with the ILGWU. This led to the

74 “Dressmakers, Remember!” and “From Cooper Union to a Mass Shop Delegate Conference” flyers, United Front Committee, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 31, Folder 8; “Stop the Terror of the ‘Progressives’” flyer, United Dressmakers Committee of the Left Wing and Active Members Groups, 1932, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 31, Folder 7.
creation of the Dressmakers Unity Committee of International Members and the Industrial Union for a Joint Organization Drive, which set forth a plan of action. The agreed-upon plan included a united campaign to organize dressmakers and improve conditions in both open and organized shops, and to win higher prices in the latter. The campaign would be carried out through strikes by individual shop, by building, and even by block in order to cement a mass struggle to unionize the entire dress trade. The Dressmakers Unity Committee would help to settle all strikes, and as part of the settlements, the workers in those shops would be able to decide which union to join, the ILGWU or NTWIU. Finally, the plan of action called for fundraising to support the organizing campaign. In its declaration of unity, the Dressmakers Unity Committee spoke of left and right wingers joining together for the good of all dressmakers: “The division which existed in our ranks for such long bitter years is beginning to disappear.”

Although left wingers and more moderate forces within the garment industry would unite at points over the rest of the 1930s, the prediction that the division between them would disappear would prove overly optimistic.

It should be noted that, when the deal between the NTWIU and the ILGWU in New York was struck, the national ILGWU leadership did not approve. Hence, when members of the NTWIU released the first issue of The Dressmakers Voice, they immediately came down on the International’s leaders, calling them “fake progressives.” Though they had joined with the ILGWU in New York, NTWIU members maintained staunch communist loyalties, lumping former NTWIU co-founder Charles Zimmerman in

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75 “Unity Declaration of the Dressmakers Committee of International Members and the Industrial Union for a Joint Organization Drive,” September 1932, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 31, Folder 6; “Garment Union Bans Red Agitators,” New York American, June 1932.
with the ILGWU leaders who they viewed as being responsible for keeping workers under starvation wages and as being more interested in preserving their power than in improving the conditions of the dressmakers. The ideology of the NTWIU members was clearly laid out in *The Dressmakers Voice*: “In their eagerness for profits, the bosses lose all human feelings.” They felt that the only way they could appeal to bosses to grant their workers better conditions was to force the bosses’ hands by going on strike.76

The Needle Trades Workers’ Industrial Union members also felt that bosses treated black workers considerably worse than white workers. This was not only a result of racism, but also a tool to keep workers divided. Once again, the NTWIU accused the ILGWU’s leaders of colluding with bosses to create such racial division. Workers could only operate from a position of strength if they were united. Thus, the NTWIU insisted that white workers had to be shown that as long as black workers were being paid low wages, the wages of all workers would be suppressed. Only when workers treated each other as equals regardless of race could bosses be made to realize that black workers deserve the same treatment as white workers. To insure a greater degree of racial unity and equality among garment workers, the NTWIU used *The Dressmakers Voice* to appeal to all of its white members to organize black workers and place them on shop committees so that they could participate in the union and in strike activities.

The union felt confident that workers of different races could work together, and a letter from a shop that was published in *The Dressmakers Voice* validated this confidence. The author of the letter explained that in her shop, after she and her fellow operators went on strike and won a one cent daily raise, they convinced the shop’s

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finishers, who were all black, to go on strike for a raise. This was especially critical for the finishers, as they were being paid only $1.00 a day, as opposed to the $2.00-$2.50 daily wage that operators made. The worker who wrote the letter pointed out that the success of operators in convincing the finishers to strike was an example of Italian and Jewish workers coming to the aid of black workers, and demonstrated the willingness of black workers to fight to improve their conditions. In a further demonstration of the NTWIU’s ties to the black community, it published a poem by the famous Langston Hughes, one of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance. “The Same” was about how black workers were similarly exploited all over the world, but it ended with a call to action:

Better that my blood makes one with the blood
Of all the struggling workers in the world--
Till every land is free of
    Dollar Robbers…
    …Life Robbers
Until the Red Armies of the International Proletariat,
Their faces black, white, olive, yellow, brown,
Unite to raise the blood Red Flag that
NEVER WILL COME DOWN!??

While this certainly sounds like a call for communist revolution, Hughes’ verse should be recognized in the context of its appearance in The Dressmakers Voice as a message to black workers that, although they suffered uniquely oppressive conditions, their best hope for ameliorating those conditions and gaining control of their economic destinies was to join with other workers of all races.

Meanwhile, Frank Crosswaith was still leading efforts to spread socialism in the black community. He declined the nomination from his party to run as its candidate for

New York Lieutenant Governor so that he could once again run to be a U.S.
Representative of the 21st district in Harlem. Yet, once again, the Socialist Party
performed poorly in the election. A record of election returns from 1932 demonstrates
that in the 21st district, the Socialist presidential candidate got just over 800 votes, while
the communist candidate received only 125. However, the socialist vote was extremely
small compared to what the mainstream party candidates received. Notably, while in
most Manhattan districts Democratic candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt garnered more
than double the votes the Republican candidate President Hoover received, in the 21st
district, Roosevelt received over 11,800 votes compared to Hoover’s over 9,300 votes.
This closer margin may be explained by the traditional voting habits of African
Americans, who had long been loyal to the Republican Party.

In the 19th district, also in Harlem, the margin between Roosevelt and Hoover was
wider—11,000 to 7,000 votes—but still smaller than the margin in other districts. In that
district, voters clearly preferred the Socialist Party to the Communist Party, but with
under 500 votes and 150 votes respectively, support for these parties was negligible.78
While Harlem’s black voters were beginning to pull away from the Republican Party,
their support for the Democratic Party was by no means secure in 1932, but it was clear
that despite the best efforts of left-wing activists like Crosswaith, most African
Americans did not see other parties as viable alternatives.

The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union was certainly happy with the
results of the 1932 elections. President-elect Franklin Roosevelt had been a friend to

Election Returns,” Manhattan, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 144,
Folder 3D.
labor throughout his political rise in New York, and Governor-elect Herbert Lehman had been as well. ILGWU President David Dubinsky sent Lehman a congratulatory telegram a few days after his election expressing gratitude for his concern with the working class:

The people of our state have now shown their keen appreciation of your humanitarian and public spirited social policies by electing you as governor by the greatest vote ever given a gubernatorial candidate. We are convinced that as governor you will retain the same genuine interest in the welfare of the wage earning masses which you have so abundantly displayed throughout your entire career.79

Left wingers, however, viewed the presidential election results as a “heavy defeat” for the labor movement because of the poor performance of anti-capitalist parties. The Socialist Party and the Communist Party both received more votes than they had in 1928, but far fewer than even their most conservative estimates had projected.80 Despite struggling in the midst of the Depression, American voters did not embrace overthrowing their economic system, opting to change major party allegiances as a sign of their frustration and desire for more aggressive governmental intervention.

Despite political defeat, the left wing was still alive in the garment industry. The United Front Committee of dressmakers from the NTWIU and ILGWU called upon black, white, Jewish, Italian, and Spanish dressmakers to participate in a United Front Conference on November 28 to discuss plans for an upcoming strike. The Committee solicited delegates from both organized and open shops, and claimed that it also wanted workers who represented both the left and right wings. Yet, the United Front was battling ILGWU leadership, who called a strike of cloakmakers and dressmakers in 1932. The

79 Telegram, David Dubinsky to Hon. Herbert H. Lehman, 9 November 1932, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 83, Folder 5.

80 “The Capitalist World in Chaos,” 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 41, Folder 4.
Joint Board of the union argued that the only hope for these workers to improve their conditions was to join together in a strong, powerful, and stable union. The feeling that the United Front Committee was handicapped because it did not have the institutional support unions had prevailed. Much as they did during the elections, the workers of Harlem leaned toward working within the system instead of challenging it, pledging their allegiance to established unions like the instead of joining leftist labor organizations like the United Front Committee that sought to supplant those unions.

Education: The Key to the ILGWU’s Relationship with African Americans

The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union was founded on June 3, 1900. Its establishment was the product of arguments by garment workers that only a national union could provide the resources and the strength necessary to transcend “seasonal unionism” and create sweeping changes in the industry. Up until that point, most workers would organize for a specific labor action, then dissolve when their attempts to push for higher wages or better conditions failed. This meant that workers didn’t have the leverage, commitment, or outside support necessary to achieve control over their working lives. This would largely continue up until the “Uprising of the 20,000” in 1909-10 when garment workers, who were overwhelmingly female, demonstrated that they could sustain labor action over an extended period of time, garnering resources and support from the community in the process. What made the ILGWU unique was that many of its founders and leaders were socialists who rejected the American Federation of Labor’s

81 “Dressmakers Negro and White, Jewish, Italian, Spanish!” flyer, Dressmakers United Front Committee, 1932, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 31, Folder 8; Dress General Strike 1932 strike card, Joint Board Dress & Waist Makers’ Unions, I.L.G.W.U., and “Read, Think, Act & Reply” postcard, Joint Board Cloak & Dressmakers’ Union, ILGWU, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 9, Folder 1.
“pure and simple unionism.” The AFL’s approach rejected political activism, but ILGWU leaders and members placed high importance on ideology, seeing workers as victims of class-based tyranny.

As early as 1914, the ILGWU endorsed educational activities as a way to uplift and motivate its members. New York’s Local 25 established an “Educational Club” shortly after, which was meant to facilitate the active participation of the female rank and file in union activities. The club offered immensely popular concerts and lectures. Interestingly, as these programs were directed toward women, the Educational Club became a uniquely female space, an alternative to the more masculinized atmosphere of union meetings. In the club, women could air their grievances over having their roles circumscribed. For Fannia Cohn, who would later go on to become the ILGWU Educational Department Secretary, and who was the driving force behind much of the union’s educational programming in the 1920s and ’30s, education helped women replace a feeling of inferiority with a consciousness of their own power.

The women of Local 25 were certainly emboldened, as they went on to create the “Current Events Committee” in 1917, which was dedicated to the discussion of politics and literature. After a waistmakers strike in 1919, a number of these women founded more outspoken societies, which led to the creation of the Shop Delegate League, which sought to align itself with international radical activism and thus denounced the union’s leadership as too conservative.82 Hence, even the very earliest of educational activities in the ILGWU set a precedent that education would largely be the domain of the union’s women, even if this did not provide them access to the leadership positions that would

82 Bender, Sweated Work, Weak Bodies, 166-68.
have given them the greatest control over programming. Lacking such official positions of power, they used educational activities to seize an unofficial power that offered them the opportunity to assert their political beliefs and have a say in the formation of union policy.

In 1917, the union established its Educational Department and developed a program of activities and leadership training. It then opened a workers’ university at a New York high school in January 1918 with courses in labor problems, industrial economics, government, and American history. Later, more advanced classes in the economics of the garment industry, social psychology, economic geography, and social drama were added to the curriculum. In a report to one of the union’s national conventions, the department explained the reason for its approach:

The truth is clear that it is the mission of the workers themselves to abolish the inequalities and injustices which they suffer and that they can accomplish this only through organization. But it is equally clear that economic strength is much more effective if directed by intelligent, well-informed, clear-thinking men and women. Therefore, we arranged activities designed to give the members of the union those facts of the social sciences which may serve as a basis for sound conclusions, may help create true social and spiritual values, and may train them for active and successful participation in the labor movement as leaders and workers.83

Along these lines, the union also established “Unity Centers” in public school buildings to host educational, social, and cultural activities, and an Extension Division to conduct courses in languages other than English, such as Yiddish and Spanish, that were the native languages of a number of garment workers. Activities included a mandolin orchestra and a union chorus. Student workers established a student council under the

83 Fannia M. Cohn, “Material for an Article on Workers’ Education,” March 11, 1938, 3-7, ILGWU records, #5780/049, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 6B, Folder 10.
Educational Department, and the department initiated special discussion groups and lectures for union officials. When the department began to arrange activities for wives and children of union members, the idea was so well-received that it led to the creation of the Pioneer Youth in 1924.

The ILGWU approach helped to inspire the first national conference on workers’ education, which was held at the New School for Social Research in New York City on April 2-3, 1921. At that conference, the Workers’ Education Bureau was founded to facilitate educational experiences for workers across the country and to prepare materials for workers’ study classes. An editorial committee was formed to create such materials, including labor leaders like Fannia Cohn, who by then had been named Secretary of the ILGWU Educational Department. A central tenet of the workers’ education movement was that the union is the primary school of the worker, providing the membership meetings, shop meetings, conventions, and strike activities where education takes place. Therefore, workers’ education had to be incorporated into union programming and not exist separate from it. As a result, the Workers’ Education Bureau only included educational agencies that were under the auspices of trade unions in its membership.

Conservative unions needed some convincing as to the virtues of workers’ education, but the American Federation of Labor supported and worked closely with the Bureau, which encouraged many unions to do so, as well.

Only days before the founding conference of the Workers’ Education Bureau, many of its attendees had been at another conference in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains to establish Brookwood Labor College. The college was the first resident labor college in the United States, and became the nation’s premier institution for labor
education. Around this same time, the Bryn Mawr School for Industrial Women opened, as well.\(^{84}\) When both of these institutions opened, neither explicitly excluded blacks, but for a few years none attended, so in 1924 at Brookwood, and in 1926 at Bryn Mawr, official decisions were made to seek out black workers to join their student bodies. In the fall of 1925, Brookwood Labor College offered its first two full scholarships for black students, to Thomas Dabney and Floria Pinkney, and after that, the school recruited between two and six black students every year until closing in 1933.

Fannia Cohn, the secretary of the ILGWU Education Department, was the key to Pinkney’s admission, having nominated her for the scholarship she was awarded. When Pinkney entered Brookwood, she joined the ILGWU and went on to become the first major female African American figure in the union. In the fall of 1926, three more blacks entered Brookwood, two of whom were women, and one of whom, Florence Baker, was a member of the ILGWU. A picture of a dozen students from the school in 1928 demonstrates the diversity of Brookwood’s student body, as the students in the picture appear to be of varying ages and include an African American. Another picture from the Pioneer Youth Camp in 1931 shows a similar scene: a small group of male and female encounters including one with an African American girl.\(^{85}\)

Pioneer Youth Camp reports demonstrate that Cohn and other camp organizers were concerned about imbuing children with respect for other cultures.\(^{86}\) When the

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\(^{84}\) Ibid.


\(^{86}\) Katz, “A Union of Many Cultures,” 162.
Pioneer camps were discussed at the ILGWU’s 20th convention, the union emphasized the notion of intercultural understanding alongside the goal of promoting labor ideology and labor organization:

We have in New York a camp operated by Pioneer Youth that takes in boys and girls, black and white, Jewish and Gentile, English and non-English speaking children who, over a period of six or eight weeks, live in harmony and get a view of sympathy which ought to result in their coming into the labor Union with real sympathy.87

Unity House, a resort in the Pocono Mountains run by the ILGWU, also became a vehicle through which the union could promote interracial respect and cooperation. Normally, a vacation to such a resort was a luxury only the wealthy could afford, but the union priced Unity House at an affordable rate, so it could become a haven for its members. The existence of this particular resort was of critical importance for black and Hispanic garment workers, who were barred from most vacation accommodations, even if they could afford them. Therefore, Unity House became the staging ground for interaction between workers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The 800-acre resort included a large communal dining hall, an open-air theater, bungalow-style hotel rooms, tennis courts, horse stables, and a large lake for swimming and boating. Workers could stay there for weekends or for blocks of one or two weeks.

Programming included music, plays, and lectures that spanned political and cultural themes. To address matters of race and ethnic culture, Unity House created a Sunday morning “International Hour” that presented music from different cultures by artists of various ethnic and racial backgrounds. In the spring of 1927, the ILGWU educational department, under the direction of Fannia Cohn, took over management of

Unity House publicity and registration. Cohn directly oversaw the weekly entertainment and educational programs at the resort. That September, she produced a musical, *The Mystic Trumpeter*, which was performed by a diverse cast that included members of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. A social dance followed the performance, ensuring that ILGWU members socialized with the black performers they saw on stage.88

Fannia Cohn was often the person who connected the ILGWU’s ideology with programming. Cohn’s involvement in labor colleges, Unity House, and Pioneer Youth Camps demonstrated her commitment to educational programs that reached out to all members of the ILGWU and encouraged them to work together regardless of race or ethnicity. Her outreach to black workers went beyond educational programming, however. She represented the ILGWU at numerous conferences of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and joined the Urban League as a representative of the ILGWU in 1928.89 In some ways, Cohn was ahead of her union in the 1920s, actually implementing policies and providing leadership that backed up the inclusive rhetoric of the ILGWU.

Cohn was a devout leftist who, while not affiliated with either the Communist or Socialist Parties, believed that society should be restructured by workers for workers on the basis of social and economic justice. She perceived this goal as also being the primary goal of labor education. Additionally, because she understood the labor movement as a critical force in restructuring society, she viewed education as necessary to prepare and train those people who would lead the new social order. As Cohn herself did not embrace any particular political dogma, she insisted that no issue should ever be dealt with in a


partisan or biased manner. Yet, for labor education to be effective, it had to be informed by the assumption that labor was not only a foundation of society, but also a major player in upholding the better social order Cohn hoped to achieve. This meant that workers had to be properly informed, so that they could play the necessary role in maintaining a restructured society. They therefore had to understand complex economic and social problems, and training in these matters was not offered through existing public and private educational institutions. Thus, the proper training had to come from the labor movement itself.

Cohn believed that labor education must have a central ideology upon which workers across the country and the world could be brought together. That ideology should include a desire for power to enable workers to function as an organized group in political, economic, social, and intellectual arenas, a demand for a voice in the management of industry, and the feeling that workers should have a voice in shaping international policy. This ideology should be permanent, and should not be affected by changing economic conditions, like the prosperity of the 1920s or the Depression of the late ‘20s and ‘30s. Yet, ideology wasn’t all that mattered. Cohn realized that practical goals and actions were just as important to labor education. She explained, for instance, that courses in economics would not just be aimed at long-term utopian goals, but also at daily bread and butter issues and prevailing conditions. Perhaps most significantly, Cohn insisted that the courses offered at any one school or educational center be shaped by the economic, cultural, and racial makeup of the majority of its students. In other words, she recognized the increasing diversity of ILGWU membership and understood that
programming should be adjusted in order to address the interests of different groups of workers.

In addition, Cohn anticipated the establishment of a national labor party by a number of years, saying in the mid-1920s that such an institution would be an important tool for workers to gain greater power. It would also require many different groups to work together, so she saw the effort to start a labor party as being a valuable tool to promote unity. However, she also argued that if the labor movement truly addressed the everyday needs of workers, they wouldn’t feel the need for independent political action.\(^90\)

Though Fannia Cohn believed education was the best way of ensuring that unions could understand and meet workers’ needs, the Educational Department of the ILGWU was struggling, as the union faced financial turmoil in the late ‘20s through the beginning of the Depression. Despite its economic situation, the ILGWU fought to maintain its Educational Department and did so with the help of its teachers, who continued to work without compensation.\(^91\)

Luckily, the ILGWU was not alone in its efforts to educate workers. The Urban League turned to its own Workers’ Educational Bureau to develop programming that would encourage interracial labor cooperation. At the Bureau’s Fourth Annual Convention in April 1925, T. Arnold Hill introduced a resolution endorsing the development of courses on interracial and international approaches to trade union problems, to be taught by leaders of various labor organizations. The resolution said that

\(^{90}\) Fannia M. Cohn, “Aims of Workers’ Education” (ILGWU, 1926), ILGWU records, #5780/049, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 6B, Folder 1; Fannia M. Cohn, “Prosperity and Workers’ Education,” \textit{Labor Age}, November 1927, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 6B, Folder 6.

\(^{91}\) Fannia M. Cohn, “Material for an Article on Workers’ Education,” March 11, 1938, 3-7, ILGWU records, #5780/049, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 6B, Folder 10.
because workers of all different races and nationalities made clear contributions to the development of the labor movement, and because misunderstanding and ignorance of those contributions was widespread, any workers’ education program had to include study of the relationships of different racial and national groups to the labor movement. The resolution was passed, leading the Urban League to claim that it had paved the way for courses to be introduced in labor colleges on relations between black workers and the labor movement and also on the contributions black workers made not just to labor, but also to American life.\textsuperscript{92}

Embracing diversity was already a priority of the ILGWU Educational Department even before the 1933-34 strike that would usher in large numbers of new black and Hispanic members. This was reflected in the music and literature of the union. Much like the Needle Trades Workers’ Industrial Union published Langston Hughes poems in \textit{The Dressmakers Voice}, the ILGWU Educational Department distributed songs like “Abe Lincoln” at the outset of the 1930s to be sung at union meetings and events. The song touted democracy and honesty, celebrating Lincoln for being a grounded working man. The lyrics also referred to Lincoln’s freeing of the slaves as a sign of his intelligence and compassion. The Republicans of the early 1930s who claimed Lincoln’s legacy were imposters, as Lincoln would have said that America belongs to its citizens

and if they grew tired of their government they would overthrow it.\textsuperscript{93} Thus, the union argued that what Americans truly wanted was humble leaders who sympathized with the working class and fought for racial equality.

To some degree, the Educational Department of the ILGWU was pushed to keep social activities running despite the economic challenges of the early ’30s because the Needle Trades Workers’ Industrial Union was sponsoring a number of events to spread its message across New York and encourage workers to join its ranks. In December 1932 alone, for instance, the NTWIU sponsored at least two major events, the Dressmakers’ Ball and the Concert Masquerade Ball.\textsuperscript{94} By this time, it had become clear that, especially in times of economic challenge, educational programming was key in maintaining the enthusiasm and participation of union members. Furthermore, such programming was also the primary way for the ILGWU to spread its progressive message, which included defending the rights of all workers regardless of race. Just months later, an unprecedented expansion in the union’s membership in which African Americans played a large role would begin. Educational programming would then become the key in absorbing new members and incorporating them into union activities in a way that encouraged class-consciousness while celebrating racial and ethnic differences.

\textsuperscript{93} Song, “Abe Lincoln,” Educational Department, Local 22 I.L.G.W.U., 1932, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 29, Folder 2.

\textsuperscript{94} The Dressmakers Voice 1, No. 1 (November 1932): 6, 10.
By the beginning of 1933, talk amongst dressmakers of launching a general strike was rampant, and it was coming both from more moderate forces in the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) and from the leftist Needle Trades Workers’ Industrial Union (NTWIU) and their ILGWU sympathizers who had joined with them in the United Dressmakers’ Committee. In August, garment workers walked off their jobs on a massive scale and they remained on the picket lines for months. The strike they conducted was even larger than the 1909–10 Uprising of the 20,000, but focused on many of the same bread and butter goals, and thus was dubbed the Uprising of the 30,000. Though the workers had to endure incredible hardship as summer turned to winter and police beatings of those on strike, including women, became more frequent, the ILGWU experienced a surge in membership unlike any other in its history. Not only did thousands of workers sign up each week during the height of the strike, but also many of those workers were of racial or ethnic backgrounds that were not already well represented in union ranks. The new union membership included Hispanics and, most notably, African Americans.

The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union had already made overtures to the black community to assist with efforts to establish black labor organizations and to recruit black garment workers into the union. However, these efforts were largely inconsistent. The Uprising of the 30,000 forced the ILGWU to take African American concerns more seriously as it now sought to assimilate African American members in a
way that encouraged their active participation in the strike and in other union activities. By the time the strike was over, the union had incorporated programming into its activities specifically aimed at educating or celebrating these members. Local 22, the union’s most diverse local, led the way in embracing diversity by breaking into branches that included a Harlem section with a mostly African American membership. It also created the model for educational programming that used specific classes, social events, and recreational activities to reach out to black members and mark their contribution to the ILGWU. The union’s Educational Department, led by Secretary Fannia Cohn, followed suit, and union leadership became more willing to grapple with race issues at its conventions. From this point forward, fighting racial discrimination and supporting anti-lynching legislation became a part of the union platform, and African Americans began to ascend into leadership roles within union locals.

In the black community, it now became clear that despite its inconsistent rhetoric in the past, the ILGWU could be counted on as an ally of the black worker. In the wake of the passage of Section 7A of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which protected workers from being fired for joining unions, African American garment workers by the tens of thousands made the choice to cast their lot with unions. They had previously looked upon unions with suspicion because of discriminatory practices or, in the ILGWU’s case, apparent indifference to such practices. Yet, the bridges the ILGWU built to the black community over the 1920s and ’30s, however tenuous, allowed African American garment workers to feel that the union was at least somewhat invested in their interests. Furthermore, when the ILGWU hired Frank Crosswaith as an organizer in 1934, that would set in motion a series of events that would lead to Crosswaith’s
establishment of the Harlem Labor Committee. This organization, which would go on to become the Negro Labor Committee, would be the most successful of Crosswaith’s attempts to organize black labor, and would be the precursor to such organization on a national scale.

_The Strike Approaches_

By February 1933, the ILGWU was engaged in an organization campaign to picket garment shops that refused to discuss settlements with workers, and union leaders stirred support for those workers on strike, articulating a zero-tolerance policy for crossing the picket lines. Additionally, with the slow but noticeable increase in the number of African Americans working in the garment industry over the preceding decade, the union began focusing on the concerns of African American dressmakers during the organization campaign. For instance, the ILGWU held a meeting specifically for black dressmakers on February 16 to encourage their enrollment in the union at which union Vice President Julius Hochman spoke. The ILGWU claimed that it protected workers from racial discrimination and treated all workers equally. Beyond dealing with racial issues, the union also claimed to ameliorate the basic economic conditions of workers. Only by joining the union could workers force employers to treat them decently and pay them a living wage. However, the ILGWU also recognized that African American workers needed economic help more than other workers, acknowledging that
they were the most exploited workers in the garment industry, being forced to work tirelessly for very little pay in non-unionized shops.¹

Local 22, the most diverse of the ILGWU locals, catered to African Americans not only through meetings that pointedly advanced the union agenda, but also through cultural events that included African American performers. On February 25, the local threw a dance that included performances by a Romanian violinist, an opera singer, and William Bowers, a renowned black singer who went on to play Porgy in *Porgy and Bess*. Bowers sang a set of Negro spirituals and folk songs and closed with “Ole Man River” from *Showboat*. Vernon Andrade’s Club Renaissance Colored Dance Orchestra provided the music for the dancing portion of the evening.² In their greetings to members and friends of Local 22 in the event program, the local’s leaders made it clear why they embraced both the diversity of their local and the planning of cultural events:

All members, regardless of race, creed, color, or nationality are dedicated to one common cause—the improvement of the conditions of those who work for a living, and their final emancipation from wage slavery and capitalist oppression.

...We still believe that workers who play and sing together will also work and fight together, for immediate demands as well as for the ultimate goal—for a new world founded on the happiness of all who work...³


² Interestingly, Bowers was also the principal soloist at the Bronx County Socialist Party’s concert the following month, demonstrating the ties between the African American community, the Socialist Party, and the ILGWU, especially Local 22, which was heavily influenced by socialists. Entertainment and Dance program, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., Feb. 25, 1933, and “Dance and Entertainment” flyer, Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 7, Folder 7.

³ Entertainment and Dance program, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., Feb. 25, 1933.
Also, as the ILGWU sought to organize more workers in the beginning of 1933, the arrangement committee that planned the Local 22 dance declared such events valuable for getting new and old members of the local acquainted. As membership was about to surge with the onset of a general strike, cultural programming thus became not only more critical to encouraging unity amongst an increasingly diverse membership, but a favored way of acclimating new members to the union.

In preparation for the general strike, there were also calls for unity on the political front within Local 22. Yet, the Progressive League, which actually represented the more left wing members of the local wanted that unity to be predicated upon opposition to the reigning local and national leadership of the Joint Board and the Dubinsky administration respectively. They wanted to run on a united slate in the local’s elections with the Center Group if the centrists would agree to openly criticizing Dubinsky’s leadership for collaborating with employers and ignoring their local due to its association with leftists. With such an agreement secured, the Needle Trades Workers’ Industrial Union would then merge into the ILGWU in preparation for launching a general strike, and both the Socialist and Communist Parties would be invited to participate in a United May Day celebration. In late March, the Local 22 Executive Board agreed to the NTWIU and the ILGWU uniting to prepare for a strike, accepting the plan of its Organization Committee, which proposed a merger plan that left out any political agenda. The NTWIU would merge into the ILGWU and all shops under NTWIU jurisdiction would be transferred to the ILGWU Joint Board. Elections in all locals and the Joint Board would be held upon
the completion of the unification. This allowed Charles Zimmerman to beat his ongoing communist rival Max Stemper and become manager of Local 22.4

After the merger, when elections took place, African American members of Local 22 began to take positions in the local’s leadership. Lillian Gaskin and Violet Williams were both elected to the Executive Board with a comparable percentage of votes to others who were elected the Board. Gaskin served on the Organization and Grievance Committees, while Violet Williams served on the Membership Committee. Local 22 was also reaching into the black community, forging a close relationship with the New York Urban League. In fact, the League was in frequent contact with the local from the spring into the summer of 1933, largely seeking financial support. After he appealed to Local 22 for an Easter contribution to be directed toward helping children of the unemployed, New York Urban League Executive Director James Hubert received a letter from T. Arnold Hill, the Director of the League’s Department of Industrial Relations discussing the local’s organizing activities in Harlem. Hill explained that Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman had informed him that the local was engaged in an active campaign to secure the membership of African American female garment workers with the help of African American organizer Floria Pinkney. He further explained that he’d pledged his support to Zimmerman and he hoped that Hubert would throw the weight of the New York Urban League behind Local 22’s efforts.5

4 “Decisions of the National Buro,” March 20, 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 41, Folder 5; “Excerpts from the Minutes of the Executive Board of March 28, 1933,” ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 9, Folder 1; Parmet, The Master of Seventh Avenue, 85.

5 “Final Report of the Election and Objection Committee to the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local #22 ILGWU,” ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 9, Folder 1; List, Executive Board members, Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 25, Folder 12; James H. Hubert to Dressmakers Union, Easter 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box
Just days after Hill’s communication, Zimmerman contacted Hubert himself, asking for his formal endorsement of Local 22’s campaign to organize black dressmakers. He stated the same arguments the ILGWU had been using for some time, asserting that his local was opposed to racial prejudice and discrimination and that it recognized black workers as being especially exploited. However, he also laid out another objective of his local’s efforts regarding African Americans, which was to encourage black members of the ILGWU to become more active and take leadership positions in the union. The ultimate hope was that, if successful in these efforts, the ILGWU could serve as an example for other labor unions of racial tolerance and equality. Zimmerman said that success was possible if all who were interested in the welfare of African Americans cooperated with the ILGWU.6 Certainly, then, the Urban League seemed a natural partner.

Yet, Hubert’s answer was fascinatingly complex. He said he was gratified to learn that Local 22 was campaigning to organize black dressmakers, as his organization had long urged that such actions be taken by unions. However, he did not pledge cooperation with the local’s campaign. He instead claimed that many black workers in New York City were unaware of the local’s efforts and, thus, an educational campaign was also needed to raise awareness and demonstrate that joining a union was in the best interests of the black worker. Hubert pledged to support such a campaign in lieu of promising to

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6 Charles S. Zimmerman to James H. Hubert, 29 May 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 26, Folder 7.
support the efforts already underway.\textsuperscript{7} Soon, with the onset of the dressmakers’ general strike, organizing black garment workers would be an easy task that the union would need little outside assistance to accomplish.

As Local 22 was attempting to organize black workers, its leadership also acknowledged that Hispanic workers were becoming a notable presence in the garment industry. Thus, the local’s Executive Board voted to organize special committees for African Americans, Hispanics, and Americans (Jews, Italians, Poles, and other whites) through which it could carry out specific propaganda campaigns directed at each group. In a further attempt to reach out to black workers, Local 22 stepped up meetings in Harlem, including a mass meeting of dressmakers on June 1\textsuperscript{st} in which black and white dressmakers were invited to stand up against racial discrimination, as well as against the class-based oppression that they faced. Indeed, all garment workers regardless of race were expected to oppose being forced to work from 50 to 60 hours a week for only $4.00 or $5.00.\textsuperscript{8}

On the eve of the dressmakers’ general strike, African American membership in Local 22 had reached its highest point ever. These members, mostly female, included

\textsuperscript{7} Hubert’s response in support of an educational campaign was not altogether surprising in light of National Urban League activities in Harlem. For instance, the League worked with the University of the State of New York to hold adult education classes, many of which were aimed at training the unemployed for jobs or at increasing the skill level of black workers, so they could ascend to higher-paying jobs within various industries. Between February and June 1933 alone, over 1,600 Harlem residents had enrolled in the adult education program, which consisted of 25 courses including dressmaking, millinery, sewing, pressing and tailoring, and labor laws and civics. Exhibit of work done in the Adult Education Classes in cooperation with the University of the State of New York at the New York Urban League (pamphlet), June 9–10, 1933, I:D32, Folder New York City, 1925–29, National Urban League Records, Library of Congress; James H. Hubert to Charles S. Zimmerman, 8 June 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 14, Folder 4.

\textsuperscript{8} Minutes of the Executive Board, Local 22, ILGWU, May 4, 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 9, Folder 1; “To All Dressmakers of Harlem” flyer, 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 21, Folder 14.
Ethel Atwell, Lillian Gaskin, Eldica Riley, Gussie Stanford, and Violet Williams, all of whom lived in Harlem. Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman did his best to take care of these members. Lillian Gaskin, who Zimmerman would later recommend to head up organizing black garment workers in Chicago, requested a personal loan from Zimmerman. Though this suggested that they had a close relationship, he denied her request. However, he went over the heads of the Relief Committee and decided to grant her an emergency loan out of the local’s relief fund, demonstrating that he had close knowledge of Gaskin’s financial situation and that he felt particularly indebted to her. Gaskin wrote a note to Zimmerman thanking him for the loan and promising to pay it back. She also promised to attend future local meetings, suggesting that Zimmerman gave his personal attention to those he was particularly interested in seeing participate in union activities. Given his determination to organize African Americans, it is not surprising that he made an effort to establish personal relationships with black Local 22 members.

In the spring of 1933, in light of political developments in Europe, anti-fascism became a primary element of the ILGWU agenda. With the rise of Hitler, the Nazi government cracked down on German labor organizations. The ILGWU saw Hitler as trying to destroy the German labor movement, so Local 22 suggested throwing the weight of the entire American labor movement behind fighting fascism. The local’s Executive Board proposed calling a conference of all labor organizations in New York City with the purpose of organizing a united front committee that would transcend political and craft

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9 “Active Member List, Dressmakers Union Local #22, I. L. G. W. U.,” August 8, 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 9, Folder 1; Charles S. Zimmerman to Lillian Gaskin, 18 July 1933, and Lillian W. Gaskin to Charles Zimmerman, 19 July 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 13, Folder 8.
boundaries to fight fascism and support German workers in their struggle. It also proposed calling upon the American Federation of Labor to organize an international labor conference to mobilize against fascism. The ILGWU went on to aid in the establishment of the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League, which liberal and labor organizations formed to promote a worldwide boycott of Nazi products. Anti-fascism would remain central to the ILGWU over the rest of the decade, and Local 22 was a leader on this issue.

**The Uprising of the 30,000**

At 10:00 in the morning on Wednesday, August 16\(^{th}\), 1933, dressmakers across New York City went out on strike. The strike announcement, which was issued in English, Yiddish, and Italian, outlined workers’ demands:

> We must introduce a shorter work week in order that every dressmaker shall have employment. We must improve our living standards by increasing our earnings. We must establish a guaranteed minimum scale for every work in the industry to assure us a living wage. We must eliminate the use by the jobber of one shop against another and one worker against the other for the purpose of lowering labor costs. We must place upon the jobber responsibility for conditions in contracting shops. We must establish our right to the job. We must have a strong and powerful union to enforce union standards and union conditions for us in every dress shop every day of the year.

The ILGWU had sent its proposal for a 35-hour work week and a guaranteed minimum wage scale for all crafts to employers and on August 9\(^{th}\), the Dress Joint Board

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10 Minutes of the Executive Board, Local 22, ILGWU, May 4, 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 9, Folder 1; George Meany (speech, 75\(^{th}\) Anniversary Dinner of ILGWU, June 3, 1975) reprinted as “More Than a Union,” in Stein, *Out of the Sweatshop*, 352-53.

11 “Dressmakers’ General Strike Declared! To-day, Wed. Aug. 16\(^{th}\) 1933 at 10 o’clock, Morning” flyer, Joint Board Dress and Waistmakers’ Union, Local 10, 22, 60 and 89, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 20, Folder 3.
announced that it would launch a general strike unless the union’s proposal was accepted through collective bargaining. The Joint Board also sent out ballots so that dressmakers would have the opportunity to vote on a strike referendum. Though it is unclear what the final vote was, due to the massive response to the strike call, support for such action seemed to be widespread amongst workers in the dressmaking industry.

The strike announcement also directed strikers to march to various halls around the city, including Harlem Terrace Hall on East 104th Street, that would serve as staging grounds for strike activities. At least two African American members of ILGWU Local 22, Mabel Jones and Eldica Riley, were assigned to be attendants at the Harlem strike hall. Prominent African American Local 22 members Lillian Gaskin and Edith Ransom were attendants at Arlington Hall on St. Marks Place and Bryant Hall at 1087 6th Avenue respectively. At various points during the strike, attendants would be circulated to other halls, and while Eldica Riley was moved to Irving Plaza at some point, Edith Ransom was moved to Beethoven Hall and placed on picket duty. Initially, over 2,330 shops responded to the ILGWU’s call to strike, which translated to the participation of almost 60,000 workers. The union immediately deemed this the largest turnout for a strike in its history. While the Harlem hall served as the headquarters for only 1,200 workers, the smallest number of workers represented by any hall during the strike, it also was the headquarters for the smallest number of shops, only 52. However, the number of workers

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12 Ibid.; “Thirty Years Young,” Labor Stuff, 1939, 12; “Assignments—Strike 1933,” ILGWU, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 5; “Assignments—Strike 1933,” ILGWU, and “General Strike Referendum” postcard, August 1933, Joint Board Dress and Waistmakers’ Union, I.L.G.W.U., ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 9, Folder 1.
per shop who attended the Harlem Terrace Hall broke down to approximately the same number of workers per shop who attended other strike headquarters around the city. ¹³

Not just in Harlem, but all across the country, African Americans, particularly females, approached the ILGWU to apply for membership and join the picket lines. The strike represented a period unlike previous years, when black women had typically joined the ILGWU only when their shop was organized or when the union approached them during an organizing drive. In describing the workers of one shop walking off of their jobs to join the strike, Bryn Mawr Summer School student Mary Beckman demonstrated that black women became not only active garment unionists, but also labor leaders during the “Uprising of the 30,000”:

The shop is unusually quiet this morning. It’s before a storm and we wait impatiently for the cloud to burst. At 9:30 a young girl with a red ribbon on her hair runs past me and whispers, ‘Comrade, get ready for the struggle!’

…Will 10 o’clock never come! Fifteen minutes more! One feels like a death call waiting for the last few minutes to pass.

What’s that! Like a black cloud the colored pressers are moving towards us, 53 strong, the first ones to throw their work down! Like a flame spreading, through the shop, shaft after shaft is cleared. No power in the world can stop this moving cloud! ¹⁴

African Americans, especially women, were integral in making the garment strike a national success and the ILGWU responded by protecting them. When union agreements compelled employers to pay black workers equal wages and require an equal number of working hours to those of white workers, many employers responded by threatening to

¹³ Hall Committee, General Strike, 1933, ILGWU to the General Strike Committee-1933, Joint Board Dress and Waistmakers’ Union of Greater New York, 7 September 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 19, Folder 1.

fire their black workers. Some locals threatened to call shop strikes, insisting that these employers continue to retain their black workers. According to Charles Lionel Franklin in *The Negro Labor Unionist of New York*, this happened in the garment industry more than in any other industry, and most often resulted in strikes by locals of the ILGWU. Indeed, a number of locals, such as 66 and 102, went on strike to end such discriminatory practices. Clearly, the interests of black workers took on new importance in the ILGWU and in the garment industry as a whole.

The massive response by dressmakers in New York led to the expansion of the Uprising of the 30,000 to other cities and industries. At the ILGWU’s 1934 convention, the union approved general strikes in the cotton dress and house dress trades, as well as in New York’s knitted outwear industry and the corset and brassiere industry. While Philadelphia dressmakers went out on strike, the ILGWU agreed to organizing drives in Puerto Rico and in numerous cities along the West Coast. It also voted to support a drive to organize Chinese dressmakers in San Francisco, and with organizing activities underway among Mexican and Japanese workers on the West Coast, the union claimed it was assuming “a truly polyglot and international character.” At the height of the strike wave, the ILGWU waged campaigns simultaneously in nearly 60 cities.

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16 Ibid., 312-7.

17 The success of the dressmakers’ strike led to strikes in the undergarment, children’s dress, knit goods, blouse and waist, embroidery, women’s neckwear and scarf, corset and brassiere, plastic novelty, sportswear, and belt trades. The undergarment trade ended up almost completely organized, and its workers won a 37.5-hour work week, a cut in hours of around seven per week, and a substantial wage raise. Corset workers won the same conditions, and children’s dress, neckwear, and embroidery workers also won similar benefits. Max D. Danish, *The World of David Dubinsky* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1957),
Indeed, Local 22 would look back on 1933-34 as a turning point. It reaped some of the most considerable benefits of the general strike of any ILGWU local. For instance, in the week of August 16, 1933 alone, almost 4,000 African American women joined Local 22, which previously had only 600 such female members before this influx. Before the strike, total membership in the local had dropped to only about 4,000, but by January 1934, membership had skyrocketed to over 26,000 and by May of that year, the number had reached about 30,000. With the general strike, workers of many different races and nationalities united as union members under Local 22 ranks. According to a census the local took of its members in October 1934, 70.5 percent of the membership was Jewish, 9.5 percent was African American, 6.5 percent was Spanish, 3.7 percent was American, and 9.8 percent were broken down over 28 other nationalities including a number of Germans and Poles and 1 each of Japanese, Chinese, and Bulgarian. This was incredibly dramatic considering that the local had been 98 percent Jewish only five years earlier.18

Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman insisted that his local, which had already been the most diverse in the ILGWU, had long been determined to unite workers of diverse backgrounds into a strong organization ready to defend their interests. He explained that although garment workers belonged to many different races and nationalities, as victims of exploitation, they all suffered the same misery and


desperation; as a result, they were all committed to the values of racial equality and class-based solidarity. However, to insure his administration could handle overseeing so many new members of diverse backgrounds, in late 1933, he led the local’s Executive Board to vote to subdivide into eight local branches located in Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Harlem. In East Harlem, around 4,000 Spanish-speaking dressmakers were organized, while a Negro group was created in West Harlem to serve 4,000 black garment workers. These branches held their own meetings to draw diverse groups of workers

into active participation in union work and leadership on an equal plane with everybody else….The administration of Local No. 22 is making strenuous efforts to draw these newer elements into union activity and to broaden and intensify their union consciousness and loyalty.19

In fact, during the strike, the membership of the ILGWU as a whole exploded, growing from less than 50,000 members to 200,000, 70 percent of whom were women.

More than any other local, Local 22 had experienced such a fast and marked increase that it could no longer hold regular local-wide meetings. Instead, from the fall of 1933 on, each section held separate regular union meetings, including the Harlem section. Just as important as growing and diversifying union membership, the general strike won the dressmakers the conditions they had been demanding: closed shops, a fixed minimum wage, the elimination of overtime and homework, and a 35-hour, 5-day work week. The thousands of black women who joined Local 22 saw their pay dramatically increase from an hourly wage of $10-15 for a 50-55 hour work week to a minimum of $22.75 for a 35-

hour work week. The 550 black women of Local 60, the Dress Pressers’ Union, saw wages triple from $18 to $45-50 per week. The dressmaking and cloakmaking industries were now almost fully unionized, and both dressmakers’ and cloakmakers’ unions entered contractual relationships with employers for the first time.

While this provided concrete bread and butter benefits to the dressmakers, it also provided them with more leisure time, a fact that ILGWU President David Dubinsky quickly recognized. Dubinsky and the union’s leadership set out to develop and promote educational, cultural, and recreational activities so that when garment workers weren’t in the shop, they were in environments where their class-consciousness and sense of solidarity with fellow union members were constantly nurtured.20

**The ILGWU: Race and Its Political Implications**

The 1934 ILGWU convention in Chicago provided a timely opportunity for the union to prove its loyalty to its black members and its dedication to fighting discrimination. The challenge that the union would have to navigate started before the convention even began when locals around the country couldn’t find hotels that would accommodate their African American delegates. Morris Bialis, Chairman of the Convention Arrangement Committee of the Chicago Joint Board of the ILGWU, told local leaders like Charles Zimmerman that with all attempts to persuade Chicago area

hotels to take black guests for the convention exhausted, he was going to form a special committee to deal with the issue and make sure they had places to stay.

This situation was a particular obstacle for Local 22’s delegation, which included two African Americans. Hence, when one of the local’s members wrote his own “Convention Follies,” the highlight was a cartoon depicting a building labeled “Chicago Hotels” with a sign saying, “No Negroes Admitted.” Outside the building, on the street, a teepee was set up. An arrow pointing inside the teepee was labeled “Sleeping Quarters For Delegates of Local 22.” Clearly, for this local, if blacks were kept from full participation in the convention, the entire local would not want to or be able to participate. However, even though Morris Bialis managed to address this problem by setting up a committee to insure all African American delegates had housing, once the convention started, the hotel hosting the event, the Medinah Club, ensured that those delegates did not feel welcome or equal.21

Trouble began when Local 22’s African American delegates Edith Ransom and Eldica Riley were refused admittance into the hotel. The dressmakers responded by saying that they would only enter the Medinah as an entire delegation and they waited on the sidewalk until the hotel let Ransom and Riley in. A few days later, Eldica Riley presented a bouquet of roses to the convention on behalf of “the 4,000 Negro dressmakers of Local 22.” She spoke of the economic benefits of being an ILGWU member and of racial equality in the shops. Yet, in light of the discrimination she and fellow black delegates were facing, she also read a resolution on behalf of the local

21 Telegraph, Morris Bialis to Charles Zimmerman, 25 May 1934, and “J. Goldstein’s Gergela: 1934 Convention Follies” cartoon, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 6, Folder 4.
calling on the Chicago Federation of Labor to abolish racial discrimination in Chicago hotels and requesting that labor unions from outside of Chicago not hold meetings in the city until the local Hotelmen’s Association withdrew its rule barring black workers from its hotels. The resolution ignited a lengthy demonstration, which president David Dubinsky followed with a speech lauding the ILGWU’s record of racial equality and telling African American delegates, “Here is a place in this world where you are equal.”

According to Nat Wallace, secretary of Local 102, the Cloak and Dress Drivers and Helpers, on the very next day the Medinah refused to allow African American delegates to ride in its front passenger elevators, insisting they use the rear freight elevators instead. Upon hearing of this demand, white delegates swarmed the black delegates, escorting them into the elevators and up to the convention. Two days later, Local 22’s Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman urged the convention to abandon the Medinah Club. David Dubinsky led the union in a mass exodus from the meeting hall to the Morrison Hotel. After this move, the ILGWU publicly labeled the Medinah Club a “Jim Crow hotel.” Dubinsky claimed this act of protest was merely an embodiment of the union’s policy on race:

…we are a labor union and we do not share in racial prejudices. We are committed to the principle of equality and justice and resistance to oppression. It was natural for us to resist this discrimination…. It was just a case of supporting words by proper action.23

Letters of thanks and congratulations to Dubinsky poured in upon his decision to move the convention. For instance, Charles Zimmerman forwarded along greetings from four

22 Parmet. The Master of Seventh Avenue, 98.

Local 22 members saying, “We are proud of our great international and its able leadership,” and praising the convention for the harmony displayed by the move to the Morrison Hotel. Perhaps the greeting from a woman only identified as Mrs. Morrison summed up the feelings of most ILGWU members best: “We congratulate the delegation of Local 22 and [the] entire convention upon [its] clear cut position taken regarding [the] race issue. You gave meaning to our words of equality. Hail the solidarity of our united International.”

The investment of Local 22 in racial issues was not surprising given that it was the most diverse ILGWU local in the country. However, when it came to implementing policies beyond the convention, the union as a whole did not yet match Local 22’s progressive stance on these issues. Despite agreeing to move locations during the middle of the convention due to racial discrimination at the Medinah Club, the ILGWU General Executive Board did not pass any resolutions opposing discrimination in unions or in employment. Instead, the focus remained on procedural issues and expanding educational programming. One critical resolution was passed endorsing industrial organization. This would place the union at the forefront of a new movement within the AFL that would lead to the creation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, which would be far more progressive on racial issues.

24 Charles S. Zimmerman to David Dubinsky, 7 June 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 7, Folder 2; Telegraph, Business Agents Staff, Local 22 to Charles S. Zimmerman, 4 June 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 6, Folder 4.

25 In their groundbreaking book The Black Worker, Abram Harris and Sterling Spero claimed that the reason the Knights of Labor had taken unprecedented steps to organize black workers during the 1880s was because of its ideal of industrial unionism that transcended boundaries of race, religion, and national background. The argument that industrial unionism promoted interracial, interethnic, and interreligious working-class unity was used to advocate for the creation of the CIO in the mid-1930s. Pinkett, “The American Federation of Labor and Negro Workers,” 9-10; list of resolutions, 1934 International Convention, ILGWU General Executive Board, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 15, Folder 10.
By the fall of 1934, Frank Crosswaith could tout the ILGWU to the African American community by pointing out not only the increase in the union’s black membership, but also the fact that numerous black garment workers held leadership positions in the union. The union had several thousand black members by this point, with some black women serving as chairladies of their shops, as Crosswaith described, “chosen for their responsible posts not because of color but rather because they were better equipped to function in such capacities.” Executive boards of numerous locals also included African Americans by this time, and in New York, thousands of black female garment workers saw their weekly income double or triple after joining the ILGWU. Crosswaith and other proponents of the union saw these facts and the actions of the 1934 convention as proof of their assertions that the ILGWU was and had always been more committed to racial equality than other unions.

Crosswaith in particular, as an African American who had led various attempts to establish black labor organizations, felt that joining such a union was essential for African American workers because it protected their class interests while recognizing that they were uniquely oppressed. However, just as important as it was that blacks join a progressive union like the ILGWU, was the fact that blacks were now awakening to their class interests and generally joining unions in large numbers:

However, time has wrought some profound changes in the thinking chamber of the black man. He is steadily and with increasing clarity learning to appraise economic and social forces. He knows that an exploiter is not concerned with the color of the exploited. Nor does a flea concern itself with the color of the dog upon which it feeds. More and more Negroes are recognizing the truism that labor is the common denominator of all God’s children and that if we are to receive justice
upon the industrial field we must unite with all those who like ourselves labor for their living.\textsuperscript{26}

African American workers now understood union membership to be the most effective tool for wielding economic power.

Sure enough, the wider African American community seemed to embrace this attitude in the wake of both the passage of Section 7A of the National Industrial Recovery Act and also the rise in black union membership. T. Arnold Hill in fact commented, “How necessary labor union membership appears to workers themselves since they have seen the high favor the Government has bestowed upon organized labor!”\textsuperscript{27} The National Urban League thus stepped up its efforts on behalf of the labor movement. In September 1934, the organization established a Workers’ Bureau, which organized Workers’ Councils in many cities around the country. These councils were meant to act as agencies through which black workers could obtain union recognition, increase their power by collective action, and fight for equal pay and the improvement of the status of all workers regardless of color. The councils’ first course of action was to publish literature on the labor movement including “Workers’ Bulletins.” The next month, the American Federation of Labor held its annual convention in San Francisco in which it passed a resolution prepared by Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters President A. Philip Randolph calling for the appointment of black organizers and a program of

\textsuperscript{26} It is interesting to note the irony that Crosswaith here refers to “the Black man” in the same speech in which he explains that it was black women who had ascended to leadership positions within the ILGWU and in which he discusses the appointment of a black woman, Thyra Edwards, as an organizer for the union in Chicago. Frank R. Crosswaith (speech, September 1934), Frank R. Crosswaith Papers, 1917-1965, MG 100, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 5, Folder 15.

\textsuperscript{27} T. Arnold Hill, “The EAC and the NRA,” \textit{Opportunity} 12 (December 1933): 381.
education for black workers. This led the National Urban League to launch a campaign to
insure that the AFL would move forward with implementing this policy.28

However, in his staunch support of the ILGWU and his efforts at black labor
organization, Frank Crosswaith remained perhaps the strongest advocate for the labor
movement in New York’s black community. While the Urban League focused on the
conservatism of the American Federation of Labor as the major obstacle to African
American involvement in the labor movement, Frank Crosswaith focused on the threat
posed by communists who he saw as undermining his own efforts and those of the
ILGWU. Crosswaith supported interracial unionism, which he now saw taking place as
the ILGWU became increasingly diverse with new members flooding in as a result of the
Uprising of the 30,000. He felt that communists threatened such unionism by spreading
slanderous propaganda about the ILGWU in the black community. He also believed that
communists preyed upon black garment workers specifically because they had had
limited experience with trade unionism until that time and thus could be turned against
unionism more easily. Whether intentionally or not, communists’ efforts aided employers
and, in Crosswaith’s opinion, helped keep blacks in wage slavery.

As he and ILGWU leaders had argued for years, Crosswaith continued to claim
that the International accorded equal rights, protection, and privileges to all its members
regardless of race, religion, or creed. He referred to the union as a happy family that was
working to establish a cooperative commonwealth and said that the union’s “protecting

28 T. Arnold Hill, Director, Department of Industrial Relations, National Urban League, to David Dubinsky,
16 December 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 27, Folder 7;
“National Urban League Demands Showdown of American Federation of Labor” press release, National
“folds” offered African Americans more rights than they’d had as oppressed American citizens. He pointed to the move of the ILGWU convention out of the Medinah Club and to the union’s educational work as proof of both its opposition to discrimination and its efforts to inform all of its members about the contributions of workers of all races to the progress of the labor movement and of humanity in general.²⁹ To further prove his point, Crosswaith published pamphlets under the auspices of the Harlem Labor Committee that included excerpts from an interview he conducted with ILGWU President David Dubinsky:

We never concern ourselves with the race, religion, nationality or color of our sisters and brothers. We know them only as garment WORKERS. We judge them only on the basis of their loyalty and devotion to the lofty principles upon which the labor movement is predicated. … From all that I have seen and heard about our colored brothers and sisters, we have every reason to be proud of them. They are among the most intelligent, loyal and devoted members of our unions.³⁰

A quote such as this demonstrated a number of things to Crosswaith’s audience. First, it reinforced the image of the ILGWU as a racially progressive union that wanted and valued African American members. Second, it made the case that blacks could be skilled and effective union members, true assets to any union they joined. Finally, though, there was a hint of condescension in Dubinsky’s comments, especially because he would say that he was proud of his union’s African American members because they finally grasped the importance of the labor movement and the meaning of solidarity. Once black workers

²⁹ To the Negro Members of The I.L.G.W.U.” pamphlet, 1934, Frank R. Crosswaith Papers, 1917-1965, MG 100, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 2, Folder 2; Green, Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work, 236.

³⁰ To the Negro Members of The I.L.G.W.U.” pamphlet.
saw things Dubinsky’s way, he could then be proud of them, and they could then earn the label of “intelligent” unionists.

More important than Dubinsky’s view, though, was Crosswaith’s assertion that black union participation signaled the emergence of a “New Negro” that would no longer be duped by greedy employers or other opponents of labor. This “New Negro” was proud of his or her race, and was learning how to stand with white workers for mutual protection and the advancement of their shared interests. As a result of this awakening, black and white workers were uniting in the ILGWU to fight their common enemies for the good of all garment workers. Crosswaith thus urged all black garment workers to continue struggling alongside whites in the ILGWU and to ignore communists who sought to disrupt the union.31

But the communists shot back and ended 1934 with a scathing response to Crosswaith. In the November issue of the National Urban League’s magazine Opportunity, Crosswaith had contributed an article in which he seemed to apologize for racial inequities in the American Federation of Labor. He said that one could not dismiss the influence of traditions and habits, as well as economic and social forces, in accounting for why black unionists had not yet achieved equality with white unionists under the AFL. He also supported the idea of having separate unions or union locals for workers of different racial groups. Communists assailed Crosswaith in the Daily Worker, claiming his statements were a capitulation in the struggle for equal rights. He seemed to be ignoring the flagrancy of racial prejudice and discrimination in AFL unions. In one article, the author pointed out that numerous cases of prejudice in union locals and

31 Ibid.
unionized shops had been reported to the Harlem Needle Trades Workers Club. Supporting the separation of workers by racial groups was equated with parroting ILGWU leadership, who communists portrayed as doing everything they could to divide garment workers.

Certainly, though, the communists’ criticism of Crosswaith was largely political in derivation. They criticized him for being a socialist, accusing him of sycophantically praising the largely socialist leadership of the ILGWU, and asking why he would be the member of a party whose Executive Committee was all white. Instead, the communists insisted that only the Needle Trades Workers’ Industrial Union had genuinely struggled on behalf of black workers and won improvements for them. They therefore encouraged the cultivation of the left wing of the ILGWU, which reached out to black garment workers in their shops to galvanize them. They wanted to get left wingers elected to leadership positions and increase their participation in union work across the country. While the NTWIU would “continue to check up every sweet word of the labor fakers,” the left wing of the ILGWU would recruit delegates for the National Congress for Unemployment and Social Insurance, which was to be held from January 5–7, 1935 in Washington, D.C. In addition to fighting racial inequality and what they deemed to be socialist indifference to that inequality, communists sought to pursue their own agenda, as well.

Despite political conflicts, the involvement of a wider network across the black community and the cooperation of communists with socialists to protect black workers was growing increasingly necessary as those workers were now joining unions and

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engaging in strikes in large numbers. The ILGWU took account of hundreds of cases in which black workers were “terrorized” by police in 1934. The union pointed to the cases of Clide Allen, who was shot and jailed, a boy named Fletsher who was mortally wounded by police, three men shot and killed in Harlem by police who were then exonerated for the crime, and three others who were sentenced to 90 years in jail on charges of stealing 38 cents as examples of police-sponsored terrorism of black workers.33

**Local 22: Race and Its Political Implications**

Local 22 was particularly invested in staffing and programming that catered to a diverse membership as it was the most diverse ILGWU local in the country. This was due not only to the growth in African American membership during the 1933-34 strike, but to the growth in Hispanic membership. This increasingly diverse membership was largely located in Harlem, where Local 22 had a major branch. Thus, the Joint Board of the Dress and Waistmakers’ Union, which represented a number of locals including 22, had employed a stamp clerk named Burnett LeRoy as a translator for Spanish workers by late 1933. The Joint Board found that over 200 Hispanic workers were utilizing the services of its office in Harlem, but that most of those workers spoke English.

Yet, by March 1934, Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman reported that 2,500 Spanish speakers had joined the ILGWU since the Uprising of the 30,000 began. The local had thus given them a Spanish-speaking section and appointed them a representative. Zimmerman suggested to ILGWU President David Dubinsky that it would

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33 “The Increasing Attacks on Labor Rights – 1934,” ILGWU, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 15, Folder 9.
only be appropriate to give the Hispanic members direct representation on the Executive Board, but this would have violated union by-laws that required board members to have belonged to the union for two years and to a particular union local for two years. Thus, Zimmerman appealed to Dubinsky to make an exception in this case. Dubinsky wrote back that he agreed that the Hispanic workers should be exempt from the provisions in the by-laws that would’ve prevented them from running for election to the Executive Board. He said these members should be free to run for any office in their union local so that they could know that they would be afforded every opportunity to take part in the affairs of their local.34

However, with the elections coming, the major issue did not revolve around Hispanics but around African Americans. The left wing of Local 22 was now trying harder than ever to wrest control of the local from the progressives, and they lobbied feverishly for African American support. Left-wing candidates ran on the United Dressmakers Slate, which was a vestige of the United Dressmakers Committee that had been established in 1932. The Committee published propaganda specifically aimed at black dressmakers. They discussed the fact that unemployment had hit the African American community particularly hard, which resulted in many black dressmakers losing their ILGWU membership rights due to an inability to keep up with the union’s high dues and taxes. The flyers the United Dressmakers Committee distributed asked what union leadership was doing to address this problem:

34 Philip Kapp, Secretary, Joint Board of the Dress and Waistmakers’ Union to Charles S. Zimmerman, 13 December 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 19, Folder 1; Charles S. Zimmerman to David Dubinsky, 3 March 1934, and David Dubinsky to Charles Zimmerman, 5 March 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Box 84, Folder 7B and #5780/014, Box 7, Folder 2.
Did the officers of the Union make any effort to alleviate the above conditions? Were you given an opportunity to express your grievances at any of the union meetings? Are the harlem section meetings conducted in a manner to encourage the Negro dressmakers to state their grievances with an assured feeling that something will be done?\textsuperscript{35}

Communists were clearly suggesting through asking such questions that the progressive leaders didn’t care about the plight of black garment workers and allowed no avenue for those workers to address their problems.

The United Dressmakers Committee then insisted that the actions of the progressives proved that they were not invested in fighting for the rights of the black worker. Communists had played a prominent role in defending the Scottsboro Boys and so the Committee used incidents within the ILGWU related to the case to prove that progressives had no interest in advancing the interests of African Americans. For instance, in one flyer, the Committee mentioned that at one of the meetings of the Harlem section of Local 22 in early 1934, a motion was made to send a telegram to the Governor of Alabama demanding the release of one of the Scottsboro Boys. Murray Gross, one of the local’s officers, ruled this motion out of order, making action on the matter impossible. Also, at another meeting in Harlem that the ILGWU helped organize, a mother of one of the Scottsboro Boys was physically thrown off the stage. The Committee described these troubling incidents as “what Zimmerman and his friends call fighting for Negro rights,” referring to the Local 22 Secretary-Manager who was seen as one of the heads of the progressive wing of the ILGWU.

\textsuperscript{35} “What Does the Present Election in Our Local Mean to the Negro Dressmakers?” flyer, United Dressmakers Committee of the Left-Wing and Active Members Groups, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 2.
The Committee offered itself up as the real advocate for African American garment workers and laid out its platform regarding their problems. First, it would establish a labor bureau whose purpose would be to protect black dressmakers from discrimination in obtaining employment. Then, it would carry on an ideological campaign to cement interracial solidarity amongst union Local 22’s members, and at union meetings, it would encourage the election of black dressmakers to shop committees, thus further integrating such dressmakers into the leadership of the local. The United Dressmakers Committee viewed its proposals as being clear remedies for many of the issues black dressmakers faced, while it painted the progressives as having a vague attitude toward those issues and no proposals for tackling them.36

A number of African American members of Local 22 chose to cast their lot with the United Dressmakers Committee, and many had been associated with the Committee for some time. They established their own Negro Committee of the Left Wing of Local 22—I.L.G.W.U. and sent out their own propaganda encouraging the election of left-wing candidates. They accused the union of ignoring their complaints that they were often not paid union wages. They claimed that black dressmakers were fired indiscriminately and were not protected by agreements the ILGWU had signed even though many of them were dues-paying members of the union. The Negro Committee claimed that despite the “beautiful speeches” that Local 22 officials made to the black community, they permitted black dressmakers to be paid less than their white co-workers, while allowing white workers to be paid less than the minimum wage. The Committee therefore argued that although the local’s officials were coming to blacks with “sugar-coated phrases and

36 Ibid.
speeches promising us everything,” black dressmakers should vote those officials out and elect left-wing candidates who would not cooperate with bosses and who would protect the rights of workers of all races. The left wingers claimed that they would protect these rights because they themselves were workers who had been struggling for their own rights for many years. As a result, they had a fundamentally different goal from the progressives, many of whom had become career union officials: a militant union completely controlled by the workers. The members of the Negro Committee had also fought for the rights of black workers, and against discrimination and lynching for many years. Their goal was thus to unite black and white dressmakers to enforce union wages and conditions in the shops.37

Local 22 reacted swiftly and strongly to the accusations of the Negro Committee. Over 300 members of the Harlem section of the local unanimously adopted a resolution condemning attempts to stir up race prejudice:

We, members of the Harlem Section of Dressmakers Union Local 22, consisting almost entirely of colored dressmakers, indignantly denounce the brazen attempt to stir up race prejudice and foster race antagonism, contained in the recent leaflet of the so-called ‘Negro Committee of the Left Wing of Local 22.’ Whatever may be our views on the issues and candidates in the Local elections, we condemn such methods as despicable and unworthy of members of a labor organization.38

The resolution continued with the argument ILGWU leaders had made so often about the union’s history of opposing racial discrimination and treating all of its members equally.

37 “Negro Dressmakers! Members of Local 22” flyer, Negro Committee of the Left Wing of Local 22— I.L.G.W.U., March 8, 1934, and “Dressmakers of Local 22-Negro and White” flyer, Left Wing of Local 22 I.L.G.W.U., March 15, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 2.

38 Press release, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., March 13, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 2 and Box 14, Folder 4.
Thus, the local was indignant that anyone could accuse it of refusing to protect black workers and claimed that such accusations were merely a tool for gaining an advantage in the local’s elections. They described such tricks as being like those used by enemies of labor like fascists and Ku Klux Klan members who had sought to pit groups of workers against each other to undermine unity.

In the face of this response, the left wing of Local 22 kept up its campaign. It passed out propaganda naming further examples of union indifference to African American concerns. A black operator was fired from the Saltzman and Goldstein firm, but when she complained to a business agent of the local, the agent sided with the employer. The inaction of the union in this case greatly angered the workers at this shop, both black and white. In the Aster Dress Shop, a black girl was working as a pinker, examiner, and draper for $15.00 a week, which was $3.00 less than what a white girl at the shop was receiving for the same work. The left-wing chairman in her shop encouraged her to demand an increase in pay, but then she was fired. When she went to Local 22 business agent Abe Skolnik, he said he didn’t have jurisdiction over her because she was a pinker. Only when the left-wing chairman created an uproar about the situation was this worker reinstated.

Such examples led the left wing to argue that the ILGWU was run by bureaucrats who liked to associate with bosses. These leaders were thus contributing to the poor conditions garment workers suffered under and undermining the union itself. Left wingers believed only they had the initiative and the motivation to protect dressmakers and the union as a whole. The group made one last push for votes in the Local 22 elections with a mass meeting at St. Luke’s Hall in Harlem on March 21st. Morris
Stamper, the left wing’s candidate for Secretary-Manager of the local, gave a speech at the event on the difference between the left wing’s program and that of Charles Zimmerman’s progressive administration, and on how the left wing proposed to fight for improved conditions in the shops.39

Despite the left wing’s efforts, the progressives easily won the 1934 Local 22 elections. While Morris Stamper received almost 2,600 votes, incumbent progressive Zimmerman received almost 7,000 and remained Secretary-Manager. Notably, three African Americans were elected to the Executive Board: Ethel Atwell, Eva Dicken, and Lillian Gaskin. Atwell received the most votes of any board candidate, 7,100, which was particularly impressive in that it meant that she had garnered more votes than Zimmerman. Two other female African American local members, Edith Ransom and Eldica Riley, sent a telegram to Charles Zimmerman as representatives of the Local 22 Harlem branch’s Progressive Group congratulating him on his reelection. Another telegram of congratulation from the entire Harlem branch soon followed and was signed by African Americans such as Ransom and Riley, Violet Williams, Lillian Wainwright, and newly elected Executive Board members Atwell and Gaskin. This election was also significant in that it marked the first time a Hispanic local member was elected to the Executive Board. Serafin Vasquez earned her place on the board with over 5,700 votes.40

39 Ibid.; “Dressmakers of Local 22-Negro and White,” Left Wing of Local 22 I.L.G.W.U., March 15, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 2; “Dressmakers of Loc. 22 Negro and White, Misleaders MUST GO from office!,” and “Dressmakers of Harlem, Members of Local 22 I.L.G.W.U.” flyers, Left Wing Group Local 22, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 14, Folder 4.

40 “Exhibit ‘D’: Election Results,” Report of the Election and Objection Committee of 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1934; Telegram, Harlem Branch Progressive Group Edith Ransom, E. Riley to Charles S. Zimmerman, 24 March 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 9, Folder 2; Telegram, Harlem Group Negro Dressmakers Edith Ransom, Violet Williams,
At the ensuing Executive Board meeting on April 24, eight Local 22 members were elected as delegates to the Joint Board, including Lillian Gaskin. It was the first time an African American would sit on the Joint Board. Gaskin was also a member of the Organization Committee of Local 22’s Executive Board, which met on April 28 to discuss various issues including the addition of four delegates from the local to the ILGWU convention to represent African American and Spanish members with the permission of union President Dubinsky. Two were to be elected from the Harlem (English-speaking) branch and two were to be elected from the Harlem Spanish branch. The question of whether they would be seated as full delegates would be settled at the convention. The Committee also recommended at its meeting that Local 22 member Saby Nehama be appointed to run the activities of the Spanish branch and staff the branch’s office, so that he could be available to attend to the needs of the local’s Spanish-speaking members. The Spanish branch then elected Nehama as one of its convention delegates, along with Amira Amador. In light of the allowance for new delegates to represent African American ILGWU members, the Harlem (English-speaking) branch of Local 22 elected Eldica Riley and Edith Ransom as its convention delegates, while Lillian Gaskin and Violet Williams turned down their nominations. At the same time, Isabel Harding was elected chairlady of the branch.41

Lillian Gaskin, Lillian Wainwright, Marjorie McEwen, Ethel Atwell, Eldica Riley to Charles S. Zimmerman, 24 March 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 14, Folder 4.

41 Charles Zimmerman to Philip Kapp, Secretary, Joint Board Dress & Waistmakers Union, 25 April 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 19, Folder 1; “Organization Committee Report,” Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., April 28, 1934, and minutes, Harlem Section, English Speaking Section, Local #22, May 10, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Box 1, Folder 1934; Charles Zimmerman to Frederick F. Umhey, Executive Secretary, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, 14 May 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 15, Folder 10.
The diversity of Local 22 was proudly on display on May Day in 1934. In one photograph from the New York City May Day parade, the women and men of the local were dressed in traditional costumes from Eastern, Northern, and Central Europe, Spain, Mexico, and Africa. However, a black woman in the picture wore a European, perhaps German costume, suggesting that parade organizers encouraged union members not only to represent their own cultures, but to immerse themselves in the cultures of fellow members. This reflected the attitude of Charles Zimmerman, who felt that the key to organizing black workers and encouraging black members’ participation was to create opportunities for workers to celebrate their cultural identities while integrating workers of all racial and ethnic groups into all union activities. Another photograph showed the horse-drawn float the local had constructed for the May Day parade. Slogans on the float included, “WORKERS OF 32 NATIONALITIES UNITED: DRESSMAKERS UNION LOCAL 22, ILGWU,” “FIGHTING FOR ONE CAUSE—THE CAUSE OF LABOR,” and “DOWN WITH NAZISM.” This last slogan is important because in a predominantly Jewish union, elevating workers’ racial and ethnic identities stood in direct opposition to the ideology of Nazism which was beginning to take hold overseas. This was just another element that inspired Local 22, and the ILGWU as a whole, to celebrate its African American membership.42

African Americans in Local 22 now sought greater representation in the ILGWU. In July, 25 black members of the local signed a letter to union President Dubinsky asking for an African American organizer to be appointed to address their interests. They said that they had been requesting such an appointment for a year and a half, but that they had

been ignored by union officials. They hoped that Dubinsky would not only grant their request, but would allow them to have a say in who would be selected to be their representative. They wanted to be clear that they were a group of unionists with diverse political affiliations, and thus they were not trying to play politics with Dubinsky. Instead, they felt that the union controlled their means of livelihood, so it was of critical importance that they have an official of their own they could go to within the union to file grievances and who would make sure those grievances were given proper consideration by Local 22 and by the union more generally. First, the African Americans of Local 22 won a victory when Ethel Atwell and Eva Dicken were two of the four new delegates who were appointed to the Joint Board by the local’s Executive Board in October. However, their demands for an organizer were finally met in November with the appointment of Frank Crosswaith.43

The appointment of Crosswaith coincided with increased efforts to step up activities among both the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking Harlem sections of Local 22. At its November 13th meeting, the local’s Executive Board approved the recommendation of its Educational Committee that it arrange a large event for the English-speaking workers of Harlem. Also at that meeting, Saby Nehama reported on behalf of the Spanish branch that it had held a very successful affair in Harlem on November 3rd where between 1,400–1,500 people attended, almost 1,200 of whom paid admission. Nehama asserted that the Spanish members of the local would be active in

43 Letter to David Dubinsky, 17 July 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 84, Folder 7B and #5780/014, Box 7, Folder 2; Charles Zimmerman to Philip Kapp, Secretary-Treasurer, Joint Board Dress & Waistmakers Union, 17 October 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 19, Folder 1; David Dubinsky to Charles Zimmerman, 16 November 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 7, Folder 2.
union work and activities, and the Executive Board voted to officially thank the Spanish
branch for organizing such a successful event.\textsuperscript{44}

Despite past political conflicts within Local 22, its members sought to bridge
political differences, and African Americans now played a considerable role in pursuing
efforts to unite with the Needle Trades Workers’ Industrial Union. At its November 22\textsuperscript{nd}
meeting, a five-member committee, including African American Gussie Price, was
elected to present the question of uniting with NTWIU members to its Executive Board.
Then, at its December 20\textsuperscript{th} meeting, the English Speaking Harlem Section of Local 22
unanimously approved accepting NTWIU members as new members of the local. The
section also continued to invite Frank Crosswaith, as well as other prominent members of
the African American community, to meetings to deliver addresses on issues related to
black labor. On December 20\textsuperscript{th}, George Schuyler, a lauded author and journalist who
traveled in socialist circles, gave an address to the meeting on “Negro Labor’s Century-
Long Struggle for Human Rights.” Politics clearly didn’t matter as much to Local 22 as
the concerns of the black worker did.\textsuperscript{45}

\textit{Frank Crosswaith and the Harlem Labor Committee}

When Frank Crosswaith was appointed general organizer for the ILGWU, it was
not surprising considering his background as a labor activist and his efforts to establish
labor organizations within the black community. When David Dubinsky told Local 22

\textsuperscript{44} Minutes, Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., Nov. 13, 1934, ILGWU records,
#5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1934.

\textsuperscript{45} Minutes, Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., Nov. 22, 1934, and minutes, English Speaking
Harlem Section, Local 22, ILGWU meeting, Dec. 20, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center,
Cornell University, Box 6, Folder 10.
Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman about Crosswaith’s appointment, he described the new organizer as “an outstanding personality among the Negro masses and also a teacher and speaker of exceptional eloquence, depth and brilliance.” Indeed, just a few days before Dubinsky sent the letter in which he used that description, Local 22’s Harlem section’s Lillian Gaskin reported to the local Executive Board that the section had a very successful meeting where Crosswaith was the featured speaker. She said that it was an inspiration to listen to him and that many could learn from his speech. She also described members of the Harlem section as enthusiastic and anxious to meet with Crosswaith again. With him on board as an organizer, Secretary-Manager Zimmerman assured Gaskin that Crosswaith would be present at the next section meeting and that Local 22 would arrange larger meetings focused around Crosswaith as the speaker. Indeed, Dubinsky assured Zimmerman that Crosswaith would be made available for lectures, as well as organizing, among both the African American and the general membership. Thus, Local 22’s African American members could request Crosswaith’s services at any time, and he ended up speaking at the very next meeting of the English Harlem branch on November 22\textsuperscript{nd} about the “Modern Meaning of Liberty.”\textsuperscript{46}

Crosswaith was also a high-profile representative of a strong ideological current within the Socialist Party that many Jewish socialists in the labor movement were a part of. This ideology rejected the Party’s dominant position that blacks should be organized into unions strictly as workers, which would entail the complete suppression of blacks’

\textsuperscript{46} David Dubinsky to Charles Zimmerman, 16 November 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 7, Folder 2; Minutes, Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., Nov. 13, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Box 1, Folder 1934; Harlem English Speaking branch report, I.L.G.W.U., Local #22, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 6, Folder 10.
unique racial and cultural identity. He rejected the method of racial integration that “subordinated Black workers’ culture that happened to be dominated by Whites.” Jewish socialists agreed that race consciousness, like national identity, should be central to organizing black workers. Therefore, the ILGWU and Crosswaith sought to organize black workers by demonstrating respect for both their identities as blacks and as workers.

The month Crosswaith was appointed an ILGWU organizer, he wrote a powerful article in Opportunity, “Sound Principle and Unsound Policy: Concerning the Problems of Negro Workers.” He lauded the ILGWU as one of the needle trades unions with a socialist bent, which influenced it to treat African Americans fairly. He referred to the ascension of blacks to leadership positions in these unions, saying that such power allowed them to finally affect policies that governed their working lives. He pointed to the ILGWU’s educational program as a model for changing the consciousness of all union members so that black workers could be better understood and more easily welcomed as co-workers and co-union members:

Among the study courses arranged for this vast army of trade unionists is one in Negro history. This course is more complimentary to Negroes than anything taught about us in any public school in the United States up to the present time. The course is entitled ‘The Negro in American History’ and is calculated to answer factually and favorably the following questions: (1) What part did the Negro play in the development of this country? (2) In Colonial Times? (3) In the American Revolution? (4) In the Civil War and the abolition of slavery? (5) In the rise of industrialism and the winning of the West? (6) In the growth of the American labor movement? (7) In the World War and after?  

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47 This mirrored a popular socialist belief often espoused by The Messenger that the United States would become home to a new form of socialism created by a “mulatto” national culture. In other words, racial integration would give rise to a new American socialism. Yet, this integration would only be possible through the celebration of racial pride, not through its suppression. George Hutchinson, The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White, 291; Katz, “A Union of Many Cultures,” 230-33.

He also lauded the President of the ILGWU, David Dubinsky, for calling upon all in the American labor movement to end discrimination while speaking at the American Federation of Labor’s convention. Crosswaith noted that Dubinsky had been elected to the AFL’s Executive Council, which put him in “a more strategic position to fight for equality of opportunity for all workers regardless of race, creed, color or sex.” He saw both the rank-and-file and the leadership of the ILGWU as critical agents in garnering better employment opportunities and conditions for African American workers.

Besides praising the ILGWU in his article, however, Crosswaith also advanced an important strategy for organizing African American workers. He suggested establishing a United Negro Trades that would be set up in a manner similar to that of his Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers of the mid-1920s. This would be an organization in which African American and white trade unionists could unite against discrimination in the American labor movement.49 That December, he called a meeting of black wage earners and trade unionists at which the Harlem Labor Committee was established.

**Educational Programming for a New Membership**

With so many garment workers joining the ILGWU during the Uprising of the 30,000, educational programming, including cultural celebrations, recreational activities, and social events became increasingly important in Local 22 and across the union. This programming reflected the rapidly growing diversity of ILGWU membership. Local 22 was a natural leader in this area as it was the most diverse local of the ILGWU in the

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49 Ibid., 341-42.
United States. A few months after the dressmakers’ strike began, the Educational Department of Local 22 laid out a program to educate its many new members, as they had no experience in trade unionism. In order to ensure their active participation in the union, they had to be socially assimilated into the union while being taught about the labor movement and how to be an effective union member. The Educational Department deemed it necessary to start with educational activities at a central location to bring all members of the local together. Hence, it recommended the establishment of a Dressmakers Educational Center in downtown Manhattan. At that center, it would hold a monthly labor forum with speakers on social, economic, cultural, and labor-related subjects. The department would also organize classes on unionism, labor economics, American history, the history of the American labor movement, and social sciences to be held at the center. Finally, it would organize lecture series at the center focusing on general cultural topics such as art and literature.

However, the Educational Department also sought to set up educational centers for each of the local’s branches, including both the English- and Spanish-speaking Harlem branches. Weekly lectures on various topics including current events would be held at each center, and classes in the principles and theory of unionism, labor in American history, and English would be offered. In the Spanish Harlem branch, classes and lectures would be conducted in Spanish, and classes would also be given in Yiddish where deemed necessary. Beyond strictly educational programming, however, the department also sought to hold periodical social affairs in each of Local 22’s branches. It aimed to organize a drama club, a chorus, a band, and whatever other social clubs there
was a demand for. Finally, the department sought to organize sports teams and events, as well as other recreational activities.\textsuperscript{50}

Will Herberg, who would later go on to pen the landmark \textit{Protestant, Catholic, Jew}, was the director of Local 22’s Educational Department. The directions he gave to various speakers scheduled to give lectures for the local and teachers who were running classes at local educational centers say a lot about the local’s priorities and its approach to education. For instance, he wrote one speaker who was going to give a talk on labor education, asking him to emphasize the class-based and race-based biases that were rife within the institutions of public education. The institutions of labor education were not only much more tolerant and treated students equally, but Herberg emphasized that any education in the spirit of labor ideals automatically broadened workers’ cultural horizons.\textsuperscript{51} Clearly, any course on labor education was supposed to advocate for labor education and for the very goals of the labor movement itself. They were clearly, therefore, not merely practical courses.

Herberg also had very specific directions for shop chairmen to spread the word about educational offerings available to garment workers. He told them to first acquaint themselves with the Local 22 Educational Department’s program and then to tell the workers in their shops about educational work in the union. They were to emphasize the importance of this work and stir up enthusiasm for it in their shops. Herberg wanted shop chairmen to encourage workers to attend educational meetings and to hand out leaflets to

\textsuperscript{50} Program of Work, Educational Department, Dressmakers Union Local 22, November 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 36, Folder 2.

\textsuperscript{51} Will Herberg to Emmett E. Dorsey, 12 December 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 7, Folder 7; Will Herberg to Antonio Reina, 18 December 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 8, Folder 4.
promote the ILGWU and its educational activities. Educational meetings had been arranged for January 3rd and 4th, 1934 in all of the local’s branches, at which renowned labor speakers would address attendees, and these were the first events that Herberg asked shop chairmen to promote. In addition, the local’s Educational Department arranged a large dance for the Spanish Harlem section for January 6th, and Herberg told the chairmen that if they had any Spanish workers in their shop, they should tell those workers about the dance and urge them to attend. They were also to stop by the Educational Department office and get tickets to the event to distribute in their shops.52

By the end of 1933, the ILGWU Educational Department was following in Local 22’s footsteps. It recognized the need to assimilate its new members, to cultivate their class-consciousness and union loyalty, and to develop their sense of solidarity and militancy. This was because groups like African Americans and Hispanics did not have a tradition of unionism, so union leadership felt that that these groups needed their own leaders who understood their concerns and could more easily win their confidence. Thus, the ILGWU laid out the objective of training black, Hispanic, Italian, Greek, and Slavic business agents, officials, and local leaders. The union also recognized the importance of utilizing the newspapers of the African American community and of various ethnic communities to wage publicity campaigns. When it came to scheduling activities, Local 22 presented a clear model for the union as a whole, as the ILGWU Educational Department aimed to link social and recreational activities including dances, pageants, parades, and choruses with educational activities like courses and lectures. The union

52 Will Herberg, memorandum to All Shop Chairmen, 19 December 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 7, Folder 7.
wanted courses offered in the principles of unionism, labor economics, the history of the ILGWU, American history, and labor history. It also sought to establish formal training for officials and business agents, and aimed for classes to be taught in the languages appropriate for various groups of union members. Hence, some courses would be offered in Spanish, Italian, or Yiddish.53

The Educational Department’s first step was to establish numerous educational centers across the country, and to hold meetings with executive boards, locals, and shop chairmen and chairladies to execute its educational program. Fannia Cohn, the Executive Secretary of the department, claimed that attendees of these meetings had been so enthusiastic that many of them expressed interest not only in participating in educational activities, but also in bringing numerous other workers with them to join in.

Programming included courses, lectures at the union’s health center to be given by physicians on health-related subjects, talks on current events, which would then appear in print in the ILGWU organ Justice, and physical training at gymnasiums. Trips to union institutions, such as various locals’ headquarters would be complemented by trips to various museums guided by scholarly lecturers, as well as by weekend excursions to the ILGWU’s vacation home Unity House. Many of these activities had already been taking place to some extent, particularly in New York City. However, one of the innovations of the ILGWU Educational Department’s program was the creation of special rooms for hosting educational and social activities in each local’s headquarters.

These rooms, according to Fannia Cohn’s description, were to be “attractively furnished, with reading tables book cases and supplied with current literature” that union

53 “Project for Educational Activity in the I.L.G.W.U.,” 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 36, Folder 1C and #5780/014, Box 15, Folder 13.
members could read at the headquarters or take home. These rooms would serve as places where local members could socialize, and thus gatherings such as teas or informal discussions could be held in them. Music would be provided by radio so that concerts and dances could be held in these rooms, as well. Members’ friends and families would be welcome at all of these events. The ILGWU Educational Department was also planning larger affairs at which dramatizations of important events in the union’s history and in labor history would be presented as pageants in which many union members could participate. Group singing would also be introduced into such affairs, which was why choruses of 25–50 union members were being trained in numerous locals. For the Educational Department all such activities were directed toward helping to develop solidarity within union ranks. This was particularly important in light of the influx of so many new members. As Fannia Cohn described in an article she wrote for the December 1933 issue of *Justice*:

Workers’ education again comes into its own in the I.L.G.W.U. There was never a greater need for it. It is destined to make its contribution to the Labor movement by assisting the local union in its important task of helping our new recruits to interpret their daily experiences, to become conscious members of the great army of organized labor to which they belong, to function intelligently and effectively within their local union, their International, and the labor movement, in support of both immediate achievements and wider goals, and finally to develop a sound workers’ ideology and new social and cultural values.54

Through worker education, new and old union members could understand their class interests and unite to defend those interests.

As 1934 began, Local 22 continued to lead the way with an impressive number of educational offerings. The seven branches of the local already had their own Educational

54 Fannia M. Cohn, “Our Educational Department Goes into Action” pamphlet, reprinted from *Justice*, December 1933, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 6B, Folder 5.
Committees with chairmen and secretaries, forming a Joint Educational Committee consisting of over 70 union members. In Harlem, where the Local 22 Educational Department was expecting to face some of its greatest difficulties, a productive educational meeting was held in early January, and in Spanish Harlem, the January 6th dance was a huge success, with over 400 people attending. The department saw this dance as a critical turning point in the relationship between Hispanic ILGWU members and the union itself, solidifying the devotion of those members to the union cause. In just six days of registration, by the second week of January 1934, over 350 people had enrolled in courses offered by the local’s educational centers. The local also launched its chorus, a dramatic group, and a mandolin group. Finally, the local planned a Dressmakers Educational Forum for January 28th, at which ILGWU President Dubinsky would speak on the “Future of Unionism in America.” Yet, it should be noted that despite the participation of the head of the union in Local 22 activities, and increased efforts by the union’s Educational Department, the local was still critical of the ILGWU leadership. At the same time the Local 22 Educational Department praised its own work, it claimed that union leaders had done little effective work in selling its educational program to union members.55

However, the ILGWU Educational Department was aggressively pursuing its program under the leadership of Fannia Cohn. She sent a detailed letter to President Dubinsky on March 14th reporting on her department’s activities, which was running

55 “Report of the Educational Department to the Executive Board of the Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., January 9, 1934,” Minutes of the Executive Board of Dressmakers, Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., Jan. 1, 1934 to Dec. 30, 1934, and minutes, Executive Board of Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., Jan. 30, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1934.
programs in New York City and in 15 other cities, as well. These programs consisted of
weekly discussions on problems facing the union and labor, which were led by lecturers
meant to educate members on how their local functioned, on how the ILGWU
functioned, and on the labor movement generally. In an article in *Justice*, Cohn said that
trips to the union’s health center and to various museums in New York City led by
educated lecturers were growing in popularity. Many locals had also set aside lounges or
clubrooms for educational and social activities at their headquarters equipped with tables,
bookcases filled with books, radios, and even victrolas. Cohn further explained that the
Educational Department frequently held socials aimed at creating solidarity, even
friendship, between union members. To strengthen those ties, most locals had developed
group singing, where choruses would lead their meetings in songs, a number of which
were originals penned by unionists for the ILGWU. Cohn claimed that over 150,000
copies of these songs had been distributed across the union, and said a record of the songs
was forthcoming, so the songs could be played in local lounges and clubrooms.

She also promised that as the weather warmed, the department would arrange
hikes and weekend trips to Unity House at special reduced rates for union members,
during which Cohn wanted to hold educational sessions. However, despite all of these
activities, there were hints of the problem the Local 22 Educational Department had
complained about: ineffective leadership by the ILGWU bureaucracy on educational
programming. At the end of her letter to Dubinsky, Fannia Cohn mentioned that
educational activities had started later than she’d hoped because until late February, she
had not been assigned a secretary or a stenographer, and she had not been provided
adequate office space. There are a number of reasons why this could have happened, but
the slow speed of ILGWU in providing funding and space for its Educational Department despite the launching of an aggressive program the previous year suggests two troubling phenomena: a lack of true support for educational activities by union leadership, and the neglect of an almost exclusively male bureaucracy toward a department led by a woman. Despite the lethargic support, Cohn soldiered on, feverishly working to spread education amongst union ranks, and convinced that opportunities for educational activities in the ILGWU were “unlimited.”

Indeed, educational programming was spreading throughout the union, even if the national union leadership was lagging behind. This was particularly true in New York City, where a number of locals were following in Local 22’s footsteps. In Harlem, for instance, Local 22 was not the only ILGWU local planning activities. In late April 1934, the Harlem branch of Local 89 planned a Victory Dance meant to garner the participation of new members and provide a social opportunity for them to interact with other members of the local from all of its branches. The local laid out the purposes for the dance and its intended audience in directions to committees who were going to shop meetings to promote the dance.

First, the speakers on these committees were supposed to point out the progress the ILGWU had made in organizing African American dressmakers, as well as the efforts the union was making to educate them and incorporate them into both union activities and union leadership. The purpose of the dance was to bring black and white dressmakers of Harlem together to strengthen their solidarity and provide them with a good time. Thus, the speakers were to emphasize to shop meetings that the dance would be

56 Fannia M. Cohn to David Dubinsky, 14 March 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 36, Folder 1C.
particularly enjoyable, with music and refreshments provided. They were also directed to give every African American worker at those meetings a ticket to the event whether she (the assumption was that most of the dressmakers were female) paid for it or not, and to try to get as many white dressmakers as possible to come to give the dance a truly interracial character. The committees were supposed to give out as many tickets as possible at shop meetings, and Local 89 leadership insisted that the entire membership of the ILGWU should support the dance because of its goal of promoting interracial solidarity.  

Certainly, many ILGWU locals were actively engaging in educational and social activities by the middle of 1934. Local 22, however, continued to set the pace, as demonstrated by its Educational Department’s mid-year report. In all, the department had run schools in six sections of the local with 16 classes in unionism, English, and American history. It also ran a central school with nine classes in subjects like English, American history, labor history, labor economics, and unionism. While the instructors at the section schools were workers who’d had some experience in labor education, the instructors at the central school were some of the most prominent labor educators in the country. Many lectures had been arranged over the first half of 1934, including a series of lectures on labor and education over January. In addition, the Local 22 Educational Department had established connections with educational institutions such as Brookwood Labor College, and members of the local had enrolled at places like the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Workers and the Workers Education Training School.

57 Joseph Piscitello to Executive Board, Dressmakers’ Union, Local 22, 21 April 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 9, Folder 1; Memorandum, “To Committees going to shop meetings at P.S.’s re: Harlem dance 4/21/34,” ILGWU records, #5780/014. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 7, Folder 7.
During early 1934, 11 social, cultural, and recreational groups had been established under the department, including a mandolin orchestra, two beginners’ mandolin classes, a brass band, two dramatic groups, three gym classes, and two swimming groups. Most of these groups had already become extremely popular. Three section dances had also been held during this period and all were quite successful. These included the Spanish Harlem dance on January 6th, as well as an English Harlem dance in mid-April, which over 550 attended, and a dance in Williamsburg on June 16th with free admission that was attended by at least 800 people. However, the Local 22 Educational Department also noted a substantial list of shortcomings of its work that it had learned from its first few months of large-scale programming. First and foremost, although their work was on a larger scale and reached a greater number of unionists than any similar effort in the American labor movement, the department felt that many thousands more needed to be reached. In order to do this, the department believed that it had to not just provide the educational programming for workers, but also bring it to them by expanding offerings, holding classes at more locations, and distributing leaflets and pamphlets. Also, the department felt that it was too disconnected from the work of the union as a whole.

Thus, in laying out its program for the following season, the department vowed to develop channels through which many more union members could be reached by educational activities, especially by incorporating such activities into union meetings, and to forge a greater connection between its work and the regular work of the ILGWU. At the same time, the Educational Department pledged to continue and expand cultural, social, and sports groups, and its first priority in carrying this out was to establish a chorus. It also sought to expand its lecture programs, and arrange dances and other social
affairs on a more frequent basis. Finally, the department wanted to emphasize the
publication and distribution of various labor- and union-related materials, and sought to
reestablish a newsletter previously published by the local, the “Union Dressmaker.”  

The ILGWU Educational Department’s mid-year report was similarly impressive
and laid out ambitious goals for the future. First, Fannia Cohn reported that at each
educational center in New York and around the country, hundreds of union members
were already participating in meetings where speakers presented on the ILGWU’s
mission, function, and achievements. These speeches often led to discussions on the labor
movement and were followed by a review of available educational and recreational
activities. Speakers were advised to lead discussions in the languages appropriate for the
group of union members they were meeting with, which in a number of cases meant that
they led meetings in Yiddish or Spanish. The Educational Department reported that,
beyond such meetings, many locals had formed drama groups, which rehearsed skits such
as “All For One,” a one-act drama about the union that had been presented at Unity
House. A drama group from Brookwood Labor College also gave numerous
performances for ILGWU members in the New York Tri-State area and Pennsylvania.

In addition, the department had directed the formation of choruses in most union
locals that led their local meetings in song and often led singing at social events, as well.
The department also helped to train an orchestra including members of various New York
locals. Trips to the Union Health Center and to various museums in New York City had
become very popular, and the Educational Department was planning to provide song
leaders for trips throughout the summer. The department had also prepared a pageant

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58 “Report of Educational Committee,” Educational Department of Local #22, ILGWU records, #5780/036,
Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1934.
commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Uprising of the 20,000, depicting the period from 1909-1934. Approximately 150 union members would need to participate in the pageant to stage it properly, and it would be performed at various union events around the country.

In the mid-year report, Fannia Cohn laid out the progress of educational programming in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City. In the latter, the ILGWU’s department assisted locals 62, 91, and 142 in setting up educational programs. Cohn wanted to expand programming further, and this started with the kinds of courses being offered by locals at their educational centers. Her department thus arranged courses on subjects like the contemporary labor movement, contemporary economic and social problems, the history and tactics of trade unionism, the history of the ILGWU, and the economics and problems of the women’s garment industry. Cohn also wanted to increase the number of discussions on health-related subjects not only to make union members more conscious of their own health, but also to increase their interest in utilizing the Union Health Center.

She sought to expand recreational activities, making swimming, dancing, and sports more accessible to both male and female union members. She also wanted “entertainments” to occur on a weekly basis, at which a union official or invited lecturer would give a speech, but there would also be a musical program, the performance of a dramatic skit by union members, and the union’s chorus and mandolin orchestra would help lead attendees in song. These entertainments would then end with informal dancing. Cohn asserted that one such celebration should be held in honor of the educational season in New York City. ILGWU President Dubinsky, members of the Educational
Department, and educators should speak at such an event to discuss the importance of the department’s programming. Ultimately, Cohn wanted celebrations of the upcoming educational season to be held in all of the union’s educational centers.59

As summer turned to fall, however, it was Local 22 that was surging ahead with pathbreaking educational programming. The intellectual level of its course offerings was simply higher than that of ILGWU offerings. For instance, Local 22 courses at its central location explored numerous economic theories, and one class was even devoted to the principles of Marxism. Courses were also tailored to the different branches of the local. There were now section schools in the Bronx, Harlem, Spanish Harlem, Williamsburg, Brownsville, East New York, Boro Park, and Coney Island branches; and while the courses offered at these branches were on Principles of Unionism, The Structure and Functioning of the Union, and English, in Harlem, one of the English courses was replaced by a course in the Negro in American History. Offering a course specifically geared toward African American union members was a groundbreaking step.

Local 22’s educational program also focused on broadening the horizons of union members. To open the fall 1934 season, its Educational Department arranged lectures on “Fascism and Labor” to be held at each section school. In fact, the department kicked off a whole lecture series to support the ILGWU’s anti-fascist agenda. Every Tuesday night, lectures were given, dealing with fascism in various countries (Italy, Germany, and Austria), the prospect of fascism in America, labor and American politics, labor and

59 Fannia Cohn, “Report to the Educational Committee of the I.L.G.W.U.,” Educational Department, I.L.G.W.U., July 24, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 36, Folder 1C.
various political movements (anarchism, socialism, communism), and the prospect of a labor party in America.

In fall 1934, Local 22 maintained its mandolin orchestra, mandolin classes, and brass band, while swimming and gym classes continued, as did dramatic work. A chorus was to be established, but there was still some controversy over whether there should also be separate Jewish and Spanish choruses, as well as an African American chorus in Harlem. The final plan was to set up a separate chorus in Harlem, a chorus and mandolin orchestra in Spanish Harlem, and special gym and swimming classes in Williamsburg. The Local 22 Educational Committee wanted the local’s sections to take more control of programming, so although it suggested that a section-based affair should happen every month to six weeks, the Committee also said that such affairs should be organized by the section educational committees. In that vein, the Committee also called for an educational program to be presented at every section meeting from then on, and to make sure that labor education permeated every segment of the union membership, it wanted such a program to be presented at every Local 22 meeting and social gathering and at meetings of shop chairmen.60

In October, the local’s Educational Department reported to the Executive Board that the fall season was off to a strong start. Over 1,500 union members had registered for at least one of 45 classes being offered at the local’s educational centers. These included 22 English classes, 12 classes in Principles of Unionism, two history classes, two classes

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60 Minutes, Meeting of the Educational Committee of Local 22, Aug. 10, 1934, and Will Herberg, Report of the Educational Department of Local #22 to the Executive Board, October 16, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1934; “Do You Like To Sing? Do You Like Music?” postcard, Educational Department, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., November 19, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 22, Folder 2.
in the structure and function of the ILGWU, and one each on social science and economics. A staff of 28 teachers, two mandolin directors, three chorus leaders, four gym and swimming coaches, and a band leader conducted the educational activities of the local. While attendance rates were high across the board, the Spanish-speaking and English-speaking Harlem schools were noted for particularly high attendance. The Spanish-speaking section was also planning a large International Ball for November 3rd and the Educational Department reported that it was helping to make this the largest social affair ever run under ILGWU auspices. It thus requested the Executive Board’s help in mounting the ball. The event was a great success, with over 1,500 people in attendance, spurring the department to begin planning an even larger affair for the English-speaking Harlem branch to be held on January 19, 1935.

Activities geared toward African American members were also being run, including a theater event held on October 27th in which local members were invited to see the play *Stevedore* after attending a lecture on “The Negro in American Life and Drama.” The Educational Department sought to schedule such theater parties on a weekly basis. Frank Crosswaith also addressed the English Harlem branch’s November 8th and 22nd meetings, which garnered higher attendance than the branch had seen at any previous meetings. In addition, the plans that had been outlined months earlier to hold lectures on issues related to labor and fascism resulted in the local calling simultaneous educational meetings in six of its sections on October 18th. These meetings were to include lectures and discussions on labor and fascism.

Trips to various cultural locations also continued and were planned to occur with increasing frequency. On November 10, a trip to the Museum of Natural History was
planned, and a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art was scheduled for December 8th. In addition, a trip was organized for children of ILGWU members to tour the International Children’s Art Exhibit being held at Rockefeller Center on December 1st. By the end of the fall season, the local’s Educational Department would also release tens of thousands of copies of union promotional materials in a series called “Know Your Union.” These covered subjects such as the “ten commandments for union members,” elements of unionism, and problems facing the labor movement. Finally, Local 22’s leaders credited the cooperation of the ILGWU Educational Department, and of Fannia Cohn in particular, with making its own educational department so successful.  

With the year and the educational season drawing to a close, the Local 22 Educational Department received a large number of resolutions from various classes that had run during the season and from its section schools expressing appreciation for the union’s educational work and urging that that work continue. Louis Shapiro, representing his class in Economics at the central Local 22 school, wrote of the benefits to the union of offering such a course:

> We declare that every one in this class will help to bring the good work of the educational department to our brothers and sisters in the shops so that there is formed an unbreakable chain of intelligent workers, understanding the aims, ideals and methods of the labor movement and helping to build a stronger and better union.  

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61 Will Herberg, Report of the Educational Department of Local #22 to the Executive Board, October 16, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1934; Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U. press release, November 26, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/057, Box 1, Folder 10; “Gym Classes For Union Members – Free!” and “Swimming Classes For Union Members – Free!” postcards, Educational Department, Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., Dec. 26, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 22, Folder 3.

62 Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U. press release, December 27, 1934, ILGWU records, #5780/057, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 10.
The students of the Harlem school, represented by Eldica Riley, promised to do their own work to spread enthusiasm for participating in the union’s educational activities: “We also wish to say that we were greatly enlightened by the discussions and we pledge ourselves to encourage other members of the Union to attend and receive the same benefits.” A committee representing the Spanish Harlem school wrote of its appreciation for the union organizing courses held in its section and for holding those courses in English so that students could learn the language of their country. With such a response from its members, the local looked forward to its next educational season, which would begin in February 1935.63

After its massive expansion during the Uprising of the 30,000, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union used educational programming including coursework, cultural and recreational activities, and social events to acclimate its diverse new membership to union life and to instill union ideology. As the union searched for ways to assimilate and galvanize workers of different racial and national backgrounds, its spirit of unity influenced the ILGWU political atmosphere, as well, encouraging its left and progressive wings to move toward a tentative rapprochement. The rapid growth in membership coupled with a political atmosphere favorable to labor embodied by the New Deal signaled the ascendancy of the ILGWU, and of trade unions in general, to a position of power in the American political system.

63 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3:

TOWARD A TENUOUS UNITED FRONT:

PROGRESSIVE DOMINANCE OF THE ILGWU, 1935-1937

The story of the internal politics of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union between 1935 and 1937 was one of dominance by moderates. Known as the “Progressive” wing of the union, represented by officials such as President David Dubinsky, these moderates came to be increasingly identified by their support of New Deal policies and opposition to fascism of all forms. As the ILGWU membership rolls increased dramatically in the wake of the Uprising of the 30,000, the old internal union battles between communists, socialists, and more moderate progressives would continue. However, with the Roosevelt administration well into its first term, lending to a political atmosphere that seemed conducive to labor’s interests, the union’s left wing found itself fighting against the current of changing political tides that shaped the allegiances not only of the ILGWU leadership, but of its membership, as well.

The Socialist-Communist Split Continues

Long-standing political battles within the ILGWU continued after the Uprising of the 30,000 ended, as the surge in union membership brought about an influx of new groups that the left wing and the more moderate leadership fought over. African Americans were the most prominent of these unionists, and while communists solicited their support, more progressive forces in the ILGWU, including moderates and socialists, accused the communists of divisive tactics and used well-worn rhetoric to claim that the union as led by progressives had long been colorblind. In the same issue of the socialist
New Leader in which an unprecedented mass meeting of Harlem’s black workers at Rockland Palace on January 6, 1935 was announced, an interview of David Dubinsky conducted by Frank Crosswaith was featured. In asking Dubinsky about the International’s attitude toward its African American members and toward black labor in general, Crosswaith dredged up issues that had been laid bare during the ILGWU’s own elections in 1934:

‘I am eager to get this because at this time there are forces at work seeking obviously to poison the collective mind of Negro wage workers against organized labor in order to maintain Negro labor in an unorganized state wherein it can be used by the enemies of labor to beat back the advancing army of organized workers.’

This was a reference to communist attempts to use the ILGWU’s broken promises to African Americans to lure them to the garment unions’ left wings and to independent unions. Yet it was also a reference to pro-Tammany, anti-labor political forces that sought to keep African Americans under their influence by maligning the unions.

On January 6, as African American workers flocked to Rockland Palace for their mass meeting, another labor event was taking place 40 blocks to the south. At the Esthonian Hall on 115th Street, the second day of the annual International Labor Defense (ILD) conference was taking place. The ILD was the legal defense arm of the American Communist Party, so much of the conference’s focus was on prominent labor-related court cases such as those of Angelo Herndon, the Scottsboro Boys, and Tom Mooney. Though the ILD continued advocating against fascism, the organization didn’t only have events in Europe in mind. The communists saw the American government and numerous elements of American society demonstrating fascist behavior through the lynching of

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1 Frank R. Crosswaith, “No Place in Labor Movement For Race or Color Prejudice,” New Leader (Labor Section) XVIII, No. 1, January 5, 1935.
African Americans, the hatemongering and red-baiting rhetoric of figures such as Father Coughlin, and the implementation of anti-labor policies.

The NRA, which had widely been seen as such a boon to the labor movement, was viewed by communists as an attack upon workers:

Throughout the land, millions of employed workers and their families have been forced to strike against the N.R.A. program of starvation wages and soaring prices, and for the right to organize. Behind the nation-wide N.R.A. smokescreen of ballyhoo ‘section 7-A gives the right to organize’, Federal and State governments have directed a most atrocious onslaught of open TERROR against workers and their organizations.  

The ILD accused the government of paying and deputizing strikebreakers and even murderers, and of using the National Guard and various weapons to attack striking workers. They also accused the government of destroying the property both of unions and of the workers themselves. The courts were also seen as being in league with these efforts by framing, jailing, and deporting thousands of workers, and imposing injunctions against unions. The inaction of the government on the cases of the Scottsboro Boys and Tom Mooney only seemed to offer further proof of the ILD’s argument. The organization’s stance on the Scottsboro and Angelo Herndon cases also demonstrated that it was paying particular attention to the African American community, seeking to protect it from the government in light of its particularly vulnerable position:

More than any other group, the Negro people have been selected for promiscuous beatings, frame-ups, discrimination on relief and emergency jobs. Typical is the sentencing of Angelo Herndon, young Negro leader of the unemployed, to 20 years on the chain gang.

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3 Ibid.
The ILD offered itself up as the best organization to defend the rights of all workers and of African Americans.

The organization’s rhetoric was not surprising in light of the fact that, at its January 1935 plenum, the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) praised the increasing interracial solidarity it saw developing across the labor movement. In its draft resolution, the party said that blacks and whites had worked together to organize the mass production industries. Even in older, less progressive unions, it seemed that a new, more tolerant attitude toward African Americans was surfacing.4 Certainly, white and black workers were increasingly encountering each other and working together in the shops, on picket lines, and at union headquarters. They were thus coming to realize their common economic plight, overcoming the social barriers between them.

Communists sought both to praise and to capitalize on this trend.

At the January convention, the National Committee of the Communist Party of the USA also drafted a resolution looking back on 1934 and assessing the state of the labor movement as a result of that year’s developments. Much as the ILD had, the CPUSA heavily criticized the NRA. Although it admitted that disillusionment with the New Deal had sparked only minimal opposition to Roosevelt, it insisted that such opposition had manifested itself in a movement for a labor party based on the trade unions. Though communists who represented the left wing of unions such as the ILGWU and the Amalgamated often claimed to be disenfranchised, the Communist Party still praised the moderate leadership of these unions for passing resolutions urging

4 “The Present Situation in the Labor Movement and Our Tasks”—Draft Resolution to Plenum of National Committee of the CPUSA, January 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 41, Folder 7.
independent class-based political action. It claimed that the American Federation of Labor (AFL), on the other hand, served the interests of capital through its “non-partisan policy,” in which it claimed not to be aligned with either political party. By not advocating an alternative to the two dominant parties on the American political landscape, the AFL was seen as tacitly supporting them.

Perhaps not surprisingly, however, the communists focused the most scrutiny on the Socialist Party (SP). First, they accused the extreme right wing of the SP, including Charney B. Vladeck, future leader of the American Labor Party, of trying to attach itself to the anti-socialist AFL leadership. Instead, the tide seemed to be turning in favor of the left-wing socialists, who were part of the growing progressive movement in AFL unions. However, the communists claimed that this right-left split in the SP had undermined the party’s power and led to a diminished formal role in union activity, making it a vestige of previous dual radical unions that never seemed wholly and properly absorbed back into the mainstream unions they had originally splintered from. In that vein, however, the CPUSA was also critical of itself.Acknowledging that its Trade Union Unity League and Trade Union Educational League unions and other independent labor organizations had failed, their conclusion was that the dual unionist approach that had been the lynchpin of communist trade union policy had been proven untenable. Though the Needle Trade Workers’ Industrial Union had merged into the ILGWU over the previous two to three years, by January 1935 it was clear that whatever ideological split remained between the organizations was also beginning to fade. communists increasingly realized that such
splits did not seem to benefit them, but did seem to be deleterious to the labor movement.\footnote{Ibid.}

In the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, the communists’ main foes, socialists, played a major role. This was particularly true in New York City, where one of the Socialist Party’s most prominent leaders was Charles Zimmerman, Secretary-Manager of ILGWU Local 22. The Executive Board of Local 22 appointed Zimmerman to attend the Socialist Conference for Labor Defense on March 15, 1935.\footnote{Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., March 12, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1935.} At the time, socialists in the city were pushing Mayor La Guardia to consider revising the city charter by adding a provision to city law that stated:

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‘Every application for a license or a franchise where applicant employees labor shall contain a statement that he agrees to recognize the rights of his employees to organize and bargain collectively thru a labor union in their trade, that he will not interfere with his employees in their organization of or affiliation with such a labor union and that he agrees to recognize and deal with such labor union concerning matters respecting hours of labor, wages or working conditions… Any violation by the employer of the terms of such statement shall be grounds for revocation of the license granted.’\footnote{Letter from Socialist Party Local New York, 12 March 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 29, Folder 7.}
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This provision was meant to protect all workers in the city, and to establish a principle of government support for collective bargaining that could become a paradigm for other cities across the country. Again, it was becoming clear that while the communists...
remained focused on anti-progressive, anti-Zimmerman rhetoric, socialists were more focused on action.\textsuperscript{8}

Yet, all was not well among the socialists. The Central Committee of the Socialist Party passed a motion giving its board absolute power to reorganize branches with the avowed purpose of purging militant socialists and any other members disagreeing with the policies of the party in New York. When the board refused to reconsider this motion in early December, 44 delegates from 37 branches withdrew and established the Official Central Committee of Local New York, pledging to end their support of the Socialist Party. The 19-21 A.D. branch of the Socialist Party, which included Harlem, was a member of this new group, and called a special meeting for December 12 to discuss the future of the Socialist Party in New York City.\textsuperscript{9}

ILGWU President David Dubinsky, a moderate socialist who now helped lead the progressive wing of the union, stepped away from the Socialist Party. Saying he could not jeopardize the future of the ILGWU by staying in a party that, under the left-wing leadership of Norman Thomas, was cooperating with communists in an attack on trade unions, Dubinsky resigned from the Socialist Party in April 1936. He continued to claim that militant socialists were isolating the Party from the labor movement, directly contradicting their argument that they represented the majority against the Old Guard. He

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.; This is not to suggest that the ILGWU leadership didn’t engage in some propaganda efforts aimed at discrediting communists. For instance, at the April 16, 1935 meeting of the Harlem Labor Committee, members discussed distributing leaflets that they had drafted and published on behalf of the ILGWU. These leaflets were meant to support the union’s campaign to expose communist tactics of patronizing African American members in order to disrupt the union. “Minutes Meeting of Harlem Labor Committee,” April 16, 1935, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Box 1, Folder 1.

\textsuperscript{9} Letter from Unail Ford, Frank R. Crosswaith, and Noah C.A. Walter, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Reel 6, Box 3.
insisted that associating with communists had always been disastrous for the labor movement, as they constantly pursued dual unionism, independent strikes, and radical political activities. Furthermore, he claimed that these groups were not giving Roosevelt enough credit. As Dubinsky left the Socialist Party behind, he officially declared that he would be voting for Roosevelt, saying:

For the first time in the history of our Nation, the question of social legislation is being considered by Congress, by the Senate, promoted thru the efforts of President Roosevelt.

We may agree that perhaps it did not go far enough and maybe it was not enough to satisfy the Socialists or the Communists; but, nevertheless, we must be frank to admit that it for the first time that an attempt has been made in that direction…

In his mind, support for the New Deal, which militants rejected, was necessary to further the aims of the labor movement. At the Socialist Party’s convention that May, one of the resolutions passed advocated unity between black and white workers. This unity, however, was not just to be based on economics, but on social bonds and cultural exchange. This was reflected in the activities of unions like the ILGWU, particularly Local 22, where emphasis was placed on social and cultural activities that brought diverse groups of workers together, but celebrated their different backgrounds. Socialists insisted on the importance of unity because they viewed efforts of capitalists such as discrimination as being aimed at dividing workers along racial lines to weaken the labor movement. Thus, the centerpiece

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10 David Dubinsky (speech, Meeting of New York Cloak Joint Board, 22 April 1936), ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 399, Folder 6.

11 Ibid.; Dubinsky made sure to speak for himself, pointing out that he was only claiming personal support for Roosevelt. He explained that in deference to the diversity of political opinions represented in the ILGWU, he could not ask the union to campaign for Roosevelt’s reelection. However, his support of Labor’s Non-Partisan League would be key in getting the union’s board to join the League and thus join Roosevelt’s campaign.
of this resolution was the fight to end racial discrimination, and a call on all Socialist Party members in unions to join that fight. The resolution also pushed for the enactment of federal anti-lynching legislation, which the Socialist Party insisted could only be achieved through the joint action of white and black workers and farmers.\(^\text{12}\)

Meanwhile, socialists continued to push for African American support. At its national convention, the Socialist Party reaffirmed its conviction that the unity of black and white workers was of central importance in the struggle for economic and social justice. Indeed, the Party argued that American workers could not mobilize toward the creation of a socialist society until they did so on an interracial basis. It also advocated for an end to all racial discrimination and urged all Party members who belonged to unions to work to end discrimination in them, as African Americans suffered exploitation because of their race, as well as because they were workers. Socialists were thus encouraged to rally support for A. Philip Randolph’s resolution that was to be submitted at the upcoming American Federation of Labor convention proposing that the AFL outlaw racial discrimination in member unions once and for all.

**May Day: Militant Socialism and the Solidification of the Progressive Agenda**

Perhaps the quintessential example of socialist action and political infighting in the ILGWU was the May Day celebration. May Day provided a chance to bring many unions together to engage in a massive event meant both to rally thousands of members to labor’s cause, as well as to demonstrate solidarity and joviality to onlookers. Well before May 1st, on March 13, 1935, the Socialist Party’s local branch in New York City

invited all affiliated organizations to each send two delegates to a May Day celebration conference on March 28 at which all plans would be made for that year’s event. Among the organizations named as invitees were the Amalgamated Clothing Workers union and the ILGWU. It was clear that although this was an effort spearheaded by socialists, the organizers sought participation from a large number of unions in order to make their May Day event seem more broad-based. This was likely because socialists were interested in an agenda that went beyond labor: “Only in a UNITED EFFORT can we protest against exploitation, against War, against Fascism!”13

Once May 1st arrived, it was clear that there were a wide array of issues that had been incorporated into the labor agenda. The call for the May Day concert, meeting, and parade at the Central Park Mall was sent out by the May Day Labor Conference, which was the group of organizations participating in the event. Spearheaded by the Socialist Party of New York and the ILGWU, the Conference consisted of 58 organizations including some with socialist and communist affiliations. Bringing these two often warring factions together was a feat made possible by the increasingly progressive tendency represented in the platform the Conference laid out in its call for the May Day celebration. Indeed, much as communists had done earlier in the year, the Conference attacked the administration of collective bargaining under section 7A of the National Recovery Act:

…its administration was put in the hands of agents of the employers. The result has been a denial of workers’ rights and an increase of employers’

13 Letter from Henry Fruchter, Socialist Party Local New York, 13 March 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 29, Folder 7.
power—by raising the cost of living and strengthening the monopolists’ hold on the necessities of life.\textsuperscript{14}

From the perspective of the May Day Labor Conference, in addition to NRA policies, the growing threat of fascism also presented an enemy common to the socialist, the communist, and the average worker. The Conference equated fascism with capitalism, saying that both movements sought to keep workers divided through stoking racial and religious prejudices. Thus, the discrimination the more militant unions in the labor movement battled was seen as another form of the racial hierarchy created under the Third Reich. The imprisonment of Tom Mooney and the Scottsboro Boys, the use of police brutality in strikes, and racial discrimination all offered evidence of this. According to this view, Huey Long and Father Coughlin weren’t just fascist demagogues, but proponents of capitalist exploitation.

Furthermore, war itself was seen as a tool of capitalism, and thus those represented by the Conference wanted to avoid being pulled into a war with European fascists. Despite the opposition to fascists, militant unionists resisted war against them because they assumed that the interests of capital were responsible for setting up the international disputes and armed conflicts that helped fascism take hold in Europe. Thus, opposition to war and to fascism went hand-in-hand and became the twin causes that would bring a diverse group of workers together. Thus, slogans for the 1935 May Day celebration included “AGAINST CHILD LABOR AND RACE DISCRIMINATION,” as well as “AGAINST WAR AND FASCISM.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} May Day Concert and Meeting flyer, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 25, Folder 3.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
However, despite the seeming strength diversity provided, the diversity of political opinions would create conflict. This became particularly evident in planning for May Day the following year. Already by late March 1936, Local 22 sought to preempt any tension by joining together with other AFL unions in New York to issue a call for one united May Day demonstration by all working-class organizations. In April, the ILGWU, the Amalgamated, the Millinery Workers’ Union, unions affiliated with the United Hebrew Trades, the Local New York branch of the Socialist Party, and cultural groups affiliated with the socialist movement were able to join together in a “united front” to plan a May Day celebration. Despite calls for unity, these groups claimed that communists were trying to sow division by organizing a competing May Day event.\footnote{“Strengthened by Its Fighting Traditions, Dress Local 22 Looks Ahead Confidently,” \textit{Daily Worker}, March 29, 1936, and “Build the United Labor Party: The Communist Answer to Dubinsky,” \textit{Daily Worker}, April 25, 1936; “Dubinsky Scores Communist-Left Alliance to Wreck Labor Unions” and “Dubinsky Declares War On the United Front of Thomas and Communists,” \textit{New Leader}, April 25, 1936.}

David Dubinsky explained:

“After we had made preliminary preparations for the celebration and specifically declared that all elements and groups in the labor movement which have in previous years participated with us in such affairs were, of course, welcome to join with us, the ‘militants’ of the Socialist Party under the leadership of Norman Thomas, together with the Communists and a number of smaller unions, announced themselves as the organized labor movement and called their own conference which proceeded to arrange an affair in competition with our celebration.”\footnote{“Dubinsky Declares War On the United Front of Thomas and Communists.”}

The group viewed as being the most problematic was not the communists, who many expected to cause problems, but the militant socialists.

The united front claimed that, in planning a united May Day celebration, it represented the true desire of most union members to work together. They sought to make those who they called the “Old Guard Socialist leadership” the outsiders, saying
that those leaders had been defeated not only in a competition between May Day events, but within the Socialist Party and the trade unions themselves.

Thus, when the group that dubbed themselves the “United Labor Party” had their May Day Committee approach the organizers of the official ILGWU, Amalgamated, United Hebrew Trades celebration to propose coordinating the two celebrations, Dubinsky claimed that the trade unions emphatically rejected this proposal, not wanting to share the identification with communists that was attached to the militant socialists. Nonetheless, the official stance of the United Labor Party was that unions were welcome to participate in both celebrations, even though they would not be cooperative. Dubinsky strongly resisted such a compromise, seeking to discipline locals like 117 that openly planned to attend both events. This opposition didn’t seem to matter, as by the end of April, the united front claimed that most trade union organizations were pledging to participate in their celebration instead of, or in addition to, that of the ILGWU, Amalgamated, and United Hebrew Trades. 125 local trade unions officially endorsed the United May Day event.18

In the end, Local 22, despite both its left-leaning membership, and also the fact that its Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman was one of the first to join the United Labor Party, participated in the original ILGWU May Day celebration. Its male soccer team played in the event’s soccer game against Local 117, and its girls’ basketball team played against the team from Mount Vernon’s Local 143. The ILGWU Chorus, the ILGWU Players, the ILGWU Dancers, the ILGWU Mandolin Orchestra, and the ILGWU

Sports Division all participated in the celebration, with Local 22 members playing prominent roles in each group. Singing and dancing was intermixed with speeches by leaders such as David Dubinsky, who professed that the platform of the unions at the celebration was in line with that of the American Federation of Labor. That platform was characterized by opposition to war and fascism and by support of New Deal legislation:

Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and militarist Japan are running wild in their imperialistic frenzy, threatening to plunge the peoples of the earth, America included, into another bloody conflict. When war breaks out, it will be the workers who will be sent out to be slaughtered in a cause not their own. The workers will fight but the bosses will make profit. On May Day we must demonstrate AGAINST WAR AND THE PREPARATIONS FOR WAR! 19

Though opposition to racial persecution was mentioned in flyers for the event, that stance seemed more associated with European fascism than it was with discrimination in American labor unions and labor policy.

Conversely, the United Labor May Day Committee had a much broader, yet more specific program. Not only did it express opposition to war and fascism, but it also contained other central points opposing anti-Semitism and discrimination against African Americans. Indeed, the United May Day celebration made a point of discussing the plight of the black worker:

19 It was not a surprise for Zimmerman to strike out with the militants, even if his normally loyal local members didn’t follow him. Soon after attending the United Labor Party May Day celebration, he attended a celebration held by the communist-affiliated International Workers Order. The fraternal organization was celebrating having reached a membership of 100,000. Max Bedacht, General Secretary, National Executive Committee, International Workers Order, to Sascha Zimmerman, 7 May 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 17, Folder 4; David Dubinsky (speeches, Meeting of New York Cloak Joint Board, 22 April 1936, and May Day Celebration, 1 May 1936), ILGWU records, #5780/002, Box 399, Folder 6; “Down Tools on May Day” flyer and May Day Celebration program, May 1, 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 25, Folder 3; “On To The Polo Grounds!” flyer, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 25, Folder 4.
The hand of tyranny which rests so heavily on the workers bears down with added cruelty on the backs of our Negro fellow-workers. On this May Day, we march side by side, workers of all colors and creeds, and demonstrate that we do not follow the will of the masters who would divide us and rule. In the unity of labor, there is no distinction. All are members of the great movement for equal rights, for social emancipation.\(^{20}\)

A focus on African American workers continued to be one characteristic that set left-wing unionists apart from more moderate and conservative elements in the labor movement.

At the same time, the Committee expressed support for the Soviet Union, for the establishment of a Farmer-Labor Party, and for numerous policies like unemployment insurance, the 30-hour work week, and a Workers’ Rights Amendment to the Constitution. Though their anti-war, anti-fascist stance was in line with that expressed in the ILGWU, the Amalgamated, and the United Hebrew Trades’ celebration, the United Labor Party actually tried to co-opt the anti-fascist platform in a shocking way. It claimed that it faced repressive tactics led by Dubinsky and other members of the Old Guard, and compared such tactics to those used by German and Austrian fascist governments against the labor movements in their countries. Thus, in fighting against fascism, the party fought not only to defend the labor movement abroad, but also to defend the militant wing of the American labor movement, as well.

Its stance on New Deal legislation also demonstrated the United Labor Party’s political leftism. Although they wanted to fight for many of the policies proposed under the New Deal, party members didn’t wholly support what the New Deal had engendered to that point. For instance, they claimed that the “subsistence wage” paid by the Works

\(^{20}\) “All Out On May First!” flyer, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 25, Folder 3.
Progress Administration was not only inadequate, but a direct attack on trade union scales. In fact, dissatisfaction with the Roosevelt administration was a central reason for their support of a labor party. After Dubinsky left the Socialist Party, complaining about militants, Jack Altman, the executive secretary of the party’s Local New York branch responded that the party was determined to campaign aggressively not only against Roosevelt’s Republican opponent in the 1936 campaign, but against Roosevelt himself. Whereas Dubinsky was willing to give the Roosevelt administration credit for progress in labor legislation, militant socialists like those of the United Labor Party insisted that the administration had “failed to solve labor’s problems.”

Local 22: A Bastion of Left-Wing Activism and a Progressive Leader

The Communist Party of the USA singled out ILGWU Local 22 as an ideal model of communist union leadership. Claiming that communists led the local, which was only true in that certain officials were communists, the party argued that the local was a leader in the trade union movement not only because of its size and sophisticated organization, but also because of its development into an exemplar of progressive labor unionism. The success of Local 22 was seen as a validation of this progressive tendency, and reinforced opposition to both conservative and dual unionism. However, the local’s success was also seen as a byproduct of its educational programming, which was the most extensive ever attempted by a trade union local. Thus, as the communists moved toward embracing the

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21 Ibid.; “Build the United Labor Party: The Communist Answer to Dubinsky,” Daily Worker, April 25, 1936; “Manifesto of the United Labor May Day Committee,” ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 25, Folder 3; “Dubinsky Resigns From Party; Calls Interests ‘Conflicting,,’” Socialist Call, April 18, 1936.

22 “The Present Situation in the Labor Movement and Our Tasks”—Draft Resolution to Plenum of National Committee of the CPUSA.
united front, they focused on the centrality of labor education over politics. They believed education to be the most critical ingredient in raising class-consciousness and in providing the foundation for labor activism.

However, while different factions within the ILGWU were drifting toward reconciliation, the left wing of Local 22 tried to hold its ground by attacking Charles Zimmerman and his progressive administration. In the February 1935 issue of *Dressmakers’ Voice*, the organ of Local 22’s left wing, an editorial accused the local’s grievance board of being Zimmerman’s puppet and imposing fines and suspensions on militant workers:

> The Zimmerman ‘Progressive Clique’ have initiated the election campaign in our local with their old methods of trumping up charges against Left Wingers. Zimmerman believes that by terrorizing the militant workers in the shops he can cover up his class collaboration policy in the Union.  

In fact, the paper also made a point of extending these types of accusations to the African American community, taking aim at Frank Crosswaith. According to the paper’s account, at the January 6th Rockland Palace mass meeting, the workers gathered demanded that the mothers of the Scottsboro Boys, who were in attendance, be allowed to speak. Crosswaith, described by the left wing as “Dubinsky’s payroll patriot,” not only refused to yield the floor, but threw the mothers off the stage and had the police break the meeting up. *Justice*, on the other hand, blamed the breakup of the meeting on “Communist hoodlums.” However, *Dressmakers’ Voice* pointed to that account as part of a cover-up of what actually happened, and insisted that African American workers would not forget either the incident or the attempts to hide what took place.

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The newspaper’s editorial section went even further in criticizing the ILGWU as a whole for having a “Negro problem.” It claimed that despite the union’s rhetoric of equality, African American workers were constantly discriminated against both in the shop and also in the union itself. In the shop, the majority of black pressers were working under the subcontractors system, meaning that they were classified as unskilled workers, and not entitled to a minimum wage. This inferior position in the shop hierarchy, and in the overall economic hierarchy of the garment industry, was blamed for the fact that Local 22 had no African American business agents or shop chairmen despite having approximately 5,000 African American members. Thus, to the left wingers, not only was the premise that Local 22 was the epitome of progressivism proven hollow, but also the authenticity of the entire progressive movement inside the ILGWU was called into question.

To demonstrate their enthusiasm for African American participation and equality in the union, the United Dressmakers Committee created a platform that they announced in March 1935 on the front page of Local 22’s left wing newspaper, now called *United Dressmaker*. Claiming that only 45 out of thousands of African American dressmakers had shown up to the most recent meeting of the Harlem (Colored) branch of Local 22, the paper claimed that the indifference of black workers to union activities resulted from their often bitter experiences with the union. Recognizing that these workers suffered constant discrimination, the United Dressmakers Committee platform claimed that the Committee would set up a Labor Bureau to protect African Americans from employment discrimination. It also laid out a plan to encourage the election of black dressmakers to

\[24\] Ibid.
shop committees, but perhaps most importantly, it pledged to wage an ideological campaign with the purpose of cementing solidarity between black and white workers. The United Dressmakers sought to nurture interracial cooperation, picking up on the tactics of the Communist Party of the USA.

It is interesting to note that by 1935, the socialists no longer seemed occupied with a rhetorical war against the communists and left wingers. On the issue of African American participation in the union, the left wing continued to claim that the progressives, led by Zimmerman, were indifferent to the plight of black members both of the ILGWU generally and of Local 22 specifically. However, instead of having his group fight back as they had during the election campaign of 1934, Zimmerman let the progressives’ actions speak for themselves. The group began working more closely with African Americans and assisting in labor organizing efforts in Harlem that were initiated by the African American community itself. These efforts were most often the conception of Frank Crosswaith and related to his activities with the Harlem Labor Committee.

The success of socialist progressives in Local 22 paid dividends in that year’s union elections. Once again, the communists’ political efforts in the union seemed directed more at attacking the socialists than promoting themselves. The Communist Party sent out letters trying to rally its supporters to vote for their slate and to stop work on the day of the elections to cover polling places to protect each other from being intimidated by Dubinsky and Zimmerman’s supporters and to insure that the votes would be counted fairly. However, such protection likely didn’t matter, as the progressive slate easily beat that of the left wing, 5,518 votes to 3,551.

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This victory also helped sweep more African Americans into positions of power in the local. Ethel Atwell, Eldica Riley, Edith Ransom, and Eva Dicken were elected to the Executive Board, but Atwell led all candidates with 9,029 votes. She was, in fact, the only candidate to garner over 9,000 votes. She even received more votes in her election to the Executive Board than Charles Zimmerman did in being reelected as Manager-Secretary. The election of these women to the Executive Board resulted in their eventual appointment to numerous subcommittees. Atwell and Dicken were made delegates to the New York Joint Board of Dressmakers of the ILGWU; Ransom was appointed to the Organization subcommittee; and Atwell and Riley were placed on the Membership subcommittee. Riley was also on the Grievance subcommittee, while Ransom served on the Education subcommittee, and Dicken served on the subcommittee of liaisons to the Women’s Trade Union League.  

By staying focused on building their power, socialists maintained leadership of Local 22 in its 1935 elections, and brought numerous African Americans into powerful positions.

Yet, the left wing of the local was unrelenting in pushing its agenda. On May 23rd, it led a demonstration in Union Square against the National Recovery Administration and the Wagner Labor Disputes Bill. It continued to claim that its stance on labor issues set it apart from the progressive wing, as Zimmerman and the May Day Conference were portrayed as firmly backing the labor policies of the Roosevelt administration. According to Dressmakers’ Voice, 20,000 workers participated in the Union Square demonstration.

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26 Letter from I. Amter, District Organizer, New York District, Communist Party, 22 March 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 5, Folder 1; Charles Zimmerman to Lillian Gaskin, 22 March 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 13, Folder 8; Report of Rules and Regulations Committee, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 25, Folder 12; ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 29, Folder 11.
They marched to oppose a pro-NRA meeting taking place at Madison Square Garden that day, which the left wing claimed both Zimmerman and Dubinsky supported participating in. Indeed, the left wing saw ILGWU leadership as just as much of a barrier to workers’ advancement as the Roosevelt administration was:

Section 7A of the N.R.A. with its promise to give the workers the right to organize into Labor Unions turned out to be a tragic farce. It made possible for the development of Company Unions. Those workers who attempted to organize and strike for recognition of their Union and higher wages were terrorized. The government, with the cooperation of the leaders of the A.F. of L., prevented the workers from striking…

Hence, Zimmerman and Dubinsky were portrayed as part of a broader movement aimed at working with the Roosevelt administration to carry on activities that seemed pro-labor on their face, but that actually sought to undermine union efforts. In other words, the left wing accused the ILGWU’s leaders of sacrificing the union’s mission for their pursuit of power.

Thus, even after the progressives won the Local 22 elections, they reignited their war of words with the left wing. They claimed that the leftists used propaganda on the issue of racial discrimination to discourage blacks from supporting progressive union leaders. Notably, the Executive Board of Local 22 claimed that their complaints against the left wing stemmed from the left’s rejection of progressives’ attempts to unify the local’s disparate factions in the wake of its elections. In this case, they supposedly distributed leaflets claiming that after thousands of black workers joined Local 22 in the wake of the Uprising of the 30,000, approximately half of them were allowed to fall out of union ranks by 1935 as a result of the administration’s indifference. This served as a

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27 Dressmakers’ Voice 2, No. 4, June 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 31, Folder 9.
precursor to more successful attempts to unify in 1936. Progressives battled back that the membership numbers provided in the left’s leaflet were pure fiction, and that African American members were not only well taken care of in the union, but were some of the union’s most loyal and responsible members. The Executive Board explained:

The Negro dressmakers are the very first to resent such slanders made allegedly in their name! Every member of our Local can testify to the determined and successful efforts made by our administration to draw all elements of our membership, especially the newer ones, into active Union life and into participation in the leadership of the Union.28

Thus, the progressive argument wasn’t only that the left’s accusations were false, but that such accusations ultimately backfired.

Indeed, when progressive groups in the needle trades laid out their program at the June conference in which they planned to establish a National Progressive Center, one element of that program was opposition to racial discrimination in the trade union movement. Thus, progressives sought to claim ownership of the struggle for racial equality in unions. In addition to their support of a labor party and their opposition to Jim Crow union policies, they also expressed opposition to war and fascism and to the control of unions by political groups. This latter point is particularly notable as the socialist influence on the progressives was clear. Locals with a heavy socialist bent, such as Local 22, prominent participants in the progressive conference, but the only political group represented at that conference was the Socialist League of Local 10. Finally, the progressives established their support of industrial unionism. However, they opposed

dual unionism. This was especially critical as needle trade unionists would soon participate in creating the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

Calls for unity between the Progressive Group and the left wing of the ILGWU now rose up from both sides. Heading into 1936, Local 22’s Executive Board recommitted itself to unifying all dressmakers regardless of political loyalties. In joining with the communists in a united front, socialists truly did split many of their unions. The ILGWU was a prime example, as their leadership was dominated by socialists, but those of a more moderate, even conservative ilk. Thus, to join with communists, who had been seen as troublemakers for years, represented a betrayal to many. Worse yet, leaders like Dubinsky dismissed the united front socialists who were called “Progressives” only a year earlier and seen as the up and coming leaders in their unions. However, these socialists refused to be denied or cast as agitators: “Does not Dubinsky know that whenever progressive elements fight for policies to strengthen the trade union movement, the reactionary craft union leaders of the A. F. of L. raise the cry of disruption and splitters?”

The left wing’s staunch loyalty to the Socialist Party caused friction with the ILGWU. When the party nominated ILGWU Vice President Julius Hochman for President of the Board of Aldermen at its convention in mid-July, Hochman declined. He said that he had never consented to the nomination, and that he deplored attacks made in Socialist Party convention speeches on Labor’s Non-Partisan League. His highest priority

29 “Progressive Center Established,” The Cutters, October 1935.

was supporting independent political action by the labor movement, so to him, condemning the League was a condemnation of the most effective form of such action to that point. After all, in the week prior to the Party convention, the New York Non-Partisan League had met with unions associated with a new organization, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), to plan the launch of a national labor party. Hochman asserted that unity was the most important element of organizing for political power, and criticism from the Socialist Party undermined that.

When the American Labor Party (ALP) officially formed, Local 22 became an early supporter. At the August 11th meeting of Local 22’s executive board, Charles Zimmerman stated his case for affiliating with the new party. First, he asserted that the creation of the party represented the first time in the history of the American labor movement that unions consciously moved toward independent political action. Though he admitted the steps unions were making were “very hesitant, very unclear, have many shortcomings…,” he lauded those steps as groundbreaking. Zimmerman admitted that for him and many others the ALP was not radical enough, but he claimed the solution was not to wait for a more radical party to form, but to participate in the ALP in its infancy to help shape its direction. The avowed socialist admitted that the party also supported President Roosevelt and Governor Lehman, who he and other leftists opposed. However, he argued that this was not a great enough reason to keep Local 22 from affiliating.

Some local members spoke at their executive board meeting against affiliation, saying that the American Labor Party was not a genuine labor party, but merely an organization formed to support Roosevelt and Lehman. It was thus particularly crucial to these members that Local 22 not affiliate with the ALP because the local had always
vowed only to support labor candidates, who they did not believe the President and the Governor to be. Although these members portrayed an association with the new labor party as antithetical to Local 22’s beliefs and previous practices, the local voted to get behind Zimmerman and affiliate with the ALP.\textsuperscript{31}

It may have seemed odd to some that Zimmerman would have parted ways with fellow left-wing socialists by joining with a labor party. However, the party emphasized a number of issues of great importance to Zimmerman and other leftists, as well. The reason they had decided not to affiliate with a possible labor party earlier in the summer was because they felt that only the Socialist Party made opposition to fascism a priority. Now that the American Labor Party was a reality, however, it declared its steadfast opposition to fascism, racism, and all threats to equality, democracy, and civil liberties in an entire section of its official program, “Human Rights.” It declared that the party “will resist to the utmost anti-democratic and dictatorial systems under whatever label they may be purveyed to our people.”\textsuperscript{32} This was a party that Zimmerman and other militant socialists could feel comfortable joining. As a result, the Secretary-Manager sent all Local 22 members a letter in late September asking them to take part in a substantial drive to recruit new members to the ALP.

The unification of the left and progressive wings was first brought about in locals such as 22, where support for the American Labor Party had increasingly become a common denominator amongst members. Left wingers had also been elected to the

\textsuperscript{31} David Dubinsky (speech, radio, WEVD, 14 August 1936), ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 399, Folder 6; Minutes of the Executive Board of the Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., August 11, 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Box 1, Folder 1936.

\textsuperscript{32} American Labor Party program, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 145, Folder 2C.
Executive Board and to paid offices in Local 22, and were well received by progressive officials and the local’s membership more broadly. As a result of the overall political atmosphere, which was increasingly working to the progressives’ advantage and the left’s disadvantage, and the warming relations with more moderate forces, the left wing announced its intentions to unite with progressives on the basis of a united program:

Our experience in carrying through joint activities with the progressives has convinced us of the enormous possibilities and benefits to the dressmakers by achieving complete unity in our ranks...by uniting both groups into one on a common program for the dressmakers, and strictly carrying out such program, would attract additional thousands into union activity.33

The left wing still had an agenda, and it sought to strengthen its position regarding certain issues through joining with progressives. Specifically, many of Local 22’s left-wing members complained that the ILGWU did nothing to address unemployment, and they were disappointed that the local itself was not doing more. They had hoped that Local 22 would see to it that the Joint Dress Board establish a labor bureau whose main task would be to place unemployed garment workers in permanent jobs.34

Unity led to mobilization, a key element of politics within the ILGWU in 1937. Despite some rocky moments, the united front between the union’s left and progressive wings was holding solid. The Left Wing Group of Local 22 wrote the Progressive Group of Local 22 in February to say that their detente had resulted in clear progress toward unifying all dressmakers. Even more importantly, perhaps, the united front had resulted in the improvement of the “inner life” of the local, which could be demonstrated in the


ever-increasing schedule and popularity of social activities. As a result, the left wingers proposed a united ticket in the coming union elections. In order to formulate an economic program to campaign on for those elections, the left wingers also asked the progressives to select a committee to meet with their committee.

By the end of February, they formed the United Campaign Committee and released a program that advocated for the effective enforcement of conditions the dressmakers had already won, the protection of minority crafts, and the prevention of racial discrimination by employers in the garment industry. It is interesting to note that, while opposition to racial discrimination had often been an element of left-wing programs, this was the first time such opposition held a prominent place in a program that represented the majority of Local 22’s membership. Additionally, in the section of the program that dealt with organizational issues, the United Campaign Committee pledged its commitment to redouble Local 22’s efforts to draw black and Spanish-speaking workers into union membership and union activities. This was complemented by the program’s focus on the continuation and expansion of the local’s educational work, which was seen as key to the success of organizing. The ultimate goal remained to broaden the local’s base of support and attract its members into more active participation in union life. Yet, the left wingers claimed that a united ticket hinged not only on this mutually agreed upon economic program, but also on mutual respect between left wingers and progressives, and on a commitment to proportional representation of each group in a new administration.35

Indeed, the entire united ticket was overwhelmingly voted into office in the Local 22 elections, held on March 18. Charles Zimmerman won 85% of the vote for Secretary-Manager, and the 29 executive board members, 33 business agents, 24 convention delegates, and 5 relief committee members elected from united ticket also won by similar margins. This was also the election in which Edith Ransom became the first African American paid officer in the union when she won the position of business agent, which was also considered a victory for the united front’s efforts to encourage Local 22 members of all races and backgrounds to be more active and to take on increasing levels of responsibility in union leadership. More than anything, however, the United Campaign Committee viewed the elections as an endorsement of its approach and also as a mandate for the continued consolidation of union ranks. Even Dubinsky and Zimmerman shook hands and vowed to work together. As the union President said of Local 22’s Secretary-Manager when he installed the local’s new administration:

I am not always in agreement with him, you know, but if I have to work with an opponent give me many like Charles Zimmerman. I have never questioned his sincerity, his interest in our Union and his interest in the general labor movement.36

**Mainstream Party Politics and the Rise of the American Labor Party**

In late May 1935, Charles Zimmerman sent a telegraph to President Roosevelt on behalf of Local 22’s members to protest wage scales prescribed under the NRA. He argued that the wages were not only far below living wage levels, but that they also

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36 David Dubinsky (speech, 19 April 1937), ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1937; Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U. press release, March 22, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 9, Folder 5.
contradicted the President’s professed aim of increasing mass purchasing power by raising wages in order to uplift the depressed economy. Instead, the NRA wages were prompting wage cuts across the country and across different industries, making conditions harder for workers and undermining unions’ campaigns for higher wages. To make matters worse, stories of NRA agents collaborating with employers were common, and in a number of these cases the collaboration was aimed at intimidating and underpaying African Americans.\textsuperscript{37}

The appointment of General Hugh S. Johnson as Works Progress Administrator for New York City did not help put any suspicions of NRA enforcement to rest. The National Urban League quickly and vocally protested against Johnson’s appointment, painting him as having a record of displaying neglect, indifference, and racial intolerance. For instance, the League claimed that he had refused to hire competent African Americans to his clerical staff and that he had ignored consistent, widespread violations of NRA codes in situations where black workers were involved. The NUL thus appealed to WPA Director Harry Hopkins and New York Mayor La Guardia to replace Johnson, but he remained in place, leaving many of the city’s African American workers and labor leaders to wonder how effective already questionable NRA policy could possibly be with a dubious administrator in charge of its enforcement.

\textsuperscript{37} In one such instance, two NRA agents in Arkansas were dismissed for exposing the identity of a complainant to the employer she was filing a complaint against. In Forest City, a woman named Lea Duncan claimed that her testimony was taken in the presence of a representative of her garment company and the company’s attorney. She testified that other African American women had been fired to avoid paying them the NRA wage scale, but was then subjected to sharp questioning by the company attorney and the NRA agents. The presence of the attorney and representative were not only a violation of NRA rules, but the interrogation of Mrs. Duncan was completely out of bounds. Despite the agents’ dismissal, incidents like these were widely reported as proof of the NRA’s failures. “N.R.A. Officials Fired For Racial Prejudice In South,” The New York Age, May 25, 1935, 3; Telegraph, Charles S. Zimmerman to Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt, 21 May 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 29, Folder 3.
The Harlem Negro Workers’ Council stood up to Johnson, laying out their concerns. Apparently, in an attempt to assuage the uproar amongst African Americans surrounding his appointment, Johnson had approached the press to declare that he would not tolerate racial discrimination in any public works projects under his jurisdiction. The Council thus offered its support and cooperation to insure that the new Works Progress Administrator came through on this promise, telling him that it sought to protect his “good intentions,” as well as the interests of New York City’s black workers. Clearly, the Council and Johnson were attempting rapprochement, but Council representatives made it clear that they remained skeptical toward New Deal agencies, and that as a result they would be keeping a close eye on Johnson. However, they also offered him their own facilities and resources to help him maintain contact with everyday people in the street and on the job.

Thus, New Deal agencies did not always inspire hope. Often, for labor unionists, especially those who were African American, those agencies engendered suspicion. Yet, once the NRA began being phased out after it was deemed unconstitutional in May 1935, the National Coat and Suit Industry Recovery Board was established to carry on many of the NRA’s functions in the garment industry. The Board instituted the Consumers’ Protection Label, replacing the NRA blue eagle, but in carrying on the work of the NRA, many of the challenges of enforcing wages and fair treatment continued.38

38 The problems associated with failures of New Deal policies were particularly bad in Harlem, where charges of inadequate home relief were widespread. This was attributed both to the fact that there were no African Americans appointed to key positions in the home relief agencies, as well as to general discrimination in the distribution of relief. “Proper Home Relief Not Being Administered To Negroes; Lack Key Administrative Positions,” *The New York Age* 49, No. 30, March 30, 1935, 1; “National Urban League Assails Appointment Of Gen. Johnson To Works Relief Post Here,” *The New York Age* 49, No. 44, July 6, 1935, 1; Manning Johnson and Timothy Holmes to General Hugh S. Johnson, 10 July 1935, Workers’ Councils Bulletin 1935 folder, I: D9, National Urban League Records, Manuscript Division, Library of...
In fact, an effort was under way within the labor movement to organize political support for labor’s agenda that was dependent neither on cooperating with Roosevelt’s administration nor on aligning with left-wing radicals. At the 1934 AFL convention in Atlantic City, delegates from 15 International unions including the ILGWU and from numerous Federal unions had supported a resolution favoring the formation of a labor party. Since that time, support for a Farmer-Labor Party had continued to build across the country. The trade unions increasingly felt that in order to be powerful enough to affect policy, they had to form their own party that was beholden to them and their interests. Hence, momentum for such a party began to build in the labor hotbed of New York. The Trade Union Sponsoring Committee For A Labor Party Conference formed and sent out a call to all local unions to send delegates to the Trade Union Labor Party Conference, held on May 24. A few weeks later, when they held a conference in hopes of establishing a National Progressive Center, progressives in the needle trades claimed the establishment of a labor party as part of their agenda.39

Meanwhile, the Republican Party, so long the party of African Americans, was losing power in Harlem and amongst African Americans nationally. At the Eastern Federation of Negro Republicans conference on September 14, the Rhode Island and New York delegates walked out after complaining that efforts were being made to swing the New York delegation behind an already defeated candidate for the national chairmanship. This appeared to be a blatant power grab for control of the convention.

39 Letter from Elmer Brown, Secretary, Trade Union Sponsoring Committee For A Labor Party Conference, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 147, Folder 1B; “Progressive Center Established,” The Cutters, October 1935.
which was already weakened by the absence of delegations from Massachusetts and Connecticut. Whereas the black Republicans had hoped to play a major role in the 1936 Presidential campaign, many came to doubt the relevance of their conference, and to some, the walkout of the New York and Rhode Island delegations sounded the death knell of organized black Republicans.

Also, 1935 was the last year in which Tammany Hall effectively imposed its power in Harlem, as it installed Herbert Bruce as New York’s first black Democratic Alderman. However, when Tammany soon snubbed him, Bruce threw his weight behind the patronage machine of James Farley, chairman of the Democratic National Committee and a key figure in the Roosevelt administration. Bruce thus became symbolic of Harlem’s transition to the New Deal coalition. Such political developments had the greatest impact on Harlem’s workers. The efforts of Frank Crosswait and his Negro Labor Committee and of ILGWU Local 22 would ultimately seem parochial next to the grand agenda and broad coalition represented by the New Deal. The greatest successes of these efforts would be in educational and cultural activities, in which unity transcended politics, as well as race.

A major new source of support for the New Deal was created in the spring of 1936 when the Labor’s Non-Partisan League of New York State was established. The League had three aims: to re-elect Governor Herbert H. Lehman and elect approved candidates across the state; to secure the enactment of effective social legislation in the state legislature and in Congress; and the primary goal, which was: “To defeat the combination of reactionary anti-labor and anti-social forces headed by Governor Alf M.

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Landon, and to assure the re-election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency of the United States for another term.” In promising to work for Roosevelt and to pursue the principles of the New Deal, the Non-Partisan League demonstrated that political organization on the part of the labor movement could function in tandem with the federal government to achieve its ends. In fact, the coalition the League claimed itself to be a part of would become a fundamental feature of the American political landscape not only during Roosevelt’s presidency, but for decades to come:

LNPL of NYS has entered this campaign to mobilize the political power of labor with the progressive forces of the people everywhere in the cities and on the farms, against reaction and for freedom, against economic oppression and depression and for recovery and democracy.41

Indeed, labor became a primary element of the New Deal coalition, as did the African Americans the labor movement helped bring into it, as well.

Despite the many different political views represented within its membership, the ILGWU officially threw its weight behind Labor’s Non-Partisan League. The union claimed that its members supported the movement for reelecting Roosevelt because his victory would be a victory for “the forces of progressive labor and liberalism.” They also foresaw the League as the first real movement toward independent labor-based political action. The union also threw its weight behind its leader, saying that David Dubinsky’s actions, at least insofar as joining the League, had been reflective of union members’ desire to campaign for Roosevelt’s reelection. It was ironic that Dubinsky chose to affiliate with the League for political reasons in that the organization was an outgrowth of

41 “Build the United Labor Party: The Communist Answer to Dubinsky,” *Daily Worker*, April 25, 1936; “All Out On May First!” flyer, and “Manifesto of the United Labor May Day Committee,” ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 25, Folder 3; “Dubinsky Resigns From Party; Calls Interests ‘Conflicting’,” *Socialist Call*, April 18, 1936.
the American Federation of Labor’s non-partisan policy, which was specifically intended to direct unions away from supporting any political party. This was meant to insure that no union members would be alienated on the basis of their political beliefs and to direct everyone’s allegiances not toward any political party, but toward the labor movement.\textsuperscript{42}

Thus, the point of the non-partisan stance had originally been for unions to garner political power through directing all political efforts away from the existing party’s campaigns and toward independent political action.

Indeed, when the opportunity arose for independent political action through the fledgling Farmer-Labor Party, Dubinsky would be slow to offer support, because he saw the new party as a militant effort:

\begin{quote}
The future of independent political action will not be the Socialist Party or the Communist Party. It will be a movement not organized thru fake maneuvers of the Communists or anyone else, but organized, sponsored and promoted by the trade unions in this country.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

Yet, Dubinsky spoke of the need for independent labor-based political action. He simply didn’t think it was realistic to form an effective labor party by the time of the election that November. He also feared that the Farmer-Labor Party already in existence, especially because it seemed to be influenced by leftist elements from the labor movement, would create competition against Roosevelt, the last thing Dubinsky wanted.

\textsuperscript{42} Resolution Adopted By The General Executive Board of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union on Invitation of Labor’s Non-Partisan League for the Reelection of President Roosevelt, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 21, Folder 2; William Green, President, AFL, and Frank Morrison, Secretary-Treasurer, AFL to Officers of National and International Unions, State Federations of Labor, City Central Labor Unions, and Affiliated Local Unions of the American Federation of Labor, 25 April 1936, and George Berry to Charles Zimmerman, 26 June 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 21, Folder 2.

\textsuperscript{43} David Dubinsky (speech, Meeting of New York Cloak Joint Board, 22 April 1936), ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 399, Folder 6.
The workers of Harlem, however, rallied behind the new labor party. At the All-Harlem Conference on Independent Political Action on April 27, 1936, attendees set up a Continuations Committee to prepare a convention for the establishment of an All-Harlem-Peoples Party. 280 delegates from 105 different trade unions attended the conference, which claimed to represent Harlem workers of all political stripes. These delegates agreed not only to run a Harlem convention, but also to send a fraternal delegation to a city-wide conference for independent labor-based political action that was to be held at the end of May. The All-Harlem Conference was meant to initiate the establishment of an offshoot of the Farmer-Labor Party in Harlem, and to associate the Harlem organization with city-wide Farmer-Labor efforts. The Continuation Committee thus called on “every Trade Union interested in unionization of Negro people” to elect two delegates to its All-Harlem-Peoples Party convention and to send those delegates to weekly meetings of the Continuation Committee to influence the planning of the convention, as well. Indeed, Charles Zimmerman pleaded with Local 22 members to support efforts such as these to establish local labor parties, as many people saw setting up a national party as an unfeasible goal.44 It only helped that the All-Harlem-Peoples Party created another connection between black workers and the Harlem branch of Local 22.

Despite the fact that so many questioned whether or not a national labor party could work or when one could be successfully launched, by the end of May, the socialists and communists of Local 22 joined together to support forming a labor party, though the

44 Ibid.; Ignatius E. Lawlor, Executive Secretary, Continuation Committee For All Harlem Independent Political Action to All Trade-Unions Interested In Unionization of the Negro People – Employed and Unemployed, 18 May 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1; Local 22 press release, May 29, 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 2, Folder 2.
socialists warned against the infiltration of middle-class political interests into such a party. Developments in New York were a precursor to the National Farmer-Labor Party Conference held in Chicago on May 30-31. The conference was called by the Farmer-Labor Association of Minnesota to explore creating a national party and included a session on the 30th in which John P. Davis, who would go on to co-found the National Negro Congress described “the Negro’s dissatisfaction with the two major parties and the weight which the negro vote would carry with a new party in many sections of the country.” Thus, from the Harlem branch of Local 22 of the ILGWU to the National Negro Congress, African Americans played a key role in the establishment of the American Labor Party.

Despite the seeming enthusiasm of many leftists and progressives for a labor party, many socialists, like David Dubinsky, remained wary. By June, the socialists had split, and neither side backed the Farmer-Labor Party. Norman Thomas led left-wing socialists and a majority of the party’s membership in setting up a national ticket. However, the right wing, which controlled many socialist institutions and which had most of the socialist trade unions’ votes, joined the mainstream labor movement in supporting Roosevelt. The left had decided not to support the formation of a Farmer-Labor Party because of its concern with fighting fascism, which was a central tenet of the Socialist Party platform. The movement for a labor party thus rested with Labor’s Non-Partisan League, whose New York State branch officially established the American Labor Party.

David Dubinsky couldn’t have been happier that the ALP was finally officially established. In a radio address on WEVD, he spoke of returning from a trip to Europe to

45 Local 22 press release, May 29, 1936; Report of the National Farmer-Labor Party Conference, May 30-31, 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 147, Folder 1B.
the good news that unions in New York had organized the new party. He painted the presidential campaign of that year to listeners as the ultimate battle between progressive working-class forces and capitalist reactionaries. The latter group represented the Republican opponents of Roosevelt who Dubinsky insisted had to be defeated. The progressive policies of the New Deal had to be protected; only by doing so could the labor movement secure better working conditions and greater political power. A permanent independent party could then go beyond reelecting friendly incumbents and could mobilize millions of people against fascism, exploitation, and oppression.46

In New York State and in Harlem, organizations formed to support the ALP. In October, the New York State Labor Committee for the Re-election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Herbert H. Lehman campaigned in defense of the Social Security Act, and teamed up with the New York State Federation of Labor to spread its message to trade unionists. The Non-Partisan Committee For the Re-election of Congressman Vito Marcantonio, with members like Aaron Copland, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Reverend A. Clayton Powell, Jr., sought the reelection of the progressive politician who represented lower Harlem. Marcantonio’s support for pro-labor legislation, unemployment relief, and civil rights were seen as the antithesis to the politics of reactionaries like William Randolph Hearst, the Liberty League, and the Ku Klux Klan.

Indeed, in New York, the American Labor Party took off. On October 27, 1936, more than 20,000 people attended a rally for the party at Madison Square Garden. The rally was part of a larger event in which more than 200,000 workers, mostly in the needle trades, quit work at 3 P.M. and marched to the Garden and to other designated meeting

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46 *The Day (Der Tog)*, October 14, 1936; David Dubinsky (speech, radio, WEVD, 14 August 1936).
places. This walkout was organized by labor unions affiliated with the ALP. Governor Herbert Lehman spoke, pledging to continue to fight for progressive labor legislation and assailing Republicans for their anti-regulatory stance toward industry. Senator Robert F. Wagner, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, Amalgamated President Sidney Hillman, David Dubinsky, ILGWU Vice President Luigi Antonini, and United Mine Workers President John L. Lewis all spoke at the over four-hour event. Lewis brought greetings from Labor’s Non-Partisan League, saying that one of the great features of the 1936 campaign was that it had brought about the political organization of labor. He concluded with a passionate appeal for support of President Roosevelt, who he characterized as the greatest President since Washington and Lincoln.47 Though Lewis’ opinion of Roosevelt would change drastically by the next election, his sentiments were symbolic of the ALP’s auspicious beginnings and dedication to defending Roosevelt’s New Deal agenda.

Though the impact of the ALP on final vote tallies was unclear, the party’s candidates won handily in the 1936 elections. The ALP ticket drew 267,000 votes in New York City alone. In Harlem specifically, however, President Roosevelt and Governor Lehman received between four to five times more votes than their closest competitors, which were Republicans. 81 percent of Harlem’s black population voted to reelect Roosevelt. Despite the repeated attempts of socialists and communists to make inroads into the community, they only received a few hundred votes in each Harlem district, as opposed to the over 20,000 votes the Democratic candidates received. The ILGWU was

47 Letter from Thomas J. Lyons, Executive Secretary, New York State Labor Committee for the Re-election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Herbert H. Lehman, 24 October 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 29, Folder 3; Letter from Morris L. Ernst, Chairman, Non-Partisan Committee for the Re-election of Congressman Vito Marcantonio, 2 October 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/002. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 142, Folder 1C; “Huge Labor Rally Warned By Lehman of ‘Sinister’ Foes,” The New York Times, October 28, 1936.
particularly happy about Roosevelt and Lehman’s reelection. Union President Dubinsky called this outcome a great victory for “the common people of America.” Mostly, however, his reaction was one of resentment toward Republicans. He claimed that they attempted to stir up racial antagonism in their campaign both generally and toward him specifically:

The abominable manner in which these pretenders to Lincoln’s traditions and principles have abused me as an American Labor Party elector because my name happens to end with “sky”, in order to hurt the President’s reelection, is something the trade unionists and laboring me and women of this country will never forget.48

Clearly, Dubinsky saw the election’s outcome not only as a Democratic victory, but as a victory for the American Labor Party, the ILGWU, and for labor in general.

Even left wingers were pleased with Roosevelt’s victory, and militants like those in Local 22 threw their weight behind the ALP as a result:

In the last elections labor played a decisive role in giving an overwhelming vote for Roosevelt. The bulk of the masses…voted for decent working conditions, for the right to organize and strike for social security, for peace, and against Fascism and Reaction.49

They didn’t interpret the landslide victory as a sign of the Democratic Party’s strength, but as proof of the ALP’s growth. Much as Charles Zimmerman had already suggested, Local 22 left wingers asserted that the party should be diverse, including communists and socialists. They felt it was most important to exert influence on the formation of progressive policies in the ALP.


However, the ALP and the Democratic Party had already become largely enmeshed. The labor party had tapped David Dubinsky to be one of its six electors, but those electors were also to be on the Democratic slate. The point of this was to create identical lists of electors between the two parties, both of which were filled with labor leaders, such as Dubinsky from the ILGWU and Sidney Hillman, President of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. The connection between the parties, forged largely through liberal labor leaders, opened up an avenue for Republican attacks. They quickly focused their attention on figures like Dubinsky, who they claimed had allied with dangerous radicals to win the election. Republicans worked Roosevelt’s friendship with Dubinsky, and in turn his relationship to radicals, into their narrative of the pursuit of socialistic New Deal legislation. This narrative was also popularly espoused by Father Coughlin, amongst others.® His speeches to large crowds and over the radio lashed out at many of the groups that made up what would come to be known as the New Deal coalition, but his attacks on labor were particularly pointed, as many labor leaders were known to have a close personal relationship with President Roosevelt.

Dubinsky furiously fought these accusations on his own, as well as his union’s, behalf. He asserted that he had personally led the fight against radicals, specifically communists, in the needle trades for years. He gave further evidence of his opposition to communism by explaining that over the summer of 1936, the Soviet government had denied his request for a visa to visit Russia. He claimed that his criticisms of conditions

50 Ibid.; Another piece of evidence Republicans and right-wing activists used to prove Dubinsky’s, and thus Democrat’s, ties to radicals was the fact that he was chosen as an elector shortly after returning from a trip to France. On that trip, he attended a convention of the Popular Front, which was formed by French radicals. “The ‘Dubinsky Issue’ in the 1936 Campaign,” Press and Publicity Department, ILGWU, December 1936, 5-6, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 142, Folder 1D.
in Moscow after a visit there in 1931 had generated animus toward him, and that his
record of fighting communism solidified Soviet leaders’ suspicion of him. His defense of
the ILGWU, however, was even stronger:

Such charges as “communistic” or “un-American” leveled by
irresponsible scribes or mealy-mouthed demagogues against the ILGWU
are particularly absurd in view of the universally known fact that this
Union, for the past twenty years, has been a bulwark against repeated
attempts by Communists in this country to dominate the trade union
movement. 51

The American Federation of Labor was aligned with President Roosevelt’s
administration, and the election results in 1936 proved that even Harlem’s more radical
workers were drifting away from radical political movements and voting with the
American Labor Party and Democratic Party. Indeed, in the two assembly districts that
constituted Harlem, the 19th and the 21st, Roosevelt garnered one hundred times as many
votes for President as the Socialist candidate Norman Thomas and the Communist
candidate Earl Browder did. These results were almost identical to those in the
gubernatorial race, with the Socialist and Communist candidates each garnering a few
hundred votes, while between the ALP and Democratic tickets, Roosevelt garnered 20-
25,000 votes. 52 Yet, despite such political developments, the AFL’s resistance to
seriously confronting racial discrimination undermined a significant opportunity it had to
capitalize on the political climate and solicit African American support in the late 1930s.
This was especially damaging, as a new umbrella labor organization arose as the AFL’s
more progressive, and more racially egalitarian, counterpart.


52 Harlem’s residents were also streaming out of the Republican Party, as the Republican candidates for
President and Governor garnered only 20-25% as many votes as Roosevelt in both the 19th and 21st
assembly districts. “Upper Manhattan’s Vote by Assembly Districts,” The New York Age, November 4,
1936.
Cementing the Progressive Agenda: The ILGWU Joins the CIO

At the 1935 American Federation of Labor convention, six members of the executive committee who represented the organization’s largest industrial unions, including David Dubinsky, submitted a minority report asking the AFL to issue unrestricted charters to industrial unions and to begin an aggressive organization campaign in the mass production industries. After the report was voted down by a wide margin, John Lewis of the United Auto Workers gathered a number of industrial unionists including Dubinsky and Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers to discuss setting up a committee of their own. On November 9, 1935, eight union presidents from industrial AFL unions came together in Washington, D.C. and agreed to form the Committee for Industrial Organization, which became the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). John Lewis was chosen as chairman and John Brophy of the United Mine Workers was chosen to be director. The purposes of this new organization were:

…encouragement and promotion of organization of the unorganized workers in mass production and other industries upon an industrial basis…to foster recognition and acceptance of collective bargaining in such industries; to counsel and advise unorganized and newly organized groups of workers; to bring them under the banner and in affiliation with the American Federation of Labor.\(^\text{53}\)

Thus, the CIO not only claimed that its goals were similar to those of the AFL, but that it expressly sought to augment the membership of the AFL. However, AFL officials and members immediately saw the CIO as a threat.

\(^{53}\) Minutes of Meeting of Committee for Industrial Organizations, November 9, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 15, Folder 4B; Memorandum on the Basis for Peace Negotiations Between the A.F.L. and the C.I.O., ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 5, Folder 8; Parmet, The Master of Seventh Avenue, 122-23.
Many felt that the CIO was lead by leftist intellectuals who opposed the traditions of the AFL. Just the focus on industrial unionism was enough to make some suspicious, but the CIO also stressed the importance of using politics to advance the labor movement, and thus supported the establishment of a national independent labor party. This was seen as proof that the CIO was established to repudiate the apolitical AFL. However, this assumption was incorrect not only because the CIO was founded to accomplish specific goals, not just to repudiate the AFL, but also because the AFL actually did engage in politics. In fact, at the convention of the New York State Federation of Labor in August 1935, before almost unanimously rejecting a proposal to support the formation of a labor party, the convention endorsed President Roosevelt and his policies. A copy of the resolution expressing the Federation’s “lasting appreciation” was ordered to be sent to the White House. As if to solidify the AFL’s political affiliations, the convention also adopted resolutions expressing appreciation for the labor policies of Democratic Governor Herbert Lehman and for Democratic Senator Robert Wagner’s support of labor legislation in Congress. *The New York Times* described these enthusiastic endorsements as presaging an endorsement of President Roosevelt by the national AFL in 1936, even though the election was well over a year away.

Beyond just backing particular politicians, the New York Federation took a stand on numerous political issues, often taking positions similar to those held by the progressives who were about to establish the CIO. For instance, the convention endorsed the AFL’s stand against fascism, which manifested into an economic boycott of Nazi Germany, and like radical groups such as the ILD had done early in the year, it also condemned the growth of militarism in America. However, the greatest controversy at the
convention revolved around the resolution supporting an independent labor party. Charles Zimmerman and Murray Gross of Local 22 led the fight for the resolution. First, Gross tried to speak in favor of the resolution, but was repeatedly shouted down. One of the central opponents of a labor party, Joseph P. Ryan, President of the New York Central Trades and Labor Council labeled advocates of such a party communists. Clearly, some in the AFL truly felt that a labor party represented a radical attack on its central tenets and its political orientation.\textsuperscript{54}

ILGWU Local 22 perceived the behavior of the AFL as dictatorial. The unwillingness to support a labor party or to get behind industrial unionism demonstrated to many that by the time the CIO was founded, the AFL was intent upon blocking all of the new organization’s efforts. Indeed, the CIO wrote in a report that, “The leadership of the A.F. of L. was determined to stop at nothing in its crusade to crush the C.I.O., not even at sacrificing the unity of the labor movement.” While this may have been somewhat of an exaggeration, by the end of 1935, AFL President William Green was already in contact with CIO officials expressing concerns over dual unionism. Despite the claims of the CIO, he protested that the establishment of such an organization was inappropriate.\textsuperscript{55}

To answer Green’s claims, CIO Secretary Charles P. Howard wrote him that the stated purpose of the Congress was to organize workers so that they could affiliate with


\textsuperscript{55} Memorandum on the Basis for Peace Negotiations Between the A.F.L. and the C.I.O., and The Declaration of the Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U. to the 23rd Biennial Convention of the I.L.G.W.U.; Minutes of Meeting of Committee for Industrial Organization, November 9, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 15, Folder 4B.
the AFL. According to Howard that “does not include the possibility of dual organization or constitute a menace to the success and welfare of the American Federation of Labor.” Later in his letter to Green, Howard adamantly asserted that the CIO constituted no threat:

It is not the intent, aim or purpose of the Committee for Industrial Organization to ‘raid’ the membership of any established National or International Union.

It is not the intent, aim or purpose to infringe upon the rightful jurisdiction of any chartered National or International Union.

It is not the intent, aim or purpose to attempt to influence any National or International Union to change its form of organization from craft to industrial.  

Finally, in an acknowledgment of suspicions that the establishment of the CIO was linked to radicalism, Howard asked for the AFL’s cooperation, lest workers be organized outside the Federation under groups guided by radical political ideologies. Yet, this would not allay Green’s fears and in 1936, tensions between the CIO and AFL would come to a head, leaving the ILGWU with critical decisions with regard to its future.

However, perhaps the most critical factor in encouraging unity amongst progressive unions was the split of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) from the American Federation of Labor. The CIO had immediately garnered the support of numerous industrial unions, including the ILGWU, and of numerous constituencies within the labor movement, such as African Americans. Yet, it had also immediately incurred the enmity of the AFL leadership. Tensions increased throughout late 1935 and early 1936 and manifested in direct threats once the AFL established its Committee of the Executive Council in May 1936 to address the situation. The Committee reasserted the

56 Charles P. Howard to William Green, 2 December 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 15, Folder 4B.
authority of the AFL and its policies, reminding CIO members that all actions taken at
AFL conventions were, without exception, binding.\(^{57}\)

It then insisted that, even though the CIO remained within the AFL, it constituted
a dual union and encouraged members to disobey AFL policy:

> The creation of a rival organization within the American Federation of Labor constitutes a menace to its success as well as to the establishment of unity and solidarity within its ranks. No organization commanding respect or worthy of existence can tolerate a dual movement within its field of jurisdiction.

> Organizations of such a kind and character can only be interpreted as an attempt to establish minority rule and to impose the will of a minority upon the officers and members of the American Federation of Labor, contrary to decisions arrived at in conventions by majority vote.\(^{58}\)

Thus, the Committee of the Executive Council insisted that the CIO immediately dissolve and demonstrate its commitment to unity by accepting the AFL’s supreme authority. The ILGWU was the first union to openly rebut the AFL’s arguments and reject its demands.

At the time, the International was conducting its biennial convention in Tampa, Florida. David Dubinsky felt this was the perfect forum in which he and his union could respond to the AFL’s Committee. Firstly, the union adopted a resolution calling the Committee’s accusations of dual unionism unfounded and laying out the ILGWU’s official response that it had always opposed any activities involving dual unionism. It claimed loyalty to the AFL and obedience to its policies, but said that all unions should have the right to advocate individually or collectively for changing organizing methods. Finally, the resolution asserted that by accusing the CIO without having reviewed the

\(^{57}\) Ibid.; Committee of the Executive Council, American Federation of Labor to David Dubinsky, 20 May 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 15, Folder 3B; “Hope for Negroes in Industrial Unions,” *Workers’ Councils Bulletin* No. 7, 2.

\(^{58}\) Committee of the Executive Council, American Federation of Labor to David Dubinsky, 20 May 1936.
concerns over dual unionism at proper hearings, the AFL was overstepping its authority and violating its own procedures. As a result, the General Executive Board of the ILGWU rejected the demand to either dissolve the CIO or withdraw from it. However, the resolution did conclude by saying that if it was ever proved that the CIO engaged in dual unionism, the ILGWU would help to correct its policies or withdraw from it.  

Apparently, after the ILGWU publicly rejected the Federation’s demands, its Executive Council sent an ultimatum to the CIO giving its member unions two weeks to decide whether or not to dissolve the organization. John Frey, President of the Metal Trades Department of the AFL submitted charges to the Executive Council against the CIO accusing it of being a “dual organization” functioning within the AFL as a rival authority making decisions that conflicted with its parent union. He further accused all CIO unions of fostering insurrection within the AFL. This ramped up talk of expulsion significantly, and again, the ILGWU was one of the first unions to react. Vice President Julius Hochman said that the threat of the CIO’s expulsion made it all the more critical that every trade unionist throw his or her support behind the CIO and industrial unionism.  

The CIO stood strong, as its Chairman John L. Lewis declined personally and on behalf of his organization to attend a meeting of the AFL Executive Council. AFL President William Green invited each CIO union to the council meeting to be held on August 3 to defend themselves and hear the penalties that the council was authorized to

59 Ibid.; David Dubinsky to George W. Harrison, Vice-President, A.F.L., May 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 8.

60 John P. Frey, President, Metal Trades Department, American Federation of Labor, to the Members of the Executive Council, American Federation of Labor, 15 July 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 15, Folder 3A; Julius Hochman to Jack Altman, Executive Secretary, Socialist Party, Local New York, 20 July 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 19, Folder 2A.
impose against them if they were found to be guilty of participating in a dual union.

When Lewis declined and none of the unions showed up to the meeting, Green reiterated Frey’s accusations, adding that the CIO was specifically in violation of the majority report at the previous year’s Atlantic City AFL convention and the vote of the 1934 San Francisco convention, both of which supported maintaining the craft union approach to organizing mass industries over implementing industrial unionism. He then laid out a resolution that said:

…the Executive Council orders and directs that each union affiliated with the so-called Committee for Industrial Organization withdraw from and sever relations with said Committee for Industrial Organization and so announce said withdrawal as its choice between the American Federation of Labor and the said Committee for Industrial Organization on or before September 5th, 1936.61

Any union that obeyed the resolution was to be “forgiven,” but any union that didn’t withdraw from the CIO was to be suspended from the AFL and lose all membership benefits. Thus, the ILGWU had to make a dramatic choice.

Just three days after this ultimatum was laid down, on August 8, 1936, David Dubinsky notified all locals and joint boards of the ILGWU around the country of the terms laid down by the AFL. The letter he sent explained that the Executive Council of the AFL had not made such a threat of expulsion sooner because it had neither the right nor the precedent to do so; only a convention vote could lead to the termination of a union’s affiliation. That was until the Executive Council passed a rule that May making it legal for them to suspend unions and disenfranchise them from representation at the next convention. Dubinsky explained that in light of the AFL’s ultimatum, he had just made a

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61 William Green to David Dubinsky, 6 August 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 8.
last-minute appeal to the Executive Council to defer action related to potential
suspensions of CIO unions for three months, until the next convention that November.
However, by a 13 to 1 vote, the one minority vote being Dubinsky’s, the Executive
Council decided to go ahead with suspensions for any union that did not withdraw from
the CIO by September 5th. 62

The matter was also discussed at the end of August at the meeting of the ILGWU
General Executive Board, which decided to issue a direct reply to AFL President Green.
It said, in part:

We further declare that our affiliation with the Committee for Industrial
Organization is a prerogative and a right which our position as an
autonomous and self-governing International Union in the American
Federation of Labor fully warrants…

   We recognize, nevertheless, that the punitive action of the Council
in this instance and its refusal to submit the controversy between itself and
the twelve International Unions affiliated with the Committee for
Industrial Organization to the next convention of the American Federation
of Labor, as proposed by our President, Brother David Dubinsky, at the
meeting of the Executive Council on August 5th, are a grave violation of
our rights, and we therefore cannot obey this decision even under threat of
suspension. 63

The Board would only comply with the AFL’s demands if it waited for a convention to
confer the power to expel unions upon them. Thus, it officially requested that the matter
of suspensions be deferred to the next convention, where all unions could have a say.
Once again, such requests were ignored, and on September 2nd, Green sent the ILGWU a
letter saying that he took the union’s actions as a sign that they had officially decided to

62 Ibid.; David Dubinsky to All Local Unions and Joint Boards of the International Ladies’ Garment
Workers’ Union, 8 August 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1,
Folder 8.

63 David Dubinsky to William Green, 28 August 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014. Kheel Center, Cornell
University, Box 1, Folder 8.
withdraw from the AFL. In other words, Green made it sound as if the International had not merely decided to risk suspension, but had actively sought it out. 64

Dubinsky vehemently denied Green’s assertion: “It would, therefore, have been more courageous and more correct to state that the Executive Council is suspending our Union and not that we have decided to withdraw.” Green’s September 2nd letter had also stated that the ILGWU had to comply with the decision of the AFL’s 1935 convention against industrial unionism, meaning it had to withdraw from the CIO before it could ask that the question of suspending CIO unions be tabled until the 1936 AFL convention.

Dubinsky met this request by arguing semantics. The previous year’s convention had never made a decision regarding the CIO, as it had not technically been in existence at the time as an independent organization under the AFL umbrella. Then, he said that the convention had never actually given the Executive Council any mandate to suspend international unions at a time between conventions or for the reason that they belonged to the CIO. Finally, he launched an argument where semantics played no part. Quite simply, Dubinsky stated, the Executive Council couldn’t carry out suspensions because it had no such right to do so under the AFL constitution. 65

However, September 5th was upon them, and the AFL suspended the ILGWU and the nine other unions that remained in the CIO. This disenfranchised over a million

64 Ibid.; David Dubinsky to William Green, 4 September 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 8.

65 Dubinsky also sought a last-minute compromise to stave off suspensions. If the AFL would postpone the matter until the AFL convention, the ILGWU would accept whatever decision the AFL made on their potential suspension, even if that acceptance was only approved by the slimmest possible majority. Normally, to accept new policies, the ILGWU needed the approval of two-thirds of its membership. However, this proposal had no impact, as the AFL carried out the suspensions as scheduled. “Statement by Mr. David Dubinsky, President, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union,” and David Dubinsky to William Green, 4 September 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 8.
members of the AFL, as their suspension also meant that they were barred from the upcoming convention, and thus from having any say on the very issue that had resulted in their exclusion. Indeed, when the convention was held that November, the suspensions were confirmed, as was the right of the Executive Council to suspend any union and bar it from conventions. The scope of the powers and functions of both city and state labor organizations and federal unions were drastically limited, as well. Many, including the ILGWU, felt that this was part of a desperate effort by the AFL to keep any disobedient unions and rebellious tendencies in check.\footnote{The Declaration of the Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U. to the 23rd Biennial Convention of the I.L.G.W.U., May 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 5, Folder 8.} Now, though, with the CIO officially separated from the AFL, it would become tougher than ever for the Federation to compete with the fledgling progressive labor organization of which such prominent unions as the ILGWU were a part.

The split between the AFL and CIO reverberated far beyond the labor movement. For instance, there were notable political implications, as the CIO became a vocal supporter both of President Roosevelt and of forming a labor party. In fact, this support was evident before the official expulsion of CIO unions from the AFL. In mid-July, the Non-Partisan Labor Committee met in New York City. Many unions, including all of those affiliated with the CIO, attended. They all decided to work toward a national labor party, to promulgate a platform, and to immediately organize a labor party in New York State and nominate party candidates for various offices. The partnership with the Non-Partisan League was a sign of the CIO’s backing of Roosevelt, as it sought to combat Republican political forces that might seek to undermine nascent industrial unionism. As the economy showed signs of improvement during 1936, there was abundant optimism in
industrial unions that Roosevelt would be re-elected and his popularity would grow even further with economic recovery. As this would be a boon to the labor movement, it was seen as ushering in a period where the CIO could freely organize in the mass production industries. Thus, any labor party supported by the CIO would be strengthened in turn, in time to nominate a serious contender for the presidency in 1940, after what was anticipated to be Roosevelt’s final term in office.67

It was no surprise, then, that the CIO greeted Roosevelt’s reelection in November with enthusiasm, saying it was “conscious of the improved position and augmented power of labor in industry” with the election’s outcome. John Lewis, the CIO President, was quoted as saying:

Labor has reelected Roosevelt. Unorganized labor has followed the leadership of organized labor…The United Mine Workers of America blazed the trail for the workers to follow in its ringing endorsement of President Roosevelt in February. Labor’s Non-Partisan League and the Committee for Industrial Organization have implemented the action of the mine workers. Inspirational leadership has thus been given the workers and they have responded by their overwhelming support of the President.68

Indeed, this represented another split between the CIO and the AFL, one that was political in nature. Just after these affirmations by the CIO and its leader, when the AFL held its convention, the Federation reiterated its commitment to a non-partisan labor policy that rejected the establishment of a new labor party.

It was at that convention in Tampa that the breach between the AFL and CIO was cemented. Many resolutions were introduced demanding that the suspensions of CIO

67 Julius Hochman to Jack Altman, Executive Secretary, Socialist Party, Local New York, 20 July 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 19, Folder 2A; “1940 Is Just Around the Corner,” *The Nation*, June 1936, 729-730.

68 *United Mine Workers’ Journal*, November 4, 1936, and “Statement by the Committee for Industrial Organization,” ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 5, Folder 8.
unions be lifted and that the unions be reinstated. Those resolutions generally asked for the matter to be put to the convention for a vote, so that if the suspensions were to be implemented, they would be implemented through AFL procedure. Charles Zimmerman of ILGWU Local 22 had submitted five such resolutions. All of these resolutions were rejected, while James Frey, who had led the suspension campaign, introduced a resolution demanding that the expulsions be maintained.

Not only were they maintained, but further measures were also taken to weaken more radical locals that might stir up further opposition. These locals were known to introduce the majority of convention resolutions, so in order to control them, the AFL started with resolution procedures. The Executive Council voted to prevent local unions from bringing resolutions to AFL conventions. Instead, they had to submit resolutions to the Executive Council for approval 30 days before any convention. If the Council disapproved, the resolution would never get heard at the convention. As for state federations, a number of them had also adopted resolutions in favor of a labor party, against the suspensions, and in favor of industrial unionism. This was not unexpected as state federations were generally progressive despite the existence of some more conservative federations. Thus, the Executive Council recommended that state federations be stripped of their right to adopt policies contrary to those of the Council. This recommendation was adopted, so that state federations, like local unions, in effect lost their political autonomy. Thus, not only was the CIO expelled, but also many of its supporters still in the AFL were handicapped.

Federation policies also buttressed opposition to a labor party. In the ILGWU, members were firmly behind the American Labor Party and the ILGWU’s representatives
made this support known. Yet, the AFL continued its conservative political approach, rejecting all resolutions submitted in favor of declaring support for a labor party. As the push for a national labor party began with the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota, the Minnesota state federation was then barred from supporting the ALP because the AFL convention had rejected the resolution in support of a labor party. As a result, no state federation was allowed to go on record for such a political party, and in fact, according to the new rules approved at the convention, none could go on record in support of industrial unionism either. This was particularly notable as, in the wake of the 1936 election, the American Labor Party was clearly trying to build steam. State federations and local unions were not only forbidden from supporting more isolated state and local efforts, but also were restricted from lending any support to the increasingly powerful national ALP. Therefore, those who supported labor-based political action were increasingly compelled to support the CIO over the non-partisan AFL.

More troubling to unionists from Harlem than the continued political conservatism of the AFL, though, was, the presence of those opposed to organizing black workers in the Federation’s leadership. A. Philip Randolph spoke on this issue at the 1936 convention, but John Frey, the same union head who had led the campaign to suspend CIO unions from the AFL, argued that not only did no racial discrimination exist in unions, but also that African Americans had more employment opportunities than white men. The progressivism of CIO unions on racial issues drew African Americans

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69 Charles Zimmerman (speech, November 1936), ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 7.

into those unions, and in the coming years, the CIO would continue to lead the way in recruiting and advocating for black workers. As the ILGWU was one of the most prominent unions in the CIO, increasingly diverse, and led by officials who were largely loyal to Franklin Delano Roosevelt and supporters of the New Deal, it would continue to attract African American members throughout the 1930s and gain greater political influence. The ILGWU, like so many other unions, was joining the New Deal coalition, and by taking a relatively progressive stance on racial issues and organizing black workers, it brought thousands of African Americans with it. A broad educational program would help incorporate these African Americans into union life and give them the opportunity to shape union culture, as well.
The weaving of culture into the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union activities wove Frank Crosswaith’s Negro Labor Committee and the union together. As Local 22 was the most active element of the ILGWU in Harlem and the most diverse ILGWU local, it was the locus for planning and launching many of the cultural activities Harlem’s workers attended. Crosswaith had already been working closely with Local 22 in Harlem since its tremendous growth during the Uprising of the 30,000. Furthermore, the fact that both he and Local 22’s General Secretary Charles Zimmerman were leading New York socialists meant that they shared a similar view on the importance of educational and cultural activities in attracting union membership and creating a sense of interracial harmony and solidarity.

The ILGWU’s increasing attention to educational programming also demonstrated the belief in labor’s progress under the New Deal. Indeed, as labor laws passed both locally and federally led to shorter hours and some improvement in working conditions, and empowered unions as never before, the urgency of bread and butter concerns waned somewhat. As the increasing focus on broad political concerns and on social activities demonstrated, leisure became a strange new factor in union life. ILGWU Educational Department Secretary Fannia Cohn and other union officials insisted that workers’ free time be spent on more union activity. Cleverly, though, union members were still meant to spend their time on leisurely pursuits. Hence, the ILGWU began to
publicize social gatherings, trips to Unity House, sporting events, and even educational courses as leisure activities. Such activities brought union members of different races together more frequently and effectively than strikes did. Ultimately, cultural, social, and educational opportunities encouraged the growth and growing diversity of the ILGWU in the mid to late 1930s, helping the union to succeed where other efforts at labor organization failed.

**Local 22: A Model for the ILGWU**

In late 1934, Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman asked David Dubinsky to be the principal speaker at the Dressmakers International Ball to be held by the local’s Harlem section on January 20, 1935 at the Rockland Palace, and asked for the ILGWU President to send along a personal greeting to the local that spoke particularly to its African American members. On January 2nd, Dubinsky sent his greeting to Zimmerman, and it was published in the event program.¹ In addition to recounting the diversity and tolerance of the union and its members, he discussed the importance of such cultural events as the Dressmakers Ball in building unity:

> Such an affair as your Ball and Concert, besides offering merrymaking and amusement, has a genuine educational value to our membership. By bringing our workers together and by offering them esthetic and cultural entertainment, it enriches their lives, strengthens them individually and collectively, and makes them more union-conscious and better equipped to fight the battles of their organization and of their class.²

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¹ Charles Zimmerman to David Dubinsky, 14 December 1934, and Secretary to the President to Charles Zimmerman, 2 January 1935, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union records, #5780/002. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Box 84, Folder 7B.

Dubinsky was not the only union official to offer detailed greetings to the Harlem branch of Local 22 in the concert program. The list of union luminaries who sent greetings was so impressive as to make clear both the importance of Harlem’s African American workers to the union, as well as the efforts of the union to gain their loyalty.

For instance, ILGWU Vice President Julius Hochman wrote about the increasing importance of African Americans in Local 22 and praised the local’s cultural and educational programming, saying, “Union members, like men and women the world over, must learn to play as well as work together.” Indeed, Zimmerman wrote in his greetings that:

> We have thrown all our resources into the job of educating our new members, of providing them with the most varied opportunities of social and cultural expression under Union auspices. We have fully realized that the strength of our Union, its effectiveness as a fighting organization, depends primarily upon our understanding, our solidarity, our unity of purpose, our militancy in action!³

General Secretary of Local 89, the Italian Dressmakers’ local, Luigi Antonini even went so far as to declare the International Ball a sign that “racial discrimination has completely disappeared” within the ILGWU.

While this was certainly wishful thinking, it is important to note that over half of the members of arrangement committee that put the event together were African American. Its chair, Isabelle Harding, and secretary, Edith Ransom, were leading African American women in the local. The reception subcommittee was led by two African Americans, chair Eldica Riley and vice chair Lillian Wainwright. African American Lillian Gaskin chaired the program subcommittee, while African Americans Ethel Atwell and Clarissa Bostic chaired the floor subcommittee and box committee, respectively. In

³ Ibid.
fact, not unlike the sentiments expressed by Antonini, the welcome written by the arrangement committee to attendees in the ball’s program claimed that racial and color boundaries had been “completely obliterated in the life of our Union.” In light of Local 22’s early and consistent acceptance of American American members, the committee pledged its loyal and unwavering support.

It was not surprising that black women assumed leadership roles in planning the Dressmakers International Ball given their increasing representation in the Local 22 leadership. Two African American women, Ethel Atwell and Lillian Gaskin, were already sitting on the 1934-1935 Local 22 Executive Board. Gaskin was also named a board delegate to the Women’s Trade Union League. The only area of leadership in the local in which African Americans had yet to play a role was as business agents. Frank Crosswaith perhaps best captured the hopes and aspirations of black members of Local 22 in his greetings to the Dressmakers Ball:

We must unite and educate ourselves as working men and women, first to save ourselves from the economic and social degradation which have been our lot through the stretches of unnumbered centuries… The Negro Dressmakers in Local 22 have a great opportunity to make upon their fellow workers a rich and lasting impression. By their membership in the happy family of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union the Negro dressmakers are in a position to contribute much to the cause of Negro manhood and womanhood and to the brotherhood of all mankind.4

According to Crosswaith, encouraging union participation and labor education involved making a good impression on fellow unionists, being part of a larger movement that transcended race, and fulfilling not only union, but also socialist ideals. African Americans who joined Local 22 may not have shared all of these ideals, but the common

4 Ibid.
goal that Crosswaith and the arrangement committee of the Dressmakers Ball did share was the uplift of the African American people. By joining a union, a black worker could help the labor movement, and could certainly help himself or herself, but most importantly, he or she could help all black people achieve increasing economic mobility and a greater degree of socioeconomic equality.

A byproduct of training programs for union officers for the Harlem branch of Local 22 was that it could train a new generation of African American leaders. A group of Local 22 members applied to two trade union institutes and those who were accepted included African Americans Edith Ransom, Eldica Riley, and Clarissa Bostic. The first institute was held at Brookwood Labor College from May 13-17, 1935 and numerous photographs taken at the second institute, held from May 25-29 at Unity House, show Ransom, Riley, and Bostic among other union members. The American Federation of Labor’s organ *The Federationist* quoted an African American woman from New York City, perhaps one of Local 22’s members, who participated in one of the institutes talking about the meaning both of being included in the union, and of being trained to be one of its leaders:

“And now we lift our heads in pride, to know that we are part of this International, that we can hold out a welcome hand to those who wish to come under our banner, and strive to light or fight the way for those who can not see.”

The fact that Local 22 was split into various sections was key in its ability to implement such strategies. In the final educational committee meeting of the local in

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5 Photographs, Training for Trade Union Institute, May 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/049P, Box 1, Folder 8.

December 1934, plans had been made for the educational term that began in the first week of February 1935. Classes were held at section schools, which meant that the Harlem section and the Harlem Spanish section each had their own programs. While English was part of the latter’s curriculum, the former held classes on unionism, social science, and U.S. history. This approach to education within Local 22 catered to the different interests and needs of its numerous sections and the diverse constituencies represented by them.

Of course, cultural activities also remained an important factor in bringing these sections together and nurturing their members’ enthusiasm for participation. At the December 1934 educational committee meeting, plans were also made to expand recreational activities by adding a men’s basketball squad to the squad of women’s teams already functioning, and by adding a Saturday morning girls swimming group to the girls’ and boys’ swimming groups that already existed. Committee members also decided to form numerous new dancing groups in early 1935, and approved a plan to hold tours of points of interest every Saturday.7 As these plans were carried out, Local 22 remained focused on education as one of its central tasks. At a meeting of the local on January 318th, Murray Gross spoke to members on behalf of its Executive Committee, appealing to them not only to take advantage of the educational opportunities the local offered, but also to encourage co-workers belonging to other unions to participate in similar educational activities, so that they could “get a further understanding of their problems as workers.”8

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7 Minutes of the Educational Committee Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., December 22, 1934, and Report of the Educational Committee, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1935.

8 Minutes, Local 22 ILGWU, Meeting of January 31, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 6, Folder 10.
Indeed, Local 22 was the hub of educational activity in the union, as a class schedule from the spring of 1935 demonstrated. Of all the classes under the aegis of the Educational Department of the ILGWU run in New York City, Local 22 held approximately half of them. These included classes in basic subjects like English, Social Science, American History, and the Principles of Unionism, which were held on Mondays. On Tuesdays, cultural and recreational classes in modern and ballroom dancing, gym, and basketball were held. The classes on Wednesdays were more mixed, as drama and gym classes were held at the same time as classes on psychology, science, economics, the history of the Jewish labor movement, and Marxism. Classes on Thursdays through Saturdays were focused on cultural and recreational activities such as mandolin orchestra meetings, swimming classes, and choral sessions.

It should be noted that, often times, numerous sessions of the same classes were held for different groups. For instance, recreational classes were divided between men and women, and special choral and mandolin groups existed for Spanish members of Local 22 and for members from Harlem. The use of pamphlets also set the local apart. Of all locals across the country, Local 22 either ordered the highest or second highest amount of every pamphlet available. The local was the only organization inside the union besides the Los Angeles Joint Board to order Spanish pamphlets, and it ordered five times as many of those pamphlets as the L.A. Board. Overall, Local 22 ordered more pamphlets than any other local in the United States.\(^9\) Local 22’s enthusiasm for

\(^9\) Class and Group Schedule, Spring Session—1935, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 36, Folder 1B; “Pamphlets Ordered By Locals,” ILGWU records, #5780/002, Box 36, Folder 1C.
integrating cultural activities into educational programming represented the ILGWU Educational Department’s ideal.

Indeed, Local 22 was planning an unprecedented program of educational activities: “One of the most extensive programs of educational activity ever attempted by a trade union in this country is now being put into operation for the Fall season…” Plans included classes at a central school and at eight section schools. Courses were offered in English and American history, but also in labor problems and Marxism, taught by some of “the best known radical students of labor economic problems.” The local also reflected the ILGWU’s attempts to expand its educational and cultural activities. For instance, in the fall of 1935, the local expanded its mandolin orchestra was and supplemented it with three other mandolin and guitar groups. It also expanded its chorus, and left open the possibility of creating other choral groups, while reorganizing and strengthening the Brass Band and dramatic group. Two modern and two ballroom dance classes were offered, and dance groups in the Harlem and Spanish sections invited new members. Local 22 rented out the gymnasium and swimming pool at the Church of All Nations for every workday evening, so that it had a place where it could offer recreational classes. The five gym groups and seven swimming classes it offered garnered over 1,000 registrations. The local also planned a whole series of dances and social gatherings in each of its sections, as well as a large-scale central event, pointing to events by the Harlem and Spanish branches as models for such affairs.

Local 22 pointed not to the union’s agenda, but to member demand as the reason it sought to expand educational opportunities. All together, between all of the various schools under the local’s jurisdiction during the fall 1935 term, 40 classes were offered
and 20 cultural and recreational groups functioned. The local’s Educational Committee reported that the number of registrations for the term was 1,500, far surpassing registrations for previous terms. In fact, this only seemed to be part of a trend of what the local described as “constantly increasing” attendance, as classes had to be added in a few locations because of high demand.

Furthermore, to supplement normal classes, additional programming was offered in Harlem. Local 22 planned periodical lectures, social affairs, and dances, and ran a course on “The Negro in American History.” Edith Ransom was assigned to the opening of the Harlem section school on October 14th, and 130 students registered at the educational center. However, focus was placed not only on providing more channels for African Americans to participate in union activities, but also on bringing blacks and whites together through education. One area seen as an opportunity for creating long-term impact was in youth clubs.

When he came to the Harlem branch meeting on October 10th, however, it was not surprising that Frank Crosswaith spoke about war instead of about a topic of specific African American interest. At the meeting, which was chaired by Edith Ransom and reportedly very well attended, Crosswaith spoke on “The Workers Stake in War.” Crosswaith’s speech was one of four being given to meetings of different branches of Local 22 around the city to begin the fall term of classes. Norman Thomas’s speech to the Bronx meeting was “American Labor Faces the Future,” while a speech on “War in

\[1^{10}\]“Dressmakers Union Launches New Educational Program” press release, September 13, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/057, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 10; Minutes of Educational Committee of Local 22, October 9, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 8, Folder 5; ILGWU Educational Department report, November 23, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/049, Box 10, Folder 1; Minutes of the Executive Board of Dressmakers Union Local 22, ILGWU, January 1, 1935 to December 31, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Box 1, Folder 1935.
Ethiopia” was given at 22’s central headquarters and a speech on “Fascism and Unionism in Europe” was given at the meeting in Brownsville. This was a sign that Local 22 and educational programming in general was broadening its horizons not only in terms of its outreach to African Americans, but also in its increasing discussions of war and fascism. Indeed, the anti-fascist, anti-war stance that came to define the progressive movement within the ILGWU, and that would eventually bring numerous factions of the union together, permeated educational programming.

Even Crosswaith himself continued to switch back and forth between addressing issues of African American interest and those aimed at a more general audience. He addressed the Harlem meeting on November 8th with a speech called “The New Negro Shapes His Future,” while his address to the meeting on November 22nd was on “The Modern Meaning of Liberty.” Local 22 continued to provide educational opportunities directed toward black members as well as to the general membership. On October 27th, the local organized a theater party to see the play Stevedore, preceded by a lecture on “The Negro in American Life and Drama.” Several hundred members of the local had already seen the play, about an ugly encounter between black workers and armed thugs sent by their employers to intimidate them, with free tickets supplied by the Educational Department. The rest of the year, however, was devoted to group excursions to the Museum of Natural History, the International Children’s Art Exhibit, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and to the Grand International Ball. The Ball, thrown by

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11Minutes of Educational Committee of Local 22, October 23, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1935.
the Spanish Harlem section of the local on November 3\textsuperscript{rd}, was attended by over 1,500 people.\footnote{Minutes of the Executive Board of Dressmakers Union Local 22, ILGWU, Jan 1. 1935 to Dec. 31, 1935.}

At the end of 1935, Local 22 renewed its dedication to integrating all aspects of educational programming into the daily life of the union. It declared that this was “one of the weak spots” of its programming, a stunning claim considering the local’s groundbreaking work in labor education. Local 22 scheduled recreational activities to bring its members and members of other ILGWU locals together to build unity. On January 4, 1936 for instance, Local 22 and Local 89 played a basketball game against each other, but the interaction between athletes wasn’t the sole purpose of the activity. In fact, Local 22 often publicized sports events using dramatic language in order to attract members to attend games. Just as with a social dance or a parade, a sporting event provided the opportunity for large groups of union members to come together, this time in friendly competitive spirit. In this instance, they were to come to “witness the great battle.” The same tactic was used for the January 18\textsuperscript{th} game between the Local 22 and Local 91 girls’ basketball teams. Local 91 was touted as bragging that they had the best team, which Local 22 said it disputed.\footnote{Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., December 30, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1935.} Thus, the importance of union members attending to cheer for the teams was emphasized.

However, course offerings at the local’s social and educational centers still constituted the core of educational programming. The first term of classes held at the Harlem Labor Center began on January 7\textsuperscript{th}. On Tuesdays, advanced English and a course
on Labor Problems were offered, while on Thursdays, dancing, singing, and calisthenics were offered, as well as a course on the Negro in the American Labor Movement taught by Frank Crosswaith. Thus, the Harlem Labor Center provided an environment where African American workers would be educated not only according to their potential as union members, but according to their race. At the center, the fact that black workers had special interests was acknowledged and placing them into the history of the labor movement was meant to make them feel that unions recognized those interests, as well.\footnote{Other activities, such as trips to places of interest, like museums, were also scheduled for the new term. This included a visit to the New York Historical Society Museum on January 11th. Letter from Fannia M. Cohn, January 4, 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/166, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1.}

Furthermore, Local 22’s inclusion of social activities like dancing and singing in its course schedule demonstrated the awareness that it had of Harlem’s culture and the importance of that culture to Harlem’s workers. Such activities had been a noteworthy part of the local’s programming for the past few years, but with the opening of the Harlem Labor Center, they increased in size and frequency.

As enthusiasm for educational activities spread, children joined in by establishing the Junior 22 Club. Approximately 30 12-14-year-olds planned social and recreational activities such as a gym class and trips to places of historical interest. However, in seeking to be like their parents’ union, they also set up short business meetings before the start of each activity. Even younger children got involved, as the Debs Club was set up for 8-11-year-olds. While they wanted to begin with the same program as the Junior 22 Club, they also sought to put on a labor play. Their interest in drama and the arts was described as “overwhelming.” These clubs both grew to 45 and 40 members respectively by the middle of the year. A 22 Club was also formed for approximately 55 15-17-year-olds.
olds, while the Progressive Youth Club was formed by 40 young adults age 18 and up. Some of those in the latter group were children of Local 22 members, but some were young dressmakers themselves. Many events outside of the youth clubs were focused on children to encourage the passing down of union values through the generations. For instance, on February 29th, approximately 200 children of Local 22 members visited the News Building as part of regularly scheduled union excursions.15

Local 22’s ties with the Negro Labor Committee and its activities through the Harlem Labor Center reflected its commitment to perpetuating its diversity and also to campaigning to recruit more African American and Hispanic workers. This commitment was on full display at Local 22’s annual ball on March 6th. Benny Goodman, the famous Jewish jazz trumpeter, and Chick Webb, a well-known African American jazz drummer, performed together with their soloists and orchestras. This spirit of unity and celebration continued with a Masque Ball on March 28th where members were encouraged to dress up in grandiose costumes that paid tribute to different cultures. According to a flyer for the event, whoever was awarded best costume won a free trip to the Soviet Union, “where a workers’ republic is being built.” Smaller prizes included free trips to Unity House and scholarships to Brookwood Labor College. Such an event should not have been surprising from a local dubbed the “League of Nations.” By early 1936, Local 22

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15 Adult educational activities continued throughout February, as well. On February 1st, 70 Local 22 members went on a trip to the Museum of Natural History. Then, on February 15th, 25 members visited the Museum of Science in Industry. Report of Educational Department Submitted to General Executive Board, May 20, 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 35, Folder 3C; Letter to Will Herberg, 6 January 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 7, Folder 7.
had 30,000 members of 32 different nationalities including Syrians, Japanese, and Argentinians.\textsuperscript{16}

By the end of the first educational term of 1936, Local 22’s statistics were indeed impressive. Not only was the local’s diversity unprecedented, but its expansive educational programming stood as a model of successful labor education. At its Central School, the local ran 18 classes that were attended by over 750 workers. Then, it ran 42 classes, attended by over 800 workers, across its eight section schools. Underneath its umbrella, the local included three mandolin groups, including its mandolin orchestra, of over 160 members. It also included two choral groups of 105 members, two dramatic groups with over 50 members, and 14 athletic groups (including gym and swimming groups, and basketball, soccer, and baseball teams) of over 610 members. Finally, the local ran seven dance groups with over 50 members that were divided between modern, tap, stage, and social dancing. A library was also established at Local 22’s central headquarters full of newspapers and books mostly on the labor movement.\textsuperscript{17}

Of course, there were other issues that Local 22 was concerned with, and which were also reflected in its programming. Some of the fall classes offered at the local’s central school had a discernible political and philosophical bent, such as Philosophy of Marxism, Marxian Economics, Decline of American Capitalist Civilization, and a course called Europe Today, which covered the three competing theories of fascism, democracy,
and socialism. Clearly, the socialist leadership of the local shaped its course offerings. Also, the local’s support for industrial unionism was advocated in a class on unionism and the mass production industries, which covered the unique challenges to organizing the steel, auto, rubber, and textile industries. The new industrially based Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was equated with the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor (AFL), as well as with the radical International Workers of the World in the course “Critical Periods in American Trade Unionism.” However, Local 22’s educational committee also sought to continue augmenting the recreational and cultural components of their programming. It decided to organize all athletic activities under an Athletic Division headed by an Athletic Board made up of representatives of all of the various athletic groups. Along similar lines, the committee also proposed organizing all social and cultural activities, such as the musical and dance groups, under a Social and Cultural Division.18

Activities at the Harlem Labor Center for 1936 began on January 14th with tap and social dancing classes, calisthenics, and a discussion of “The Labor Movement Today – with Special Reference to the Negro Worker” between Frank Crosswaith and George Schuyler. Such activities were critical because they picked up on successful WPA-sponsored educational programs, but were more inclusive. The WPA sought to educate workers, but not in areas that might uplift workers on the basis of class or of racial or ethnic background. It offered no courses on labor history or labor practices, and

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18 Minutes of the Educational Committee, Local #22, I.L.G.W.U. Meeting of September 29, 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1936; “Social and Educational Centers, 1936-1937” postcard, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Box 35, Folder 3B; “Educate Your Children in the Spirit of Unionism” pamphlet, Educational Department, Dressmakers Union, Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 7, Folder 7.
none on African American history or the history of any ethnic group. By this point, the ILGWU, and Local 22 specifically, had made a significant effort to surpass the educational efforts of the WPA; to teach workers about their own interests and to instill them with pride in their heritage and in the unique role their racial or ethnic groups had to play in the labor movement.

Though the activities at the Harlem Labor Center were open to the public, they were aimed at ILGWU members who, along with their family members, could participate for free. Yet, these members were encouraged not only to attend, but also to bring along fellow workers, unionized or not, and to spread the word about programming at the HLC:

This is an excellent opportunity for you to develop a social and educational center in West Harlem that will be the pride of our members. You can do this by speaking about the center to your fellow workers wherever you see them – in the shop, in the street or at meetings.19

By early 1937, social programming had become more a source of pride for Harlem’s unionists than going out on strike. Across the neighborhood in East Harlem, the Hispanic branch of Local 22 did its part to reach out to other unionists through social activities. It held a dance on January 26th, but the event also included a dramatization of labor songs and a short basketball game between the Harlem branch of Local 89 and Local 62, Italian-dominated unions.

On March 6th, Local 22 held its masquerade ball, which was a huge event, as it was headlined by Benny Goodman and his orchestra. He was meant to share the bill with Chick Webb, who was in many ways the black version of Goodman, a renowned

19 Fannia M. Cohn to Fellow Worker, 13 January 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/166, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1; “Special Attention!” postcard, January 11, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/166, Box 1 and Frank R. Crosswaith Papers, 1917-1965, MG 100, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 3, Folder 14; Report on the 23rd Biennial Convention of the I.L.G.W.U. Held in Atlantic City, May 3 – May 15, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 6, Folder 5; Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library.
orchestra leader and jazz icon. Yet, Webb had a last-minute conflict that prevented him from appearing, so the somewhat lesser-known black bandleader Charlie Johnson played the event instead. Numerous African American members of Local 22 helped put this impressive event together. Edith Ransom was on the Arrangement Committee, Eldica Riley chaired the Ticket Committee, Clarissa Bostic was the secretary of the Costume Committee, and both Ethel Atwell and Eva Dicken were on the Reception Committee.

In addition to dancing to Goodman’s and Johnson’s orchestras, over 100 members of Local 22 put on a labor pageant depicting the life and struggles of the dressmakers. The performers were drawn from educational, cultural, social, and athletic groups. Finally, local members staged a grand costume parade. This included a contest for the best costume judged by a diverse panel including ILGWU President David Dubinsky, Vice Presidents Luigi Antonini and Julius Hochman, and African American author Lewis Corey. A group honoring the Congress of Industrial Organizations won first prize, a trip to the Soviet Union, while those who came in second and third won guest passes to the upcoming ILGWU convention. The fourth place finishers, who represented the Spanish Harlem branch of Local 22, and the fifth place finisher, who parodied Father Coughlin, won vacations to Unity House. Other members who participated in the costume contest dressed up as Jews, Mexicans, Native Americans, Chinese, and African Americans, while others dressed up based on themes, such as “ILGWU Workers Fight Fascism.”

Thus, the costumes helped Local 22 members celebrate the both the various cultures and the

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20 Joseph Gennaro, Theresa Kelly, Pauline Bruno, and Josephine Sassano to David Dubinsky, 21 January 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 35, Folder 3A; Masquerade Ball of Dressmakers’ Union, ILGWU program, March 6, 1937, and “Prizes Awarded at the Annual Affair of Dressmakers Union Local 22, ILGWU,” ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 1, Folder 3.
ideas their union represented. It wasn’t surprising that the local would celebrate its diversity as it had grown to a membership of 29,000, which represented at least 47 different ethnic, racial, or national groups.21

Local 22’s activities were so successful that they became the focus of much attention within the ILGWU. The union decided to keep the positive momentum from the masquerade ball going by throwing a dance gala at the Harlem Labor Center on April 2, 1937 for all workers who attended activities there, as well as their friends and families. Much like Local 22’s event, this dance featured a live orchestra and invited union members to participate in a costume pageant and a dramatization of labor songs. In many ways, in organizing this event, ILGWU Educational Department secretary Fannia Cohn sought to reenact Local 22’s ball so that she could put such activities on display. She asked attendees to show up on time so that a picture of the gala could be taken for display by the Educational Department at the ILGWU convention and in Justice.22 It is interesting to note that, in publicizing this event, the ILGWU took credit for organizing the types of activities that Local 22 had been running regularly since its massive expansion after 1933.

Local 22’s Rules and Regulations Committee decided to divide the Executive Board up into small committees, including an Education Committee consisting of seven members, and ILGWU President Dubinsky installed the local’s new administration at a

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21 Green, Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work, 288.

22 Fannia M. Cohn to Fellow Worker, 23 March 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/166, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1.
large bash on April 19\textsuperscript{th}.\textsuperscript{23} Julius Hochman was also present, representing the ILGWU Joint Board. The ILGWU Chorus, Mandolin Orchestra, and Russian Jewish actor and singer Victor Chenkin all put on concerts at the installation, where an opera, \textit{Cavalleria Rusticana}, was also performed. Yet, diversity was not just in the event program, but also in who was being installed into leadership positions. For the second year, African American member Ethel Atwell led all candidates for the Executive Board, this time with 12,260 votes, just a bit less than the number of votes Charles Zimmerman garnered for re-election as Secretary-Manager. Along with Atwell, African Americans Bertha Edgcombe and Eldica Riley were also elected to Local 22’s Executive Board.

At the installation of the new administration, David Dubinsky spoke of Local 22 as an example for the ILGWU, and as a microcosm of the union. The local reflected the union as a whole in its militancy, and by embracing its diversity, it also reflected both the ILGWU’s interest in international solidarity and promoting democracy, as well as the union’s opposition to fascism generally and to Nazism specifically. Local 22’s interest in independent political action and its activism toward that end mirrored that which was being pursued by the ILGWU leadership. The union was interested in education as a means of militarizing its members, organizing more members, and creating more experienced leaders. Dubinsky said that if the union was interested in course work, recreational activities, and social activities, those were represented in Local 22 more than in any other local. Most importantly, however, if the union held no distinctions between people of different races and creeds, didn’t engage in discrimination, and believed in equality, then Local 22 truly did set the tone for the whole union.

\textsuperscript{23} Report of Rules and Regulations Committee, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 25, Folder 12.
Perhaps what best demonstrated this final point with the installation of the new administration was that, for the first time in ILGWU history, an African American was elected to a paid union position when Edith Ransom was elected as Business Agent. Upon her election, Ransom was quoted as saying, “Only give the colored workers a fair chance and equal rights and they are sure to prove loyal and disciplined unionists.” Local 22 members clearly believed by the time the union elections of 1937 took place that black unionists were capable not only of being an asset to their local, but also of helping to lead it, as well. Other African American local members who won positions in the administration included three delegates who were elected to represent the local on the Negro Labor Committee, and African American local members Clarissa Bostic, Gloria Garcia, and Bertha Edgecombe, who were elected as delegates to the union convention.24

Meanwhile, Local 22 was continuing with its educational programming. On August 14, the local held its annual excursion. Several thousand members boarded a steamboat with friends and family for a trip up the Hudson River to Bear Mountain. An orchestra played on the boat, providing music for dancing, and once at their destination, a baseball game was held between Local 22 and Local 155. Other games were also arranged. Such trips were some of the most popular activities in the ILGWU, providing unparalleled opportunities for union members to interact and involve their families and friends in union activities. However, Local 22 continually sought to integrate more

24 Minutes of the Exec. Bd., Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., April 13, 1937, and David Dubinsky (speech, 19 April 1937), ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1937; 1937 Local 22 election results, and Dressmakers Union Local 22 press release, March 22, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 9, Folder 5; Report of Rules and Regulations Committee, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 25, Folder 12; Frank R. Crosswaith to Charles Zimmerman, 31 March 1937, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Reel 1, Box 1; “An Example To Organized American Labor,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 3, 1937.
substance into its educational programming. Social gatherings were a way to attract members’ participation, but the local’s officials also sought to advance the goals of the labor movement. Advocating for the American Labor Party was seen as one way to accomplish that. Thus, in its planning for the rest of the year, the local’s Organization Committee recommended that an educational meeting be held in which a speaker from the ALP would address union members.\(^\text{25}\)

To that end, Local 22’s Educational Committee proposed a new program. It began by declaring that, while educational activities had to be interesting and of benefit to the individual, they also had to benefit the union, as well. This led to a startling conclusion: Stage, modern, and tap dancing could be used for exhibitions at union meetings and other union events, so it could be of use to the union. However, social and ballroom dancing was meant for individual union members to learn and enjoy, and was of no larger use to the union. Thus, the committee declared, social and ballroom dancing no longer had a place in Local 22’s educational program. Considering that such dancing had been such a staple of the local’s activities to that point, the notion that it was of no benefit to the union as a whole was a shocking revelation. Yet, the idea that it should be stricken from educational programming altogether was even more surprising.

Instead, the Educational Committee redoubled its efforts to educate Local 22’s members on unionism. Staple classes on the fall schedule were “CIO—New Problems of American Labor,” “Labor in American History,” “Economic Organization and Unionism in the Dress Trade,” “Structure and Functioning of Our Union,” and elementary courses

\(^{25}\) Letter from J. Friedman, Secretary, Dressmakers Progressive Group, Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., 9 August 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 29, Folder 10; Minutes of the Organization Committee, September 16, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 28, Folder 9.
on economics and on labor unionism. Of course, some vestiges of the union’s political platform remained embedded in its educational programming, as another class on the fall schedule, “War Centers of the World,” reflected an anti-war stance. For the first time, Local 22’s Forum series was focused specifically on the CIO and was directed at increasing attendees’ understanding of the CIO’s role in the labor movement. However, its sports and cultural activities continued to expand, despite the fact that they were not in any way focused on strengthening union members’ understanding of the labor movement and its agenda. Calisthenics, volleyball, and baseball were scheduled three times a week, while swimming and basketball practice were scheduled twice a week. The athletic director also called for the organization and training of cheering squads for competitive games.

The Educational Committee wanted to better integrate athletic activities into other educational activities. It made plans for callisthenic and other athletic exhibitions to be presented at large union meetings. Then, the committee instructed the athletic director to form drill teams and train color guards and marching groups for mass union meetings and parades. The musical and cultural groups remained mostly unchanged, with the spring’s two mandolin classes being combined into one large class, and the addition of an elementary level class for new registrants. The chorus continued, as did the drama group, and stage, tap, and modern dance classes. In fact, so many Local 22 members were involved in the ILGWU Chorus, that by the end of 1937, talks were underway to set up a Local 22 Chorus.

The local agreed to set up bi-monthly educational membership meetings, which were meant to combine educational, social, and recreational activities. The idea behind
such meetings was to combine talks on important subjects with musical programs, athletic exhibitions, film showings, or all of the above. At the same time, the Educational Committee also recommended that monthly folders be issued on the principles of unionism to form a manual of sorts for all of the local’s members on the basics of unionism. The committee also proposed starting a Local 22 radio program, and producing a film about the local. Finally, it urged the local to start its own newspaper, arguing that a paper was probably the most powerful educational tool for promoting understanding of labor issues and strengthening union loyalty. However, so many trade union papers had failed to that point that the committee insisted that a paper could only be established if it was well-planned and effectively managed. Yet, the paper was viewed as so important that, despite these caveats, the committee recommended that one be created for Local 22 as soon as possible.26

Local 22’s Educational Director Lewis Corey explained that registrations from the Fall 1937 and Winter 1938 terms for the local’s classes were much higher than they had been for previous terms. Corey complained, though, that the local was unable to attract large numbers of new or young members into educational activities because it did not have the right plan in place. In fact, those young union members active in such programming were largely those who had already been attending classes or participating in cultural groups or sports teams for some time.27 Corey continued to push for young and new members to attend classes during the Spring 1938 term, establishing three

26 The Educational Program of Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1937.

elementary classes “marked by simplicity” and “human interest,” specifically aimed at attracting those groups.

However, the focus wasn’t merely on attracting new participants to educational programming, but it was also on galvanizing active students to engage in practical union activities. To that end, labor journalism, public speaking, and labor teachers’ classes were held to teach local members how to become leaders and spokespeople for the union. The idea that these classes were for active members who were the cream of the local’s crop was reinforced by the fact that all registrants had to pass an examination before they could be admitted. Standard cultural groups also ran throughout 1938, as Local 22 organized its own Mandolin Orchestra, Chorus, and Dramatic Group. The Chorus was particularly noteworthy, as its very structure was aimed at celebrating the local’s diversity. It was set up as a series of quartets each formed to sing labor songs and folk songs from various national and racial traditions including “Yiddish, Russian, Spanish, Negro, German and American.” These quartets would then be combined into the complete chorus to sing all of these songs. Regular classes in tap, modern, and stage dancing continued, while several hundred local members were recruited to participate in the Local 22 Pageant, which dramatized the history of the local, for its performance at the local’s 30th anniversary to be celebrated in 1939.28

Local 22’s educational activities through early 1938 demonstrated important advances in programming. Its educational committee began to organize classes by shop. For instance, women from the Wiesen shop were organized so that they would meet once

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28 Local 22 Union School Spring 1938 Catalogue, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 7, Folder 7; “Report of Educational Committee, Dressmakers Union, Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., February 15, 1938.”
a week for gym activities, and a color guard was formed from those who attended. Many of the shop’s women then enrolled in other classes and activities, fulfilling the educational committee’s goal of using shop classes to spur women to greater participation in the local’s programming. The local also began to hold Educational Shop Conferences for workers who had not yet engaged in any educational activities, demonstrating the aggressiveness of its approach to getting members involved in those activities by reaching them through their workplaces. The first of these conferences was held on February 27, 1938.

It included addresses by the ILGWU Educational Director Mark Starr, Chairman of the ILGWU Educational Committee Julius Hochman, President David Dubinsky, Manager of the ILGWU Cultural and Sports Division Louis Schaffer, and Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman. Hochman’s speech was followed by questions and discussion, as was the speech of Louis Hacker, a Columbia University professor. An hour was also set aside for general discussion of Local 22’s educational work. Finally, a performance of the wildly popular ILGWU musical *Pins and Needles* closed the night.

However, the conference was meant to be only the beginning of attendees’ participation in the local’s educational programming. In the report of Local 22’s Educational Committee from February 15th, Educational Director Corey laid out expectations for all conference attendees. They were expected to engage in one or more of the local’s educational or cultural activities and to be active in their shops recruiting for Educational Department activities.²⁹

Unfortunately, educational programming wasn’t always as successful as the union had hoped. This was particularly evident in Local 22, where the focus was so heavily placed on education. The Local’s Educational Committee reported to its Executive Board that although over 40 registrants had been secured for its chorus, that number was not as high as expected. In fact, the Committee had been aiming for 100 registrants, so it asked the Board for help in recruiting. The dramatic group seemed more promising. Over 50 attended, doing their own writing, costuming, and staging. Yet, perhaps one of the most promising developments in the local’s educational programming was the growth of opportunities for Spanish-speaking members. The Spanish Harlem branch of the local organized a course on the functioning of the union taught in Spanish. Many also enrolled in an English class formed especially for their branch. These courses were viewed as the foundation for further educational activities amongst Spanish-speaking Local members.  

Locals all over New York held celebrations toasting the success of their educational programs as the Spring 1938 session of classes concluded. The ILGWU singled out the West Harlem Educational Center at the Harlem Labor Center for its mix of folk dancing, games, and singing. At the center’s celebration, the Harlem Center’s boys’ basketball team challenged the girls’ team to a game, which ended in a tie, while

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Educational Committee to the Executive Board, March 22, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1938.

30 The Harlem branch also participated in more educational activities. For instance, a photograph of Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman with four members of the Harlem branch of Local 22, including Edith Ransom, was taken at an educational conference on April 3rd. It is unclear whether this conference took place at the branch’s location, the Harlem Labor Center, or at another location, as Zimmerman often accompanied Local 22 members to educational gatherings across America and in other countries, as well. Photograph, Charles Zimmerman and four black women including Edith Ransom, ILGWU records, #5780/14P, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 7; Educational Committee report, Dressmakers Union, Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., Summary of Report of the Educational Committee to the Executive Board, March 22, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Box 1, Folder 1938.
the Bensonhurst basketball team challenged and lost to the East New York team at the Bensonhurst center’s celebration.\footnote{“Our Centers Celebrate,” \textit{Justice}, April 21, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/049, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 2, Folder 11.}

At the end of May, Local 22’s Educational Department planned its summer activities. It wanted to build on its shop conferences as a source of women to enroll in gym classes. It also made tennis available through selling season tickets for ILGWU courts in Brooklyn and the Bronx. The Department planned hikes and rowboat picnics, while ramping up cultural activities. The Local 22 Drama Group was to meet twice a week throughout the summer in preparation for a presentation to open the fall season of classes that upcoming October. Both the Mandolin Orchestra and the elementary mandolin class were to meet throughout the summer, and a small mandolin group of seven members was formed to train for playing small parties. Finally, the new Local 22 Chorus was also scheduled to meet throughout the summer, planning to begin work on its small national groups to prepare them for performing. Plans were also set in motion for a “living newspaper” on workers’ education to be produced by the Local 22 Drama Group. A small group of students from the journalism class was formed to work throughout the summer gathering material on the labor movement and on workers’ education, so that they could write the script of the living newspaper. A labor camera class was also organized to take photographs for the newspaper, and if their work was good enough, the local planned to publish “Labor Camera Stuff,” a booklet featuring photographs of local life and activities.\footnote{Lewis Corey, “Summer Educational Activities,” Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local #22, ILGWU, May 31, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1938.}
Yet, Local 22 was not happy with the ILGWU Educational Department. At its Executive Board meeting at the end of November, there were complaints that the union’s Department had been discriminating against the local, and that it had not been doing enough to accomplish the goals Local 22 had established in launching the union’s push to institute educational programming. The belief was that, in fact, educational activities were only reaching a small number of union members. Furthermore, athletic and cultural activities were deemed a flop, not influencing or attracting members beyond those who directly participated in them. They declared that the attempt set out at the beginning of the year to attract new and young members to educational activities was a failure across the board. They said, however, that this was true in all locals, and that each local, not just the union’s central Educational Department, was to blame. Thus, 1938 ended with Local 22 calling for a new approach to educational activities in the local and across the ILGWU.33

In fact, Local 22 placed just as much focus on its dance and musical show at the end of May 1939. The Local 22 Players, nine of whom came from the disbanded road company of the ILGWU musical *Pins and Needles*, staged a one-hour musical. It consisted of 10 numbers, some of which were on union life and labor problems. All of the numbers except one were written by union members. Then, guests at the event were welcomed to participate in five hours of dancing to music provided by a swing band.

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33 “General Executive Board Meeting,” Minutes of Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, ILGWU, November 22, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1938.
Held under the auspices of the Local 22 Educational Department, the celebration was one of the local’s biggest events of the year.34

Over the first half of 1939, Local 22 was consumed with an organizing drive in Harlem, but its Educational Department remained active, mounting a successful dance in the late spring that was accompanied by a musical revue. Leaders of the ILGWU Educational Department Fannia Cohn and Mark Starr spoke to the local’s Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman, praising the revue highly. Meanwhile, the organizing drive found great success, as well. As a result, many Harlem shops were unionized, leading to an upsurge in membership. At a membership meeting in late May, over 100 workers, many of them new members, many of whom were Spanish-speaking, attended. Zimmerman thus suggested initiating regular branch meetings in Harlem, which had only been held intermittently to that point.35

Educational opportunities were particularly meaningful to African American unionists. For instance, Local 22 performed its musical Sew What at Unity House from August 18-20. The New York Amsterdam News published a photograph of Charles Zimmerman shaking hands with a row of his African American female local members, including Clarissa Bostic, Edith Ransom, Oretta Gaskins, Enid Perrieri, and Katy Webb, the last two of whom had performed in the musical. In the photograph, they formed a receiving line of sorts, and peeking out from behind Perrieri and Webb was Maida

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34 Lewis Corey to David Dubinsky, 17 May 1939, and “Big Musical Show & Dance” flyer, Educational Department, Local 22, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 84, Folder 7A.

35 “Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, ILGWU, June 6, 1939,” Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., Jan. 1 1939 to Dec. 31 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/036. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1939.
Springer, who would go on to become one of the union’s most prominent leaders. Mentions of African Americans’ association with the ILGWU and of the union’s friendly relations with the African American community in the black press only served to encourage more black garment workers to join the union.

Local 22’s Education Committee planned a diverse range of activities to insure that it satisfied its increasingly diverse membership, dividing its program into six categories: central classes at the union’s main offices, cultural activities at Labor Stage, weekly forums, monthly forums, the local’s library, and miscellaneous cultural services. Classes in labor economics, journalism, public speaking, American labor history, “The War and the Worker,” social psychology, and English were held four nights a week at the central offices. Labor Stage housed Local 22’s chorus, dramatics group, and mandolin orchestra. By the end of 1939, approximately 560 of the local’s members were participating in educational classes or cultural groups. The local’s library had just opened in the fall, but already over 400 members from 175 shops were using it. Books could be withdrawn for free for two weeks, and as of December 5th, 310 books were in circulation. Almost 1,000 books were available, 160 of which were in Yiddish.

Falling under the miscellaneous cultural services category was the provision of tennis and swimming passes. Members of Local 22 were also issued special cards allowing each of them and a guest to see Pins and Needles at reduced rates through an arrangement with Labor Stage. 325 of these cards had already been issued by the end of 1939. African Americans were becoming increasingly valuable in the ILGWU by 1939. This was certainly the case in Local 22. In late September, when the local’s Executive Board had to choose two delegates to send to the New York Women’s Trade Union League annual conference, it chose Fannie Shapiro and its African American organizer Edith Ransom. Minutes of Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., September 26, 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1939; “Harlem Dressmakers Frolic At Unity House,” New York Amsterdam News, September 1939.
the year, meaning 650 members and their friends had seen the musical through this special arrangement alone. A similar deal was struck with the Columbia Broadcasting System, which made a limited number of free tickets available to the Local 22 Educational Department for concerts at Town Hall and Carnegie Hall.\textsuperscript{37}

Local 22 was also involved in the ILGWU Student Fellowship’s end-of-year celebration. Local member Elsie Leitner was secretary of the Fellowship’s Social Committee. She and Margret Marchese of Local 89, Secretary of the ILGWU’s Harlem Social-Educational Center, both spoke at the event, emphasizing that the Fellowship was like a laboratory for union life, teaching members valuable skills for work and for effective union participation. In cooperation with the union’s Educational Department, the Student Fellowship also produced a movie, in which hundreds of Fellowship members acted. The movie premiered at this celebration after Leitner and Marchese’s speeches.\textsuperscript{38}

In 1940, Local 22 offered series of monthly and weekly forums. The weekly forums hosted authors, playwrights, and educators in hopes of promoting the local’s library housed in the Harlem Labor Center. The monthly forums were planned on a broader scale, as evidenced by the speaker at the April event, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins. The youth section of the local also celebrated its elections with a jamboree introducing a new dance, the “Progressive Hop,” which was deemed a bigger fad than other popular dances of 1930s New York such as the Lindy Hop and The Big Apple. The

\textsuperscript{37} “Report of Education Committee,” Minutes of Exec. Bd., Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., December 5, 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1939.

\textsuperscript{38} “For Mr. S. Farber,” Justice, December 7, 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/049. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 2, Folder 11.
pamphlet for the event called on local members to attend and “Swing it with social
significance.” Their new progressively minded dance would be directed at supporting
higher wages, fewer hours, better treatment from bosses, and curbing bosses’ power.39

The local continued to take pride in its diversity through 1940, as demonstrated by
the concert that accompanied its installation of a new administration on April 16th. The
local had once again elected Charles Zimmerman its Secretary-Manager and Edith
Ransom its business agent. It also elected Eldica Riley and Maida Springer to the
Executive Board, and chose Zimmerman and Clarissa Bostic as two of its delegates to the
ILGWU convention. Maida Springer’s quick rise in the ILGWU ranks was in evidence
by 1940. Not only was she elected to the Local 22 Executive Board and to represent the
local in the NLC, but she was sent on speaking engagements as an ambassador for the
union. For instance, the ILGWU Educational Department reported that Springer spoke at
a seminar run by the Department of Race Relations of the Federated Council of
Churches. Mark Starr, the Department’s Director complimented her on an excellent job.
In her oral history interview for The Black Women Oral History Project, Springer herself
maintained that she had numerous mentors and role models, both black and white,
amongst union officials. She specifically singled out leaders like Fannia Cohn for
creating and encouraging her to pursue educational opportunities, and a Local 22
business agent, most likely Edith Ransom, for advising her to take advantage of such
opportunities whenever they were presented to her.

39 “Report of Education Committee,” attached to Minutes of Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local
22, I.L.G.W.U., December 5, 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1,
Folder 1939; “Calling All Dressmakers to the Election Jamboree” pamphlet, Youth Section, Dressmakers
Progressive Group, March 9, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 9, Folder 8.
The incoming administration sought to strengthen ties to the black community, as Edith Ransom, Eldica Riley, and Minnie Rubinstein were chosen to represent the local in the Negro Labor Committee (NLC). Representatives from across the ILGWU attended the local’s installation, as did representatives of friendly labor organizations including the NLC. The program for the evening included addresses by Zimmerman, ILGWU President David Dubinsky, and Vice President Julius Hochman, and performances by the union’s chorus and symphony, famous actor Burgess Meredith, and actor Earl Jones, who sang a Negro spiritual accompanied by the union’s Negro Chorus.⁴⁰

Local 22’s diversity also influenced to its stances on numerous issues, which were reflected in resolutions it submitted to the 1940 ILGWU convention. The local called a general membership meeting on May 13th to discuss and vote on resolutions to submit to the convention. They decided to recommend over a dozen resolutions to their Executive Board for them to adopt and bring to the convention. These included resolutions expressing support for an anti-lynching bill and for a national labor party, and opposition to racial discrimination in trade unions. In fact, the local submitted all of those resolutions to the convention, as well as a resolution endorsing the work of the Negro Labor Committee. As its resolution against racial discrimination said that “the unity and equality of all workers, without regard to race, color, nationality, religion or opinion, is the very foundation of the trade union movement,” it was not surprising that Local 22 wanted to pay homage to one of its closest African American partner organizations. The

⁴⁰Minutes of Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local #22, ILGWU, Oct. 22, 1940, and minutes of Installation Meeting, April 16, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1940; Installation & Concert program, Dressmakers Union Local 22, April 16, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 9, Folder 7; Elizabeth Balanoff, “Maida Springer Kemp Interview,” in The Black Women Oral History Project, vol. 7, ed. Ruth Edmonds Hill (New Providence, NJ: K.G. Saur Verlag, 1991).
resolution further called upon all ILGWU locals and progressive trade unions in New York City to affiliate with the NLC.\textsuperscript{41}

In addition, Local 22 established a Resolutions Committee, which proposed submitting the resolutions mentioned above, as well as additional resolutions, to the national convention. It added resolutions in support of the Workers’ Education Bureau, the National Cultural Bureau, and labor unity, and in opposition to Nazism and fascism, and to anti-Semitism. The convention adopted all of these resolutions, demonstrating attention to issues of concern to African Americans and opposition to all forms of racial oppression, while reasserting the union’s dedication to cultural and educational programming. Local 22’s African American members sent their own message to the convention in the form of a telegram. Edith Ransom, the author of the message, claimed that in fighting for workers regardless of race, creed, or color, the ILGWU had become a guiding force for all labor organizations in America. The African American members of Local 22 thus offered full support and loyalty to the union.\textsuperscript{42}

Later in the year, when the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters solicited the local’s participation in a parade and banquet at the opening of their annual convention, Edith Ransom and Charles Zimmerman were placed in charge of appointing a committee to take part in the parade. Yet, despite partnerships with African American organizations

\textsuperscript{41} Minutes, Organization Committee, May 4, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 9; Resolutions, “For A National Labor Party,” “For the Wagner-Capper-Van Nuys Anti-Lynch Bill,” “Against Racial Discrimination in the Labor Movement,” and “Negro Labor Committee,” 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 6, Folder 15.

\textsuperscript{42} Minutes of Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., May 7, 1940, and minutes of Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., June 18, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1940; Telegram, Edith Ransom to David Dubinsky, 31 May 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 6, Folder 5.
and the presence of African Americans in leadership positions, many African American members of Local 22 struggled. For instance, Lily Mais, one of the local’s black members, lodged a complaint about discrimination as it pertained to the settlement of prices. When prices were not adjusted, she claimed that the union was practicing further discrimination, ignoring her complaint because of her race. Unsurprisingly, Charles Zimmerman responded that such an accusation couldn’t be true, as the union fought discrimination wherever it existed. However, it was clear that many ILGWU members who had to deal with the reality on the ground knew that discrimination existed and that the union didn’t always go out of its way to assist black members in fighting against it.

The complaints of members like Lily Mais seemed surprising, as Local 22 was a progressive leader within the ILGWU, which was considered a progressive leader within the labor movement. For instance, the local continued to advocate for the New Deal in its programming. In the fall educational schedule, the local scheduled a course on “Social and Labor Legislation,” which was meant to analyze New Deal policy. The instructor had been a member of the Minimum Wage Division of the New York Department of Labor, and was also holding a class on social security legislation. In addition to these pro-New Deal classes, Local 22 also held a course called “Labor’s Civil War,” which explored the CIO-AFL split from the ILGWU’s perspective.

The local also maintained its commitment to cultural programming. Earlier in the year, it had opened the Local 22 Art Workshop, and to celebrate its already thriving position, the local’s Educational Department arranged an exhibition of members’ artwork.

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43 Minutes of Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, ILGWU, August 27, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1940; Charles S. Zimmerman to Lily Mais, 2 October 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 24, Folder 9.
for November, with prominent artists serving as judges. The Department also pledged to continue arranging for local members to see concerts and Broadway plays for free, but perhaps most notably, it initiated a tap dancing class. The new class demonstrated the embrace of a popular dance that came out of the African American community. Combined with the establishment of the ILGWU Negro Chorus at the Harlem Labor Center early in the year, this new class demonstrated an increasing effort to go beyond previous demonstrations of appreciation for the cultural gifts African Americans brought to the union, and to actually incorporate their culture into the life of the union.

**Embracing Diversity: The ILGWU’s Educational Programming**

In the wake of the explosion in African American membership in the ILGWU during the Uprising of the 30,000, union President David Dubinsky beat the old drum about the colorblindness of the ILGWU, saying that the union didn’t see the race, religion, nationality, or color of its members, but only saw them as workers. Even more important to Dubinsky, though, was that once African American members believed in the racial equality practiced by the union, they became more loyal and involved:

> They are among the most intelligent, loyal and devoted members of our unions. To me there is something fascinating and gratifying about the conduct of the colored union garment workers, once they are convinced of the absence of prejudice on the part of their fellow workers and union officials.

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44 Minutes of Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., October 1, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1940; Flyer, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 22, Folder 1.

45 Frank R. Crosswaith, “No Place in Labor Movement For Race or Color Prejudice,” *New Leader* (Labor Section) XVIII, No. 1, January 5, 1935.
Some of the characteristics of black ILGWU members Dubinsky most enthusiastically praised were based upon culture and personality: “…their inseparable companions are their songs, their music, their mirth, their ready wit and laughter.”\textsuperscript{46} These thoughts reflected that many of the International’s most prominent activities were cultural in nature. Dances were planned as often as lectures and, in fact, dances and musical performances were often part of educational events and union meetings. As an ILGWU organizer, Frank Crosswaith picked up on this approach. In the bustling cultural milieu of Harlem, using song and dance to promote unionism and labor education was a natural move. Thus, over the course of 1935, Crosswaith’s Harlem Labor Committee would plan events based just as much around the African American culture of the day as around union activism or socialist ideology.

In the January 1935 issue of \textit{Workers’ Education Quarterly}, ILGWU Educational Department Secretary Fannia Cohn described the wide-ranging educational activities of the union. She first discussed the effectiveness of using labor dramas to stir the passions of workers and explained that many in the union were writing and staging their own one-act plays. She also pointed out that ILGWU dramatic groups were being formed in locals across the nation. In the area of music, Cohn hailed the formation of mandolin orchestras and the participation of hundreds of thousands of union members in various ILGWU local choruses. The choruses were meant not only to bring participants together, but also to entertain audiences at various union events, and even at member meetings. The popularity of music among ILGWU members was proven by the fact that over a million copies of union songs had been distributed to union members. The success of all of these

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
activities led to the establishment of special dramatic, music, and choral divisions in the union, with directors in charge of each.

Cohn went on to describe visits to points of interest during which lecturers would accompany participants to explain the importance of what they were seeing. Then, she explained the structure of “sociables,” often attended not only by union members, but also by their families. Each sociable was planned by members themselves and featured cultural activities, such as a performance by ILGWU players in a one-act play, a concert by the local’s mandolin orchestra, or a concert and sing-along led by the local’s chorus. They then ended with a dance, and during each event union members were given the chance to register to participate in one of the ILGWU’s cultural divisions. Beyond drama, music, and dancing, recreational activities were also critical to the success of the International’s Educational Department. The activities provided for ranged from exercise classes to swimming to sports such as baseball and soccer.

The ILGWU also used many different mediums to get the word out about its educational programming, as well as to attract new members and espouse union ideology. Cohn pointed to weekly broadcasts by the union over numerous radio stations, motion pictures by union members about the history of the International, and countless pamphlets on the union and the labor movement as effective tools that had been used to spread the union’s influence. Perhaps even more significant, though, was the incorporation of educational and social activities into the physical headquarters of the union and its locals. According to Cohn, by 1935 the Educational Department had initiated a trend to equip local headquarters with clubrooms in which various activities could be held. These rooms were often furnished with reading tables and libraries
containing books on economic, labor, and social issues, as well as current literature. Pianos and radios were often times in the rooms, making them even more ideal spaces for hosting social events featuring dancing and singing. The trend of creating defined spaces to encourage social and educational activities would be key in paving the way for the Harlem Labor Center, which was in many ways an enlarged clubroom.

Finally, Fannia Cohn explained that the General Executive Board had established a training center for organizers and union officers. Indeed, programs ran throughout 1935 to train shop chairmen and chairladies, local officers and representatives, and active union members who wished to qualify for service. The course plan for the program that ran from January to March of that year demonstrated the union’s awareness of the challenge its increasing diversity posed to organizational and educational efforts. In the central symposium of the course plan, which dealt with organizing issues, one of the main topics for discussion was the problems presented by company unions and by special groupings within the ILGWU. The plan outlined these special groupings as “sex, racial, religious, etc.,” demonstrating concerns that such divisions could become a source of disunity and pose a challenge to crafting an overall organizing strategy. However, this also showed that the union recognized that it would likely need to take different approaches to organizing different groups to be successful. Thus, training union officers

47 Fannia M. Cohn, “Meeting Our Problem,” *Workers’ Education Quarterly*, January 1935; Cohn also described this programming in a letter to David Dubinsky on May 27, 1935, in which she expressed her gratitude for union leaders’ and members’ acceptance of her approach to leading the Educational Department. Fannia Cohn to David Dubinsky, 27 May 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 36, Folder 1B.

48 “Training for Trade Union Service,” ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 36, Folder 1C.
was a critical element of labor education, and so was the inclusion of specialized strategies for recruiting people of various religious, ethnic, and racial backgrounds.

Indeed, as Fannia Cohn had described, the department sought to uplift the spirits of union members and bring them together through social get-togethers and exposure to cultural activities. Dramatic groups and performances were perhaps the most popular tools used to achieve this. The report of the Education Committee of the General Executive Board, contained a plan for a Workers’ Dramatic Festival to be held on April 20-21 under the jurisdiction of numerous drama groups including the ILGWU Players. The plan was to “demonstrate how effectively plays by workers for workers can be used to enrich the emotional tie-up of our members with their union.” The Festival was approved and was held on the proposed April dates at the New School for Social Research. The program included 16 plays and three mass recitations, most about union life and striking. 49

Yet, an even larger celebration of recreational and cultural programming was held a few months later. On June 9th, the Cultural Groups of the ILGWU held the first annual Music, Drama, Dance, and Sports Festival, in which Local 22 members were prominent participants. Numerous groups that performed at the event were comprised of members from various locals. The Mandolin Orchestra, ILGWU Chorus, and mass recital by ILGWU Dramatic Groups all included Local 22. The Local 22 ILGWU Dancers performed a piece called “Worker’s Dance” as a prologue to the mass recital, which was an English version of Yiddish labor poet Morris Rosenfeld’s “In the Factory.” To

49 Education Committee of the General Executive Board ILGWU report, March 2, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 36, Folder 1C; Labor Drama Festival flyer, ILGWU records, #5780/049, Box 4, Folder 4A.
represent recreational activities, the ILGWU Athletic Division paraded across the stage at
the Hippodrome, where the festival was held. Then, to demonstrate the union’s support
for this new and varied approach to educational programming, President Dubinsky
addressed the crowd. The event was such a success that a similar one was planned for the
following January.  

The enthusiasm for cultural activities continued throughout the summer. For
instance, at Unity House, the Educational Department of the ILGWU presented numerous
plays including another mass recitation of “In the Factory.” The Mandolin Orchestra and
the Chorus performed and received numerous accolades. On August 4, a Palestinian
Dinner exposed workers vacationing at the House to the food and culture of Palestine,
and the meal was followed by dancing and dramas by the ILGWU Players, then by more
dancing. However, as summer turned to fall, the ILGWU Educational Department pushed
its agenda even harder. ILGWU Educational Department Director Mark Starr held a
meeting of representatives from local educational departments on August 21st. The
conference agreed to organize a joint drive to promote their educational work in
September under the direction of a joint committee. They also agreed to establish more
local social-educational centers in various parts of the city with facilities for classes,
lectures, sports, and cultural activities. Finally, they sought to issue a bulletin for those
engaged in ILGWU educational work, offering further promotion of the union’s
educational agenda.

50 First Annual Music Drama Dance and Sports Festival program, June 9, 1935, ILGWU records,
#5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 15, Folder 13; Summary Report of the Activity of the
Education Department from June 1st to September, inclusive, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Box 36,
Folder 1A.
Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman reported on another conference held in December for representatives of all the classes and groups that ran during the fall. The main subject was strategizing as to how cultural, recreational, and educational activities could be integrated into the daily life of the union. Apparently, despite all of the union’s efforts to that point, members wanted to promote labor education and its many components even more, not as an independent element of unionism, but as one aspect of union membership to be woven together with organizing and other forms of activism.\textsuperscript{51}

The Educational Department in 1936 established the ILGWU Studios at 39\textsuperscript{th} Street and Sixth Avenue on January 11\textsuperscript{th} to house various dramatic, music, and dance groups. Then, as January came to a close, the ILGWU Chorus and Mandolin Orchestra put on a concert in which Local 22 members were prominent participants. In fact, approximately two-thirds of the chorus members were from Local 22, many of whom were African American. Also, more than ever, union concerts integrated the musical traditions of the black community into their programs. At the January concert, the male chorus sang a song called “Workers in the Shop” that was based on a Negro spiritual. The women’s chorus sang the spiritual “Go Down, Moses!,” which was followed by “Bread and Roses,” a song whose lyrics served as a testament to the power of cultural activities to turn diversity into a strength for the good of all workers:

\begin{verbatim}
Comrades, if United Labor
Leads on and we follow after
Bread and roses, songs and laughter
We shall win with liberty
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{51} Photos also showed that a diverse group of women, including at least one African American, attended the Brookwood summer session that year from August 12-23. ILGWU records, #5780/049P, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 6; \textit{The Unity News} 1, No. 31, August 4, 1935; Minutes of the Educational Committee of Local 22, Wednesday, Sept. 4, 1935, and minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local #22, ILGWU, Dec. 30, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Box 1, Folder 1935.
All the races, creeds, and colors
Fight with us in every manner
Come and let us sew the banner
Of the new Humanity.\textsuperscript{52}

While such songs demonstrated a utopian socialist vision where divisions between people would disappear, they also demonstrated the real world tactics that were employed in fighting toward that vision: cultural activities and all efforts aimed at bringing workers of diverse backgrounds together.

In fact, mid-1936 marked a high point in the educational activities of the ILGWU to that point. The union held almost 300 classes, and ran 55 music groups, 33 drama groups, 105 athletic groups, and 21 dancing groups from June 1935 to May 1936. During that period, the union estimated that over 15,000 students enrolled in these activities. In terms of cultural and recreational activities, the ILGWU Studios that had been dedicated in January hosted a drama festival on April 6-7, 1936, and the union’s basketball championship games ran throughout April, garnering hundreds of players and union members to cheer them on.\textsuperscript{53}

With the acceleration of educational activities in all ILGWU locals, especially 22, came the presence of these activities in the Harlem Labor Center. In announcing the new term of classes at the Harlem Labor Center, Fannia Cohn pointed out that ILGWU members had won a shorter work week because of their union. Thus, when Cohn solicited Harlem’s workers to take classes at the HLC, it was based in a plea that the union wanted to improve the working conditions of its members, as well as improve their

\textsuperscript{52} Concert program, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union Chorus and Mandolin Orchestra, January 25, 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 5, Folder 2C; “Education Marches On!” report.

\textsuperscript{53} “Education Marches On!” report.
lives overall by allowing them to “develop body and mind.” One benefit of the success of ILGWU educational programming was that it helped strengthen the union’s partnerships with other organizations. This was most notable in reference to the union’s relationship with the Negro Labor Committee and its resulting ability to attract African American members. It should be noted that of the approximately 110 students who attended courses at Local 22’s West Harlem Educational Center, the Harlem Labor Center, from the end of 1935 until the spring of 1936, only about half of them were members of Local 22. Whereas some locals were represented by one or a few members in these classes, almost 30 members of Local 60 attended, while over 50 members of Local 22 did. Thus, while 22 took the lead, the fervor for labor education spread to other locals, clearly having an impact on Harlem’s workers beyond just Local 22’s membership.

Frank Crosswaith himself created the strongest link between the union and the NLC. As both General Organizer for the ILGWU and NLC Chairman, he led events such as a mass meeting of cleaners, dyers, and pressers at the Harlem Labor Center on August 24th. Edith Ransom also embodied the link between the two organizations, as a member of the NLC and of Local 22. Ransom, Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman, and ILGWU organizer Rose Pesotta all attended a summer institute that June on studying production methods in Bristol, England.

Mark Starr, the ILGWU educational director, then asked Crosswaith to reserve Thursday nights beginning on October 15th at the Harlem Labor Center for ILGWU classes. Furthermore, he asked Crosswaith to arrange to co-teach one of those courses with journalist George Schuyler. Once these conditions were accepted, Starr then asked if

54 Letter from Fannia M. Cohn, 4 January 1936 and letter from Fannia M. Cohn, 25 February 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/166, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1.
he could run the course in the early evening slot, so that it could be followed by a dancing
and calisthenics class. Crosswaith accepted the schedule and ran 12 lectures with George
Schuyler under the title “Negro Labor: Africa and America.” These lectures covered
topics ranging from the history of African American worker to black intellectuals to
“Labor Education and the Race Problem.” Thus, the connection between Local 22 and
the NLC engendered labor education that catered to Harlem’s workers.

Harlem was abuzz in 1936 with labor activity, as the Harlem Labor Center
provided a staging ground for strikes and a base through which the ILGWU could take
root in the community. The International’s increasing influence could be seen as it
prepared for a general strike at the beginning of 1936. Thousands attended a mass
meeting on January 21st held jointly by the ILGWU and the United Hebrew Trades to
plan the strike that was to begin on February 1st. Unlike in 1933, the garment strike in
1936 was organized with African Americans in leadership positions. For instance, Local
22 members Ethel Atwell, Clarissa Bostic, Gussie Price, Edith Ransom, Eldica Riley,
Lillian Wainright, and Violet Williams were all on the Hall Committee. As committee
members, they met with union members from various shops they were assigned to,
checked strikers’ attendance on a daily basis, and organized daily picketing of their own

55 Attendance sheet, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, Educational Department, West Harlem
1935-36, ILGWU records, #5780/166, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1; “Monster Mass Meeting of
all Cleaners & Dyers, & Pressers” flyer, Frank R. Crosswaith Papers, 1917-1965, MG 100, Schomburg
Center, The New York Public Library, Box 3, Folder 22; Photograph, Studying production methods,
cooperative wholesale society, clothing factory, Bristol, England, June 17, 1936, ILGWU records,
#5780/014P, Box 1, Folder 7; Mark Starr to Frank R. Crosswaith, 31 August 1936 and 25 September 1936,
Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public
Library, Reel 29, Box 14; Educational Department flyer, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union,
12 Special Lectures by George S. Schuyler and Frank R. Crosswaith, Negro Labor Committee Record
shops. Thus, many African Americans, most of whom were female, ran the operations of the 1936 garment strike on the ground.\textsuperscript{56}

However, also unlike the “Uprising” of 1933-34, the 1936 strike did not turn out to be a drawn out, dramatic affair. Instead, it began as planned on February 1\textsuperscript{st}, and by the beginning of March a collective agreement had been reached in the dress industry. Also, the city’s government was openly active in negotiations from start to finish. The Joint Council of the Metropolitan District of the Dress and Waistmakers’ Union of the ILGWU, which consisted of Locals 10, 22, 60, and 89, passed a resolution on March 6\textsuperscript{th} to thank Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia for bringing union members and employers together after initial negotiations had broken off. The Council credited the mayor for making the dress manufacturers see both that union demands were fair and also that a general strike would create a disturbance in New York City while paralyzing the largest industry in New York State.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, not only were more African Americans involved in the labor movement by the time of the 1936 strike than there were during the 1933 strike, but the city government was more closely tied to the movement, as well. As a result, strikes in New York were increasingly successful, and blacks were even more encouraged that participation in unions could result in tangible benefits.

\textsuperscript{56}“Huge General Strike, Prepare For Action!” flyer, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Reel 29, Box 14; “Hall Committee: 1936 General Dress Strike,” ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 5, Folder 8; “Tentative Instructions and Information to Hall Chairmen and Assistants – Dressmakers General Strike – February 1936,” ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 28, Folder 5.

\textsuperscript{57}“Resolution of Thanks to Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia Passed at Meeting of Joint Council of Metropolitan District of Dress & Waistmakers’ Union, I.L.G.W.U., Held on March 6th, 1936, at Delano Hotel.” ILGWU records, #5780/014. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 32, Folder 7.
In 1937, recreational, educational, and cultural activities were more popular and more frequent than ever amongst Harlem’s garment workers. The ILGWU reached an all-time peak in membership of over 240,000, with 236 locals in 111 cities and towns across the country. Thus, the ILGWU continued to be a draw for increasingly active black workers.\textsuperscript{58}

Of course, the ILGWU’s union-wide activities continued to be popular. For instance, the Mandolin Orchestra held a concert on February 6\textsuperscript{th}. As usual, the concert honored many different cultures, in this case by the playing of Hebrew folk songs. The concert also included a choreographed pantomime that had sections where its main character succumbed to war hysteria, then was exposed to the horrors of the battlefield and came to speak out against the war. A central union tenet of the mid-late 1930s, opposition to going to war in Europe, was frequently incorporated into cultural activities. The union also held its normal slate of classes, such as social dancing, advanced English taught by black organizer Floria Pinkney, and an expanded version of Frank Crosswaith’s Harlem course on African Americans and the labor movement. In the union-wide version of this course, Crosswaith taught with A. Philip Randolph, and brought in guest speakers, as well.

By February, ILGWU drama groups met every evening to receive instruction in acting and to rehearse plays in production. The modern dance and tap dance groups practiced on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and the ILGWU chorus, now over 200 members strong, practiced for its March concert. In addition to the entire chorus performing, Jewish and Italian groups planned to sing folk songs from their cultural

\textsuperscript{58} Report on the 23\textsuperscript{rd} Biennial Convention of the I.L.G.W.U. Held in Atlantic City, May 3 – May 15, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 6, Folder 5.
traditions. As for recreational activities, basketball continued to be the most popular, but soccer took off with the formation of a league made up of seven unions including Local 22. The league played three games across New York City every Sunday. The Cultural and Recreational Division of the ILGWU also had plans to add tennis, handball, and outdoor swimming to the sports program.

The importance of sporting activities had been reinforced by Charles Zimmerman, who told the *Daily Worker* that labor organizations across the country had approached him to learn more about trade union athletics. He explained that, after the Uprising of the 30,000 in 1933 brought so many young people into the ILGWU, the demand for a sports program spiked. Thus, the union started its recreational program, which became the largest in the country. Yet, Zimmerman wanted to do more. He felt that the union needed to use its success to encourage other unions to initiate their own sporting activities. His hope was that such unions could join with the International to form an independent labor sports federation. A labor coalition would thus be solidified not through a political program, but through recreational programming.

Yet, the union also made a strong effort to integrate musical with educational activities, such as with 12 forums held from the beginning of the year to the end of March. However, although the forums combined lectures with a musical program, they weren’t well attended, at least in the opinion of the ILGWU Educational Department. The highest attendance at a forum was 422, which held solidly for a number of weeks.

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59 Third Annual Concert program, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union Mandolin Orchestra, February 6, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 35, Folder 2C; Mike Cantor, “ILGWU Leader All for Sports,” *Daily Worker*, January 4, 1937; Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library.
However, as the union elections neared, attendance dropped to around 100, and members appeared more interested in lectures run by their locals or by outside organizations. This could explain why Local 22’s social and educational efforts were so successful and continued to outpace those held by the union. Indeed, the ILGWU noted that although Local 22 members frequently participated in union-wide events, the local often had events that conflicted with union-wide activities. For instance, Local 22’s girls’ basketball team competed in a championship game against the girls’ team from Local 91 on April 10th. The team was unbeaten that year and the championship was seen as so important that the local called upon all of its Executive Board members and officers to attend. However, this meant that young members of the local had to choose between going to the championship game and attending the ILGWU Student Fellowship’s Luncheon Get-Together, which was being held the same day.\textsuperscript{60}

Delegates from the ILGWU Student Fellowship and from various social and educational centers were introduced by African American Local 22 member Clarissa Bostic at the 1937 ILGWU Convention, which was held in Atlantic City, New Jersey from May 3-15. On behalf of the Fellowship’s Vice President, African American Ola James, who couldn’t attend, Bostic thanked the ILGWU for its educational programming. Local 22 swelled with pride over the presentation of its “Clarissa,” and over its educational department, as it said that the Fellowship and representatives of the social and educational centers demonstrated the growth of the local’s educational efforts and their national influence. Local 22 also pushed for more progress on racial issues by submitting several resolutions to the convention. One was against racial discrimination in

\textsuperscript{60} Mark Starr to David Dubinsky, 31 March 1937, and Fannia M. Cohn to David Dubinsky, 19 March 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 35, Folder 3A. 226
the labor movement, saying that “the unity and equality of all workers, without regard to race, color, nationality, religion or opinion, is the very foundation of the trade union movement.” Local 22 explained that such a resolution was anti-fascist, as racial discrimination was a tool of fascism used to crush the labor movement in Germany and other countries under fascist oppression. Another resolution against lynching and for the freedom of the Scottsboro Boys notably pointed out that physical acts of lynching and the legal lynching of the Scottsboro Boys were tied together by both their racist and anti-Semitic spirit.

Beyond submitting resolutions, Local 22 also celebrated the embrace of the ILGWU’s black members at the union convention. Perhaps the most critical moment of the convention occurred when all of the black delegates presented a large floral piece spelling out “Black and White Workers Unite.” They then put on a demonstration where Local 25 member Winifred Gittens spoke and officially presented the piece as a gift from African American workers to the convention. They also presented a memorial to President Dubinsky expressing their appreciation for the opportunity to “find our place in the ranks of our class” and take part in union life, and complimenting the union for its opposition to racial prejudice. The black delegates lauded 350 black women and girls who were striking at the time at a garment factory in Chicago, and they also praised the Negro Labor Committee in Harlem for its good work. As the convention applauded, Dubinsky thanked the black delegates for their presentation, claiming they were an example of the fact that blacks had “cheerfully” joined the union.  

Then, Frank Crosswaith made a rousing speech in which he hailed the integration of African Americans into the labor movement. According to reports, his speech was interrupted with applause numerous times, especially when he declared that the ILGWU had always held out a hand of friendship to all garment workers regardless of race. In fact, his speech garnered such positive reaction that union Vice President Luigi Antonini proposed that it be included in its entirety in the convention minutes. Apparently, the motion was carried unanimously. David Dubinsky followed Crosswaith’s speech with encouraging news on organizing African American garment workers in the South. He claimed that, despite rampant discrimination and racial hatred in that part of the country, the ILGWU had been able to organize black workers in Atlanta.

The convention sealed its commitment to racial progress by adopting a resolution demanding equal pay for equal work for workers regardless of race, creed, sex, or nationality, and a resolution calling upon all labor to discontinue racial discrimination, as it hurt the white, as well as the black, worker. The resolution Local 22 submitted calling for the freedom of the Scottsboro Boys and endorsing anti-lynching legislation in Congress was also adopted. In a nod to Crosswaith, the convention also adopted a resolution supporting the unionization of black workers, which was to be expressed specifically through cooperating with and funding the Negro Labor Committee and encouraging all New York locals to affiliate with the Committee, as well. Finally, although he could not submit his resolution in time to go through normal voting procedure, Crosswaith brought a resolution to the convention supporting the Gavagan
anti-lynching bill being considered by Congress at the time. The convention approved the resolution, which presented lynching as a working-class issue:

Whereas, a majority of the persons lynched have been Negroes, all of whom have been workers, while the whites who have been lynched also have been workers, thereby demonstrating the fact that lynching is essentially a weapon aimed at the workers of the nation in their efforts to improve their lot, economic and social…

When, shortly after the convention ended, the Educational Department of the ILGWU filed its annual report, it became clear that educational activities were now at the heart of union life. As the poem on the front of the annual report indicated, education was now considered the most critical element of working-class empowerment, a necessary complement to striking and political activism:

When Labor strikes it says to its master:
I shall no longer work at your command.
When it votes for a party of its own, it says:
I shall no longer vote at your command.
When it creates its own colleges and classes, it says:
I shall no longer think at your command.
Labor’s challenge to Education is the most fundamental of the three.

The introduction to the report claimed that organizers frequently came to the department for help in running meetings and drafting leaflets and local bulletins, for assistance in finding out facts about the industry, and for guidance in creating and maintaining an understanding of trade unionism in order to spread that understanding to union members.

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63 "The Twentieth Year Annual Report of the Educational Department, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, June 1, 1936-May 31, 1937,” ILGWU records, #5780/049, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 2, Folder 11.
Whether or not that was true, evidence showed that educational programs were quite successful on their own merits.

From June 1936 through May 1937, 553 groups involved in educational programming were active across the union, containing over 20,000 weekly students. Now, 25 locals had their own educational directors, and 18 scholarships to workers’ summer schools and colleges had been handed out that year across the union. Five labor institutes also ran under union auspices, enrolling 164 students, while over the 1936-1937 season, the number of publications printed by ILGWU groups and locals increased to 39 and were widely sold. Classes were well attended across the union, but the educational report demonstrated that they were particularly successful in Local 22. While all other union locals in New York and across the country ran under 10 classes that year, Local 22 ran 102, and also ran more athletic, gym, dance, and music groups than any other local. Local 22 was also unique in that it was one of only a few locals that ran a youth group. While the West Harlem educational center, which was housed in the Harlem Labor Center, ran no gym activities as other centers did, it ran more classes than any other center and was the only center that hosted a dance group. Classes generally ranged in attendance from 6 to 200 students that year, and the ILGWU Educational Department estimated that the total number of students attending union classes and groups from June 1936 through May 1937 topped 20,000.

Meanwhile, in New York City, members’ participation in various groups made the importance of cultural activities in union programming clear. The NYC chorus of the union included 120 members, the mandolin orchestra had 70 members, the NYC dramatics group had 50 members, and the NYC dance groups had 25 members. In
addition to courses and music, dance, and athletic groups, the union also ran special events throughout the year. For instance, its Advancing America Forum ran for 12 weeks, presenting highly regarded lecturers. The union and its locals also held many picnics, dances, demonstrations, theater parties, Brookwood chautauqua shows, and educational meetings. Numerous locals ran their own libraries or social rooms, and from November 1936 to the beginning of June 1937, 27 excursions and trips had been organized across the union.

Various events over the course of the year had reflected the growth and diversity of ILGWU educational programming. From October 13-16, 1936 alone, five social and educational centers opened across New York City. Then, on November 11, 1936, the ILGWU Chorus participated in an Armistice Day demonstration at Madison Square Garden. In December, the union published a coloring book for children, “Mother Goose Goes Union,” while locals 32 and 91 produced paintings for the WPA that were exhibited in March 1937. The educational report wrapped up by noting important events that had just occurred at the union’s convention in Atlantic City. For instance, on May 8th, the Chairman of the Education Committee, Julius Hochman, presented the committee’s report to the convention. His presentation was preceded by a concert given by the Greater New York Mandolin Orchestra. The next day, Local 102’s men’s basketball team defeated Local 11’s team to win the Dubinsky championship trophy, while Local 91 won the Hochman trophy for the women’s basketball championship over Local 150. Finally, on the last day of the convention, May 15th, a new set of educational requirements for union officers was adopted, as was a resolution to establish a labor college.64

64 Ibid.
Frank Crosswaith pushed African Americans to take part in some of the union’s many educational offerings. In response to the ILGWU’s progressive policies on racial equality in the labor movement, he argued that black members of the union should be loyal and supportive of union traditions and of the union’s agenda. He told these members to attend meetings, pay dues, and most importantly, attend classes held under union auspices. He emphasized that such attendance was a primary duty because classes taught members how best to serve both their union and their class interests. That summer, Camp Unity provided a groundbreaking opportunity for African American unionists to learn and celebrate their culture. From July 19-25, the camp hosted “Negro Culture Week,” which highlighted performances by prominent black artists, writers, musicians, and stage stars. As the summer of 1937 came to a close, Crosswaith’s Negro Labor Committee looked to maintain educational programming for the rest of the year. Its Subcommittee on Education held a meeting on September 14th to plan further activities.65

Along with Local 22’s thriving educational programming, and its plans for expanding that programming, the ILGWU Educational Department continued to expand its programming, as well. It capped off 1937 with a Festival-Dance and Pageant held jointly with the ILGWU Student Fellowship on December 4th. Committees of locals from around the city, and from across the country attended. The event was meant to bring together members who attended union activities with teachers, lecturers, and local educational directors, and it was also meant to celebrate the beginning of the educational

season. It included music performed by the WEVD Radio Orchestra and the performance of a short dramatic movie, “A March of a Generation.”

The pageant that was the highlight of the evening was called “We Shall Be Free!” and traced the history of garment workers from their arrival in America to the growth of union membership and educational programs after 1933. During the first scene of the pageant, “Arrival in America,” members of the union assembled dressed in costumes based on different nationalities. After celebrating the diversity of the union by performing folk dances in these costumes, the members then took off the upper parts of those costumes to reveal that they were all workers. In a later scene, “The Triangle Fire,” a similar picture of interethnic and interracial solidarity was acted out. The workers performing marched in protest, proclaiming that such a tragedy as the fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory should never happen again. They then all removed their national costumes, standing united as workers.

Notably, the first half of the pageant included many lines paying homage to women. The narrator pointed to their leadership in the Uprising of the 20,000, placing them on equal footing with male union members, then the performers sang out:

In the black of the winter of Nineteen Nine,
When we froze and bled on the picket line,
We showed the world that women could fight
And we rose and won with women’s might.

Then, they made the same pledge that garment workers made in response to Clara

66 Fannia M. Cohn to David Dubinsky, 24 November 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 35, Folder 3A; “Meet Old Friends and Make New Ones at the Festival-Dance & Pageant of the ILGWU Student Fellowship” and “I.L.G.W.U. Student Fellowship Festival and Dance” postcards, ILGWU records, #5780/049, Box 4, Folder 4B.

67 “We Shall Be Free” program, Festival Dance and Pageant of the ILGWU Student Fellowship, December 4, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 35, Folder 2C.
Lemlich at Cooper Union at the beginning of the 1909 Uprising: “If I turn traitor to the
cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise.”

Finally, the last scene of the pageant, “The Power of Knowledge,” celebrated the
successful work of the ILGWU Educational Department. In it, the performing workers
sang the following verse:

We have fought together,
Now we’re gay together,
And we’re learning all the time.
While we sing and dance,
And swim and play together,
We are learning all the time.
For there’s one thing sure—
That we must prepare;
So we come in masses
To our Union classes,
Learn to hold the line,
And go on from there!
As we work and play,
Every day together
We are learning all the time! 68

Clearly, the pageant served one of its main purposes: to involve union members in
dancing, singing, and cultural performance to encourage greater solidarity. However, the
Educational Department also declared that the pageant was meant to bring members the
pleasure that comes with self-expression and to inspire a greater appreciation of art by
union members, as well. 69 As usual, simple education didn’t seem enough; the ILGWU
Educational Department wanted to enlighten and uplift union members.

Frank Crosswaith wanted to help the ILGWU cement its image as a leader on
racial equality. In order to write a story for the Negro Press about African Americans

68 “We Shall Be Free” program, Festival Dance and Pageant of the ILGWU Student Fellowship, December
4, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 35, Folder 2C.
69 Ibid.
elected as delegates to the 1937 ILGWU convention, he took a survey of International locals. For instance, Local 25 reported a total membership of 2,500, including 350 African American members. Two of these members, Annabelle Curry and Winifred Gittens, had been elected to its Executive Board, with Gittens also having been elected as a convention delegate. Local 62 reported 500-600 African Americans out of a membership of 10,000, with only one African American member elected to its Executive Board, and none elected as convention delegates. However, it did report that numerous female members had been elected union chairladies of their shops.

Local 22’s statistics regarding African Americans far surpassed that of other locals. That was partially due to the local’s huge membership, which topped 30,000. Thus, although less than 10 percent of its members were African American, it still had an African American membership of almost 3,000. Of course, it reported that Eldica Riley, Ethel Atwell, and Bertha Edgecombe had been elected to its Executive Board, and that Clarissa Bostic, Gloria Garcia, and Edgecombe had been elected as convention delegates. Whoever filled out Crosswaith’s survey also inserted a line for the number of African American business agents in the union, for which the number “1” was filled in for Edith Ransom. Also, unlike other locals, which reported anywhere from zero to 18 black shop stewards or chairladies, Local 22 reported an “unlimited” number of black shop chairmen and chairladies, meaning there were likely dozens of African American men and women elected to leadership positions in shops under Local 22’s purview.\(^70\)

\(^70\) Frank R. Crosswaith to Charles Kreindler, Mgr., Blouse & Waistmakers Union #25, Frank R. Crosswaith to Charles Zimmerman, 31 March 1937, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Reel 1, Box 1; Samuel Shore, Mgr. to Frank R. Crosswaith, 7 April 1937, and I.L.G.W.U. statistics, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Reel 1, Box 1.
Crosswaith’s plan for the information gathered from his survey was to use it to write a special article for black newspapers. He argued that such publicity was necessary to offset an anti-union campaign that Henry Ford had launched in the African American press. For instance, he lauded the ILGWU to *The New York Amsterdam News*, saying that its educational program was squarely aimed at undermining racist ideology that assumed the inferiority of African Americans.\(^71\)

**Workers’ Education Programs Spread and Brookwood Labor College Closes**

In addition to the specific educational activities of the ILGWU, there was a nationwide effort within the labor movement to integrate workers’ education into union activities. The federal government’s attempts to educate workers through FERA and WPA programs were not successful in the eyes of many unionists, some of whom saw such attempts as hollow gestures meant to disguise a capitalist agenda, and others of whom perceived the programs as being bogged down in red tape and staffed by indifferent personnel. Thus, a number of unions stepped up their activities under the Workers’ Education Bureau of America, which had been formed in 1921 to assist labor colleges and union educational departments.\(^72\) Though the Bureau was becoming increasingly conservative under the influence of the American Federation of Labor, the overall consensus in the labor movement that education was a necessary element of effective programming led conservative forces to join together with more leftist unions like the ILGWU to promote workers’ education.

\(^{71}\) After sending out his survey, Crosswaith informed David Dubinsky that he had sent a news item on Edith Ransom’s election to African American newspapers across the country. Frank R. Crosswaith to David Dubinsky, 5 April 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 130, Folder 4; “Higher Wages Boost Earning of Harlemites,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, November 20, 1937.

Secretary of the National Urban League Workers’ Bureau Lester Granger suggested that the central way to garner support for unions was to educate people so that they would better understand the plight of black workers. This argument mirrored the belief now widely held in the ILGWU that worker education was vital to make workers more conscious of their class interests and of how to defend them. The depth of that commitment was apparent in 1937, as the union sought to strengthen its relationships with outside institutions of labor education like Brookwood Labor College. That April, Brookwood’s Director Tucker Smith, submitted an outline for a training program for those wanting to work in trade unions. He noted that the ILGWU had led the way, even amongst progressive unions, in implementing workers’ education, and proposed a plan for spreading such education across the labor movement.

Smith wanted to start by establishing a labor college much like Brookwood that could train organizers and officials for any union that wanted to utilize it. Such a college was necessary, he argued, because while every union should have its own educational department as the ILGWU had, few unions would be able to institute such a department in the immediate future. Smith believed that the unions that needed educational programming the most were too weak to consider implementing it. He also wanted the college to have headquarters, so that it could host activities, provide a hub where unions and union members could come for help, and from where workers could be sent to enroll in and aid unions. Smith also saw such national headquarters as being of great symbolic importance as a representation of all efforts at worker education around the country. Yet, Tucker Smith didn’t just believe that Brookwood could be the model for such a college, he also believed that it could actually become that college, as it already had a vast
property, large staff, and successful programming. The college was struggling financially and its director felt that one way to save it was to transform it into an even more vital labor institution that had national import and educated workers from all industries.

Although the education such an institution could provide was of vital importance to the labor movement, Smith also pointed out that, much like the ILGWU’s social activities, a labor college could bring workers together to develop greater solidarity. Thus, his ideal college would be, like Brookwood, a residential one where workers could focus on study and bonding with fellow students. He felt that a few weeks spent at such a college could be of greater benefit to workers than years’ worth of taking classes. He pointed to the ILGWU as an example of this, saying that the union’s members who had attended Brookwood had come away with a deeper appreciation of workers’ education, and thus became more involved in educational activities. The importance of cultural activities was also clear from Smith’s proposal. Much like the ILGWU’s programming, the college’s educational activities would include not only classes in topics such as labor economics, trade unionism, and labor publicity methods, but also drama courses. Also, in addition to providing courses both at the college and at related centers, courses for union members, and speakers for union meetings, Smith’s proposed labor college would organize a traveling company to perform labor plays in 75 cities around the country.

Finally, Smith saw his college as beginning of a movement to spread worker education across the country. The college could provide counseling for unions to help them set up their own educational departments and establish educational programming. The importance of labor dramas was also emphasized, as Smith sought to organize a Drama Project to train future labor leaders in organizing local drama activities and
staging programs of plays for spring tours. Ultimately, the educational and cultural programming that this new college would conduct would help train new organizers, new officers, and new members. The bottom line, Smith argued, was that union members needed to be taught the basics of unionism if their enthusiasm for their unions was to be transformed into permanent loyalty and activism.73

His argument was one most progressive union leaders believed. Though it is unclear what David Dubinsky did with Smith’s proposal, the Local 22 Executive Board recommended that the labor movement implement Smith’s suggestion to establish a central labor college to train union organizers and officials. It further decided that if other labor organizations, including the CIO, would not fund such an institution, the International should. By the time of the 1937 ILGWU convention in early May, they hoped that the union would take over Brookwood Labor College, finance it completely, and use it as the central trade union college for organizers. However, in November, Brookwood closed because of dwindling enrollment and a lack of funding. It was then seen as too much of a potential economic liability to become the potential new labor institution both Tucker Smith and the ILGWU hoped it could be.74

In some ways, the growth of the labor movement in the wake of the Uprising of the 30,000 damaged Brookwood by directing attention and resources to organizational drives. This meant that the union’s best members and leaders were being directed away from labor education and toward organizing, causing attendance at institutions like

73 Tucker Smith, “A Proposal For Training For Trade Union Service For a Growing Labor Movement,” April 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 11, Folder 5A.

Brookwood to begin to dwindle, draining more of the their financial resources. The CIO had been asked to take over the troubled labor college in the summer of 1936, but President John Lewis refused, saying the Brookwood was “mortgaged up to the hilt.”

Notably, the school’s directors also blamed the success of workers’ education in the ILGWU and the WPA Workers Education Project for their institution’s downfall. This was because the educational programs spurred on by the ILGWU and the WPA led to the development of “little Brookwoods” in countless unions across the country. When unions and union locals seized control of educational programming, already-existing institutions outside of unions began to become obsolete. By late 1936, approximately 50,000 students attended workers’ educational classes and recreational groups nationally. By the end of 1937, that number had doubled, with over 20,000 attending classes in the ILGWU alone. From 1936 to 1937, ILGWU expenditures for educational programming doubled to $200,000. As *The New York Times* described it, “Hand in hand with the union organizer today goes the union schoolmaster to cement the ties of affiliation with bonds of common learning…”

**The Success of ILGWU Educational Programming Continues**

At the beginning of 1938, the ILGWU continued to demonstrate its commitment to following Local 22’s model of emphasizing educational and cultural programming. For instance, the ILGWU Student Fellowship rang in the new year with a festival dance on January 14th featuring the showing of a movie, *The March of a Generation*. More than 100 young members of the ILGWU performed in the movie, which focused on

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democracy, but clearly emphasized the involvement of youth in the labor movement and their militancy in fighting for labor’s agenda.

A young communist ILGWU member, Josephine Martini, confirmed this when she spoke to the New York State Communist Party convention. She said that in many unions, only a small minority of members were active, all of whom were young people, while the large majority were passive. Yet, she said that while youth could often be militant during strikes, they were inactive otherwise. The ILGWU seemed to avoid this problem because of its educational activities. Martini argued, however, that although the ILGWU was a leader in this respect, its youth participation was still not as high as it should be. Thus, she reinforced that notion that educational programming was necessary to solicit more youth participation in unions, and pointed out that while the ILGWU led such efforts, it still had a long way to go in militarizing young members.76

The ILGWU attempted to take an increasingly aggressive approach to recruiting members into educational activities. Educational Department Secretary Fannia Cohn described the multi-faceted nature of the union’s labor institutes. Interstate institutes, held at places like Unity House or Brookwood Labor College, hosted students from across the country. Inter-local institutes were attended by union members from different locals within a given city, while inter-shop institutes drew students from different shops within a particular local. Finally, regional institutes attracted students from various locals in certain areas of the country. Yet, what was important about these institutes was not their

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76 Yetta Horn, Bernard Beckler, and Josephine Sossana, ILGWU Student Fellowship to David Dubinsky, 12 January 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 35, Folder 2C; Josephine Martini (speech, 10th Convention of the New York State Communist Party, May 1938), ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 5, Folder 1.
sheer educational value, but their role in bringing union members from different places, trades, and shops together. Also, making them aware of critical issues was necessary to make them more enthusiastic participants in the labor movement, aware of their own power:

We can, however, accomplish something more important—to stimulate in the worker-students an interest in the problems of the local, the International, the labor movement generally and society as a whole—to make them conscious of important current developments—to impress them with the important part they play as members of the organized labor movement and of their rights and responsibilities as such.  

The social and educational benefits of these institutes were augmented by cultural and recreational programming. A picture of the ILGWU Chorus from 1938 shows a room packed with chorus members, a half-dozen or so of whom were black. African American members included soprano Clarissa Bostic, altos Gloria Garcia, Oretta Gaskins, and Olive Pearman. Garcia was the chorus secretary, while Bostic served on the chorus council. On March 19th, the chorus and the ILGWU Mandolin Orchestra played their fourth annual concert, featuring Russian violinist Efrem Zimbalist. The Chorus’s Negro Female Section sang the spiritual “Heav’n, Heav’n,” while the full chorus sang the spiritual “Water Boy,” as well as the Yiddish folk songs “Mit a Nodl on a Nodl” (“With a Needle, Without a Needle”) and “Un Du Akerst” (“You Plow”), which contained these stirring lyrics:

You plough and you plant  
You stitch and you sew  
You hammer and you weave,—  
But what be your reward, my people?  
Where be your food and shelter?

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Fannia Cohn, “History: Fiction or Fact,” Educational Department, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/049, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 6B, Folder 2.
Where be your silks and satins?
Where be your weapons of defense?
What happiness awaits you?

Men of Labor Awake!
Realize your own strength!
With your hand all-powerful
You can stop all wheels from turning!

The finals of the ILGWU Eastern Basketball Championships, held in late March, brought the women of Local 40 from New York together to compete against Local 150 from South River, Massachusetts. The men’s teams in the championship game were from New York Local 102 and Philadelphia Local 11. Bringing union members of diverse backgrounds from across the country together through song and sport was meant to unite them, so that they could be a stronger force for labor’s cause.

The importance of cultural vitality was made even more explicit when Locals 60, 62, 89, and 155 joined 22 in a mass meeting on May 1st. David Dubinsky was the highlighted speaker at this event, while the managers of each participating union, including Charles Zimmerman and Luigi Antonini, also spoke. It also included a musical program of skits from *Pins and Needles*, performances by stars of the Metropolitan Opera Company, and numbers from *Mexicana*, the Mexican government’s official musical review. The ILGWU Chorus and Mandolin Orchestra also performed, but the star performer of the night was Bill Robinson. Robinson, often nicknamed “Bojangles,” was a famous African American movie and stage actor whose most frequent role was that of a

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78 Fourth Annual Concert program, March 19, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 35, Folder 2C.

79 Photograph, ILGWU Chorus, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/014P. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 7; Milt Spiro, Cultural and Recreational Department, ILGWU to David Dubinsky, 22 March 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Box 35, Folder 2C.

243
butler in the antebellum South who he played opposite Shirley Temple in a series of movies, including that year’s *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*.80

Local 31, the Patternmakers’ Union, followed the May Day celebration with its own mass rally on May 26th. They had Frank Crosswaith speak to their meeting, again emphasizing the respect in the union for Crosswaith himself, and the increasing recognition across locals that there needed to be union representatives who spoke to their black membership. He was listed not as the head of the Negro Labor Committee, or as an organizer for the ILGWU, but as a lecturer from its Educational Department. The Department’s influence throughout the union was clear, and it touted this fact in its annual report. From June 1937 through May 1938, 620 weekly educational groups with an attendance surpassing 22,000 were run under the auspices of the Educational Department. These included over 300 study classes, 70 music groups, 37 dramatics groups, 84 gymnasium courses, 83 athletic teams, and 37 dancing classes. Classes ranged in enrollment from 9 to 53 students, with an average of 21 students per course. The average attendance per educational season was over 3,900 students. That year, numerous youth groups were also established across New York and around the country, including in Local 22. Speaking tours by ILGWU representatives included the popular cross-country tour of Frank Crosswaith. Countless locals also started their own journals to supply their members with the latest news from the trade union movement. The year had also been

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80 “Celebrate May 1st” flyer, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 25, Folder 4.
marked by numerous important events, including the opening of five social and educational centers in New York in October 1937 alone.81

Once again, Local 22 led every other union in the amount of educational activities it offered by a sizable margin. Not only did it hold more than double the number of classes of any other local from 1937 to 1938, but it held more classes than any other city’s joint board. Montreal held 20 classes total, while Local 22 alone held 29. The Local also had five music groups, a dramatics group, and four athletics teams. Also, while all other locals held zero to three gym classes, Local 22 held 12. Two courses were held at the Harlem Labor Center, as were one of the music groups, one of the gym classes, and a dancing class.

Yet, the Educational Department wasn’t satisfied, completing its annual report with an advertisement to solicit further participation from ILGWU members. It highlighted sports activities, relating partaking in them to being a good union member and leading a fuller life. For instance, it said to take gym classes to build healthier bodies for the work of building a better world, while it said to revel in sunlight and feel the wind “on the heath” on summer hikes. It advertised dancing as, “Revolt, protest, awakening, expressed in the symbolic dances of the workers,” while social dancing was meant to breed feelings of friendship that were critical to solidarity between workers. The advertisement referred to dramatics as a way that union members could state their case to the rest of the world, and it lauded music groups: “Labor songs, born of our victories,

81 The Patternmaker (Extra) 2, No. 5, May 1938; The Twenty-First Year Annual Report of the Educational Department, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, June 1, 1937—May 31, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 35, Folder 2C.
hymning full-throated our faith in the Union, mocking the foes who oppose us, recalling the dark days and the martyrs of Labor’s fight.”

It also advertised trade union training as a way for members to acquire public speaking skills, study the parliamentary law and procedure used at meetings, learn about the labor movement, and join the fight against fascism and war. The union offered many different classes, but the advertisement said they were all aimed at answering the central question of how workers ended up facing their current conditions and what they could do to earn a better, more complete life. President Dubinsky also wrote a letter to all ILGWU members in the Educational Department report, saying, “We have a right to claim that our Union has become strong not merely through its economic gains but by virtue of the idealism and solidarity fostered by our educational and cultural activity.” Thus, more than ever, educational programming was thriving in the ILGWU and seen as a vital part of the union’s success.

Once the summer of 1938 was over, the Educational Department marked how far its educational programming had come with a “Coming-Of-Age” Celebration. Representatives of the ILGWU Student Fellowship delivered talks to the attendees. Blanche Lee of Local 22 lauded the union for its diversity and its unity, pointing out how different their situation was from that in Europe, where so many were being persecuted:

When I look into the faces of this audience, representing a cross-section of our membership, descendants of many races, creeds and nationalities, my mind turns to Europe. I can visualize the fear and distrust that have overtaken the peoples there. All nations are arming ready to destroy each other. Fearfully do they look into the skies, watching lest bombs descend on them.

82 The Twenty-First Year Annual Report of the Educational Department, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, June 1, 1937—May 31, 1938.
And here, in our country we see a different picture. The descendants of the same races and nationalities are fighting together for better conditions, protecting each others’ rights as American citizens, hundreds of thousands of them, marching under the banner of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, helping to build a world in which poverty will be banished, and where true democracy and brotherhood will prevail. When I think of this, I realize what an idealistic, constructive, social force our International is. It’s in our union, that we learn to cooperate and respect each other, no matter what our religion, race or color.83

She credited the Educational Department for creating such an atmosphere, pointing out that members of the Student Fellowship further learned to cooperate with other young union members. She explained that, on the picket line, ILGWU members learned to act together as workers and citizens, while in classrooms, they learned to think together. Finally, in their social rooms, they learned to play and sing together. Thus, striking, educational classes, and cultural activities all worked symbiotically to create militant, happy, and active union members.

Josephine Sassano of Local 89 further explained that the Educational Department also helped union members to appreciate literature, music, drama, and their own communities. More than anything, though, it helped keep members informed on everything going on in the labor movement, as well as on national and international social, economic, and political trends and problems. Clearly, the educational programming of the ILGWU didn’t just unite the union’s diverse membership and make them more active, it also taught them about the world around them, their own communities, and their economic interests. The Student Fellowship sent the celebration a message thanking the ILGWU for allowing them the opportunity to attend its social and

83 “Gratitude and a Pledge” pamphlet, ILGWU Student Fellowship, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 35, Folder 2B.
educational centers, institutes, lectures, visits to points of interest, trade union service classes, and countless other activities. It also proclaimed that it assisted the Educational Department by bringing young union members together to dance, sing, and play. Yet, perhaps the proudest achievement of the “Coming of Age” celebration was that it garnered greetings from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia.84

The Department affirmed all of this in its announcement of its educational and social program for the 1938-1939 season. It advertised visits to museums, galleries, and other places of interest scheduled for Saturdays at 1 p.m. It also advertised theater and concert parties where union members and their families could see plays and concerts at reduced rates and listen to lecturers explain and interpret what they’ve seen and heard. Other social get-togethers and outings were planned, as were lectures at the Union Health Center on health and stress issues. Of course, the normal dancing, singing, callisthenic, and athletic activities were planned, and such activities were often combined, as dances were frequently held after basketball games. Soccer activities would also expand in the new term, as the ILGWU league gave way to the much larger trade union soccer league, which included teams from the Transport Workers Union, the Butchers Union, and ILGWU locals including 10, 60, and 117.

The standard courses on the meaning of trade unionism, the history of the ILGWU, public speaking and English, and the social and political history of the United States were offered during the new term. Interestingly, as those who attended the public speaking and English class were learning those skills for a reason, the union crafted their class so that they would discuss the economics of the garment industry, challenges facing

the ILGWU, and current events. Thus, once they graduated their class, they’d have something to say of specific benefit to the union.85

Fannia Cohn happily announced to ILGWU members the start of the new season at the West Harlem Social Educational Center, which was housed at the Harlem Labor Center, on January 5th, 1939. She detailed the activities that would be occurring there, including classes in social, folk, tap, modern, and interpretive dance, calisthenics, and basketball. All of these would be taught by qualified teachers, including Frank Crosswaith. Discussions would be held on a regular basis on current economic, social, and labor-related topics with special reference to the place of African Americans in the labor movement. These were tentatively planned for every Sunday as part of a series called the Community Labor Forum, and desired speakers included not only leaders with national reputations, but also active workers in trade unions with high African American membership. Although the forum was not supposed to have any partisan slant or affiliation, it was intended to be staunchly pro-labor. Monthly socials were also planned to bring ILGWU members and their friends together. Cohn insisted that, despite the union’s spotty record with regard to funding the Harlem Labor Center, it was committed to making the West Harlem Social Educational Center one of the union’s finest.86

The concentration on issues and leaders of importance to the black community demonstrated a recognition not only of where the center was located, but also of the growing importance of blacks in the ILGWU. David Dubinsky referred to them as being

85 “Announcement, 1938-1939, Social Educational Centers” pamphlet, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union Educational Department, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 35, Folder 2B; Cutters Voice for Peace and Democracy 1, No. 1, October 1938, 2.

86 Fannia M. Cohn to Fellow Member, 3 January 1939, and “Tentative Plans for Forum,” Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Reel 29, Box 14.
some of the most intelligent and loyal members of the union. Their loyalty was sealed when they became convinced of the absence of prejudice by union officials and fellow union members. Dubinsky referred to African Americans as particularly valuable unionists because they were “the bane of the scabs” when they were on the picket line, and also because of their cultural contribution to union life. Whether picketing, attending union meetings, or working in the shop, black ILGWU members always brought “their songs, their music, ready wit, laughter and their rustic working class philosophy.” Thus, they contributed to the culture of the union, helping strengthen it through augmenting its diversity and its devotion to working-class issues.

Dubinsky argued that black members seemed to easily grasp the meaning of solidarity. This could likely be attributed to the unity that cultural ties provided. Frank Crosswaith wrote the union’s newspaper Justice in late February claiming that no organization had done more to eliminate prejudices based on color, religion, and nationality than the ILGWU, and that the union had always demonstrated an interest in the problems of African Americans. He claimed that the union’s slogan had been, “Neither the needle, the thread, the cloth, the machine nor the pressing iron can distinguish between the color of the hands that hold and operate them.”

The union’s young members also inaugurated a new year of activities, as the ILGWU Student Fellowship held a festival and dance on January 14th. Unity House also made a new push for visitors in 1939. At the beginning of March, Herman Liebman, a member of the ILGWU’s Unity House Committee, submitted a suggestion for a letter contest on the subject “Why I recommend Unity House as an ideal vacation place for our

87 Frank Crosswaith, letter to the editor, Justice, February 27, 1939.
members.” He then made a number of other suggestions for publicizing the resort. He thought that *Justice* should begin to devote a regular column in its “Features” section to Unity House, and that a Unity House Reunion Dance featuring a prominent band leader should be held in the late spring in one of the larger dance halls in the city to inaugurate the beginning of the resort’s season. Liebman suggested that a dance contest be held at that event with prizes of free vacations to Unity House. He also asked that advertisements for the resort be placed in programs for the musical *Pins and Needles*. Considering that companies were performing the musical around the country, that meant that thousands of advertisements would appear. Finally, Liebman thought that the best way to directly promote Unity House to union members was to have members of its staff give talks at ILGWU membership and executive meetings.

Interestingly, while it had been apparent that women led the way in planning educational and cultural events, in the case of Unity House, women also far outnumbered men in terms of patronage. Thus, Liebman wanted to emphasize activities that attracted male vacationers, such as tennis, handball, baseball, golfing, horseback riding, bowling, boxing, and swimming in the resort’s lake. Men were also seen as enjoying ping-pong and billiards, and as being attracted to attending dances because of Unity House’s well-known dance orchestra. Liebman said that he knew of many boys who, once introduced to Unity House, came back repeatedly to participate in the same sports and dances. Thus, he wanted to hold contests and tournaments in indoor and outdoor sports to attract more first-time participants. However, athletics weren’t only for male union members. Liebman noted ever-increasing participation by girls, saying that they really enjoyed those activities. However, he also used more traditional explanations to explain their
participation: they wanted to go where the boys were and “they look swell in sport clothes.” Since both women and men were drawn to playing sports, it was not just in line with union policy, but good business for Unity House to promote such activities.88

A few weeks later, Liebman wrote of his plans for entertainment at Unity House. He was not an advocate of sophisticated cultural experiences, but argued that what vacationers wanted was simple, even low-brow fun. Thus, he advocated scheduling performances by comedians, concerts by contemporary, not classical musicians, and dances with popular music, as opposed to dance concerts with performances by professional troupes. In fact, he argued that dance contests should be held on a weekly basis, as should moonlight sails, bonfires, comedic roasts, and movie nights stressing comedy features. He also proposed holding amateur nights, fireside sing-alongs, storytelling, readings, and bridge parties. Liebman further suggested that two or three costume and mask balls be held during the forthcoming season. Finally, he asserted that as many events as possible should be videotaped so that they could be shown to Unity House guests and used for publicity across the ILGWU.89 The union had clearly embraced cultural programming by 1939, and attempts to expand the activities at Unity House reflected just one aspect of such programming.

Despite the expansion of educational programming in the ILGWU, the Educational Department’s annual report for June 1938 through May 1939 noted that while the number of classes offered to union members had increased, attendance was

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88 “Announcement, 1938-1939: Social Educational Centers” pamphlet; Herman Liebman to Charles Zimmerman, 24 March 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 17, Folder 1.

89 Herman Liebman to Charles Zimmerman, 7 April 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 17, Folder 1.
down from the previous year. Indeed, it reported a total of 673 weekly classes across the country and Canada, dozens more than had been offered from mid-1937 to mid-1938. This broke down between 268 study classes, 117 music groups, 74 dramatics groups, 100 gym classes, 55 athletic teams, and 59 dancing classes. Yet, all classes had an average registration of 16,464 students, as opposed to the over 22,000 enrolled in classes in the previous year. The union blamed the Roosevelt Recession for causing more unemployment and thus shrinking the pool of potential new union members who could become students of educational programs. Yet, the success of Pins and Needles buoyed the Educational Department. Its nationwide tour was met with theater parties and receptions arranged by local unions. Many locals also held their own musical revues, including Local 22, whose Sew What garnered widespread positive publicity.

Local 22 also, once again, held the most classes of any local and more than any city’s joint board. It led locals in music and dramatics groups, but some locals held more gym and dancing classes, or more athletic activities. The West Harlem ILGWU Educational Center at the Harlem Labor Center hosted two study classes and one gym class, as well as one music group and one dancing group. One new educational center that made a large impact on the union was the one held at the Labor Stage. It didn’t host study classes, but had a few dance and drama groups. However, it offered 18 music groups to participate in, more than twice as many as any local, joint board, or other union educational center hosted. Notably, one of those groups was an All-Negro Choir, the first of its kind organized at a union center.90

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90 “The Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Educational Department, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, June 1, 1938-May 31, 1939,” ILGWU records, #5780/049, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 2, Folder 11.
The ILGWU was happy to publicize the diversity of participants in educational programming. For instance, in the July 15, 1939 issue of *Justice*, in its section on educational activities, Barbara Pavusek, a union member of Croatian descent from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, wrote about her experience at the Hudson Shore Labor School. She studied, hiked, sang, dance, swam, and even enjoyed weiner roasts with other workers. Pavusek said that she came away from her time at the school with the conviction that the labor movement had no room for racial prejudice, as she attended alongside workers of various backgrounds from all over the country:

There were Portuguese girls from Massachusetts. There were Italians from New York; Russians from Boston; Polish girls from other parts of Pennsylvania, and a group of fine, outstanding, Negro girls from New York City. And we were all from the shops—all making our living in the same way—all belonging to the same big union and all facing the same problems.91

Indeed, Pavusek believed that when people worked together and fought for common goals together, race faded into the background. She said that while workers may have different skin colors, underneath their skin they are the same. In a world riddled with racial prejudice, which was fed by fascism, interracial unity was necessary not only to advance the cause of labor, but also to fight fascist nations that sought to plunge the world into war. Furthermore, Pavusek argued, if Americans were to fight forces of fascism in their own country, they had to overcome racial and religious prejudice, which was used against citizens to undermine democracy. Thus, workers’ education could be a tool to achieve both domestic and international political goals.

As the ILGWU looked to finish out its educational programming for the year in strong fashion, it added music-related activities to the schedule for its social-educational centers. Herman Liebman, who ran Labor Stage, was sent to each center to run discussions on music and its usefulness to the labor movement. These talks started in late October, involving violin and piano accompaniment and performances by Anne Schuldenfrei, a soprano who sang Italian, French, Jewish, German, Spanish, and American folk songs. Then, the talks were to be followed by discussions on interpreting literature and placing it in a contemporary context. The union looked to supplement these talks with discussions on economic, social, and labor issues, so the focus of these activities was not solely cultural.92

In a report for the U.S. Department of Labor about the ILGWU, Max Danish, the editor of Justice, explained not only the structure of the union, but the benefits of being a member. Local 22 was one of four dressmakers’ locals organized into the New York Dress Joint Board, which constituted the largest division of the International. Thus, Danish explained that these locals had a dominant position in the garment industry. However, the ILGWU reached out to other segments of the industry, making a new effort to organize workers in cotton garment manufacturing, of which 50,000 were estimated to be unorganized. There was reason to be confident in such efforts, as organizing campaigns had been very successful over the previous few years, bringing ILGWU membership up to 250,000 in 1939.

Danish lauded the fact that, since 1935, union work standards had been introduced in nearly every garment center in the United States and Canada. Furthermore, he

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92 Ibid.; Untitled article and “Appreciation of Music,” Justice, October 9, 1939.
described how the union not only served to advance workers’ political interests and protect them from exploitation, but also became a welfare and medical institution, as well as a center for educational and recreational activities. Danish discussed institutions like Unity House, and described the activities of the Educational Department, but he went into the greatest detail about the way the ILGWU looked after the health of its members. He wrote about how the Union Health Center, established in 1913, provided medical care at low rates to workers and their families, while hosting programs to educate workers on illness prevention. Preventive care was a focus of the center’s work, insuring all new union members were examined to make sure they had no contagious diseases. During 1938 alone, over 100,000 people went to the center for medical assistance and examinations. Danish pointed out that the Union Health Center was the only clinic of its kind in the United States owned and operated by a labor union. In addition to providing access to this facility, 13 of the largest ILGWU locals in New York had special funds to provide sick benefits for their members. In fact, in 1937, the union paid out almost $200,000 in sick benefits and an additional $40,000 of medical relief. They paid out more in benefits and relief in 1938, and anticipated paying out an even greater amount through 1939, as well.93 Education toward solidarity was important, but so was the basic wellbeing of union members.

Meanwhile, the ILGWU’s Cultural Division held numerous concerts in 1940, such as those on February 25 and March 10. Its Educational Department also held a celebration for the Harlem Social and Educational Center it had at the south end of the neighborhood at the Heckscher Foundation. The event, held on February 23rd, featured a

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basketball game between the ILGWU Student Fellowship Harlem team and a visiting team, as well as dancing, singing, and games. The Student Fellowship also recorded parts of the event for its movie, *Marching Toward Tomorrow*. The Educational Department listed more events for ILGWU members to participate in from mid-March to mid-April. Even in this short time period, the union and fellow labor organizations held seven different events. These included a spring dance on April 13th, which included an African American dance band.94

Another event during this period was a symposium on “Whither the Negro in the Present War,” which included Frank Crosswaith, Abyssinian Church Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Mary Ovington of the NAACP, and leader of the Lovestoneites, a communist splinter group of which many Local 22 members were adherents, Jay Lovestone. Indeed, by promoting such programming, the ILGWU demonstrated its wide reach and range of partnerships, from the more moderate NAACP to the more radical Lovestone, and from traditional religious quarters to overtly political groups. Furthermore, the symposium was an example of the programming that reached out to African Americans.95

The union had been reaching out to its black members ever since their numbers greatly increased in the wake of the Uprising of the 30,000, but by 1940, it looked to its African American members for leadership in certain areas, albeit ones that fit the stereotype that the assets those members brought to the union were largely cultural. Early

94 Minutes of Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., February 6, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1940; “Our Harlem Center Celebrates,” *Justice*, December 27, 1939; “Calendar of Stimulating Events For Period March 15 to April 19, 1940,” ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 15, Folder 5.

95 “Calendar of Stimulating Events For Period March 15 to April 19, 1940.”
in the year, Simon Rady of the ILGWU’s Music Department wrote to Frank Crosswaith to confirm that the department could use the Harlem Labor Center as a base to establish a Negro Chorus. The Chorus would not only be important as the chorus for the center and an activity aimed at African Americans, but it would also become a leader of choral activities that the general ILGWU Choral Group could come to for advice and cooperative enterprises.

It was not surprising that musical activities were a prime source of African American participation and interracial cooperation in the ILGWU. In 1940, one of the favorite songs for ILGWU choral groups to sing was the “Ballad for Americans,” which had been written the year before by Earl Robinson who, despite having been affiliated with the Communist Party, worked with the WPA Federal Theater Workshop. No song could have better captured the spirit of interracial unity than Robinson’s ballad, which invoked Jewish heroes like Haym Solomon, often called the “financier of the American Revolution,” and black heroes like Crispus Attacks, the first victim of the Boston Massacre. When the melody evoked the tune of the spiritual “Go Down Moses,” which referred to the story of Exodus, the lyrics of the song said, “Man in white skin can never be free/While his black brother is in slavery.” This echoed the saying of labor unions that white workers could not be free while black workers remained enslaved by lower wages and racial discrimination, and it conjured a biblical tale that was central to both black and Jewish narratives.96

96 “Ballad for Americans,” Music by Earl Robinson, Lyrics by John LaTouche, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 29, Folder 2; Simon Nady, Music Dept., ILGWU to Frank Crosswaith, 30 January 1940, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 29, Folder 14.
The song goes on to proclaim that workers are the foundation of the United States and points out that they are of all different backgrounds:

Am I an American?
I’m just an Irish, Negro, Jewish, Italian, French, and English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Polish, Scotch, Hungarian, Litvak, Swedish, Finnish, Canadian, Greek and Turk, and Czech and double Czech American!

And that ain’t all,
I was baptized Baptist, Methodist, Congregationalist, Lutheran, Atheist, Roman Catholic, Orthodox Jewish, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist, Mormon, Quaker, Christian Scientist, And lots more!97

The song concludes with the argument that, although they have been oppressed both on an economic and racial basis, workers will eventually triumph. Perhaps most notable about the “Ballad for Americans” was not that it was widely sung across the ILGWU, but that it was popular across the country. In fact, it became a bestselling album, and was played at the 1940 national conventions of both the Republican and Communist Parties. This was a sign that times were changing. It seemed that Americans were beginning to embrace the notion of interracial cooperation and recognize narratives of minority struggle, even if only in the imagination of popular culture. The ILGWU’s enthusiasm for finding unity through diversity was now being echoed across the political spectrum.

Perhaps one of the greatest keys to encouraging African Americans to join the ILGWU, a largely Jewish union, and to stimulating cooperation between the ILGWU and the Negro Labor Committee was the sense that black and Jewish workers had not only common working-class interests, but also a common past that included narratives of

97 “Ballad for Americans.”
slavery, emancipation, and post-emancipation oppression. Toward the end of 1940, Frank Crosswaith affirmed that commonality and the importance of continued unity between blacks and Jews in the labor movement in an article he wrote for both the socialist paper The Call and the Workmen’s Circle, a Jewish labor organization. Firstly, he asserted that no groups of people had more invested in the escalating struggle between totalitarianism and democracy than African Americans and Jews. The reason for this, he argued, could be explained by history:

> All up and down the rugged slopes of time, and all along the pathway of human progress, it seems that the Jew and the Negro have been singled out from among their brothers of other faiths and colors to bear upon their shoulders a cruel cross and upon their brows a crown of thorns.⁹⁸

Yet, he claimed that these groups also held out hope despite their struggles that all people would someday come to embrace brotherhood and appreciate the beauty of a world filled with people of varying colors, creeds, and “so-called races.” Indeed, in defending interracial unity, Crosswaith implied that the very category of race was illegitimate.

He also felt that one of the most encouraging signs that a world of brotherhood could be achieved was the fact that Jews and blacks were joining with fellow members of the working class regardless of creed and color because they were increasingly recognizing their common economic plight. He pointed out, though, that it was not surprising that Jews came to that recognition before African Americans. After all, African Americans had only been emancipated from slavery less than a century earlier, and then they were confined to agriculture and domestic service for many years. Because of their close daily contact with employers, they spurned labor organizing. As blacks began

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moving into industrial work, they were trained to believe that they had nothing in common with agricultural or domestic workers. Educational programming by the ILGWU helped to change that mindset not only amongst black garment workers, but also inside the black community more generally. This changing perspective, matched by the efforts of figures like Frank Crosswaith, prepared blacks to organize with each other across industries as well as with workers of different races from their own industries in order to assert working-class power and to place African American concerns on the working-class political agenda.

99 Ibid.
CHAPTER 5:
SUCCESS AND FAILURE:
BLACK LABOR-RELATED ORGANIZATIONS OF THE MID-LATE 1930s

At different times throughout the 1920s, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) organizer and leading black socialist Frank Crosswaith had attempted to establish black labor organizations in Harlem to help the neighborhood’s African Americans find employment and join unions, so that once employed, they could be protected both as workers and as a group that often suffered racial discrimination on the job. Yet these efforts failed, largely due to a lack of support from unions and other organizations. In 1935, though, after African Americans began flooding into unions in the wake of the passage of Section 7A of the National Industrial Recovery Act, Crosswaith seized the opportunity to establish the Harlem Labor Committee, which became the Negro Labor Committee (NLC). This organization would become the most successful of Crosswaith’s efforts at organizing black workers. Yet, despite its clear impact in Harlem, the organization struggled as critical support from unions, most notably the ILGWU, was inconsistent.

National black organizations also recognized the increasing importance of black workers and the necessity that they organize to protect their unique interests. Hence, the National Urban League (NUL) established Workers’ Councils across the country. Many African Americans saw these efforts as being too reliant upon assistance from whites. The National Negro Congress (NNC) was the most independent effort at black labor organizing, meant to be established and supported by the black community. In fact, when some viewed the NNC as having too many whites involved, the Congress split apart.
However, the NNC’s greatest obstacle was the political turmoil within its ranks. Much as the NLC found its potential for success undermined by its ties to socialism, the NNC was hindered by accusations of communist influence. In the Negro Labor Committee, Frank Crosswaith’s focus on political ideology and personal grudges alienated potential supporters, while in the National Negro Congress, the question of whether or not the organization would claim a communist identity distracted from its work on the ground.

Indeed, these organizations would never find stable enough footing to become permanent fixtures in the black community. The Urban League’s Workers’ Councils were already in decline by 1937, whereas the National Negro Congress shut down in 1947, and the Negro Labor Committee ceased to function at the end of the 1960s, well after its heyday. However, each organization gave black workers a voice, encouraging them to join unions, and teaching them how to wield power as workers and as union members. By helping foment class-consciousness while augmenting race consciousness, the NLC, NNC, and Workers’ Councils taught black workers that they were not purely means of production, but agents of political and economic change. These organizations also demonstrated that, in order to affect such change, interracial cooperation was necessary, even if it wasn’t always reliable.

The Creation of the Negro Labor Committee

On Sunday, January 6, 1935 at the Rockland Palace, a meeting described as the “greatest labor gathering in the history of Harlem” took place. This “monster mass meeting of Negro labor” was organized, however, not only to promote the empowerment of Harlem’s workers, but also to promote interracial efforts toward labor organization and
education. The *New Leader*, a leading socialist newspaper, congratulated the Harlem Labor Committee for organizing such an event, saying of it, “…this will be the greatest labor demonstration ever staged in Harlem” and “…we believe it will mark an epoch in American labor history.”

Prominent speakers like ILGWU President David Dubinsky, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) President A. Philip Randolph, and Chairman of the Harlem Labor Committee Frank Crosswaith were scheduled to deliver addresses, but American Federation of Labor (AFL) President William Green was the highlighted guest. He was touted as bringing a special message to African American workers, as the mass meeting marked the launch of an effort to organize thousands of these workers into AFL unions.¹

The *New Leader* elaborated upon the work Green had to do in gaining the trust and allegiance of African Americans:

> The A.F. of L. has over and over again placed itself on record as being opposed to discrimination against Negroes. Though national conventions have laid down policy and though race prejudice is a violation of every ideal of labor, specific international unions have time and again discriminated against colored workers. Negroes have felt themselves justified in being suspicious of the professed friendliness of organized labor in view of this record.²

However, while condemning the AFL, the *New Leader* praised needle trade unions such as the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, as well as other unions it deemed “Socialistic” for not discriminating against African American workers.

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¹ “Mass Meeting of Negro Labor” flyer, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union records, #5780/002. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Box 130, Folder 4; “Historic Meeting of Negro Labor in Harlem,” *New Leader* (Labor Section) XVIII, No. 1, January 5, 1935.

Thus, the paper claimed, such unions had been the “beneficiaries of the loyalty, devotion and love of Negro members.”

Indeed, one of the event’s co-sponsors was the ILGWU, but President Dubinsky didn’t attend. Unfortunately, despite reports in Justice that the mass meeting was the “biggest Negro labor meeting in the history of New York,” AFL President William Green didn’t show up either. Thus, while many African Americans could have been mobilized at the Rockland Palace meeting, many left feeling insulted, once again rejected by a labor movement whose leaders were inconsistent in their enthusiasm for black participation.

Despite the ILGWU’s record of ambivalence toward supporting efforts to mobilize black workers, Frank Crosswaith’s relationship with the union grew closer, as he was appointed one of the ILGWU’s general organizers in early 1935. His Harlem Labor Committee called the appointment groundbreaking: “…this is the first time one of the largest units of American Labor has filled such an important post from the ranks of Negro labor.” In fact, the Committee commemorated his appointment and his years of service to the labor and socialist movements with a testimonial dinner on March 3rd. Over 320 people attended the dinner, over half of them African American. ILGWU Educational Department Secretary Fannia Cohn and ILGWU Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman spoke at the dinner, while ILGWU Vice President Julius

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3 Ibid.


Hochman chaired the dinner committee and served as its emcee. In his speech at the dinner, Hochman said of the black worker:

"Today he is forced in ‘paper unions’ that are hardly more than “scab” recruiting agencies. Or he is led astray by hair brained movements that use him as a catpaw for demonstrative purposes. Our union has a simple program for the Negro: “Equal opportunity for the job at equal pay and conditions.”"6

While he praised the ILGWU’s treatment of African Americans, Hochman demonstrated that the influential old rhetoric about blacks acting as scabs and being weak-minded remained prevalent, even among supposed progressives.

Perhaps most important about the dinner, however, was that it served not only to commemorate Crosswaith’s appointment as ILGWU General Organizer, but also to provide the opportunity for the Harlem Labor Committee to discuss taking steps to launch a United Negro Trades under the American Federation of Labor umbrella. By March 1935, it was clear that the leaders of the Harlem Labor Committee wanted it to become a bigger, more powerful organization with a greater reach. Its members wanted to spread their enthusiasm for black labor organization beyond Harlem, and they knew that a key element in enabling that would be to affiliate with the AFL through building relationships with sympathetic AFL unions, such as the ILGWU.7

The Committee came out with a report of its activities from December 1934 to March 1935 wherein the history of the organization and the transition to a United Negro Trades of sorts were laid out. In December 1934, a small group of African American

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7 Ibid.
trade unionists had created the Harlem Labor Committee, chaired by Crosswaith and including members of Local 22. This program reflected numerous goals:

(1) To cooperate only with bona fide unions affiliated with the A. F. of L. seeking to organize Negro workers, (2) to initiate organization campaigns wherever possible and whenever necessary and at all times to counsel with the local leaders of the A. F. of L. in such campaigns, (3) to utilize Negro Labor News Service for the purpose of carrying on an educational campaign through existing Negro newspapers and magazines to the end of developing among Negro wage earners a desire for organized action as workers, (4) to stage periodical labor demonstrations in Harlem in the form of mass meetings, parades, outdoor meetings, etc., (5) to publish from time to time leaflets dealing with specific problems of Negroes in particular trades to effect the anti-trade union propaganda of the open shoppers and Communists and lastly, to cooperate generally with all unions facing problems involving Negro workers.  

Clearly, the Harlem Labor Committee saw its mission as multi-faceted. Its members sought to organize, educate, stage events, propagandize, reach out to friendly organizations, and combat any opposition.

As far as working with the ILGWU, by March 1935, the Committee had written and distributed a special leaflet among the union’s members to offset communist activities in its ranks. The Committee claimed, in fact, that in the wake of the January 6th Rockland Palace mass meeting almost every union affiliated with the AFL in the New York area had requested the Committee’s services or expressed appreciation of and solidarity with its efforts. Its educational efforts and attempts to reach beyond the Harlem community were also bearing fruit. By the time of its December 1934-March 1935 report, approximately 50 of the larger African American newspapers across the country were regularly printing the reports of the Committee’s Negro Labor News Service. The largest and most influential of these newspapers, the New York Amsterdam News, paid special

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attention to the Committee’s activities. Yet, as previous attempts at establishing black labor organizations had failed due to a lack of support from unions, it was critical that the Harlem Labor Committee get the necessary funding from friendly organizations. In the financial statement of the December 1934-March 1935 report, the national office of the Socialist Party, the ILGWU and numerous ILGWU locals, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters were all listed as donors to the Committee.9

However, communists sought to undermine Crosswaith’s activities by associating him with Local 22’s Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman, an ardent socialist, and accused him of working against the very interracialism the Communist Party of the USA had recognized in the ILGWU and latched on to. The communists argued that, as the Harlem Labor Committee looked to expand into a United Negro Trades, it would become a segregated organization. However, in the Harlem Labor Committee’s report, it made clear that as it developed into a larger, wider-reaching organization, its membership would not be confined to African Americans. Furthermore, the report exposed the anger of committee members at communists who sought to attack their efforts at self-determination.10 If the communists really wanted to help black workers, they would support the Committee, as it was an attempt by the workers themselves to organize their community and foment class-consciousness.

Despite the communists’ efforts, by the summer, Frank Crosswaith’s campaign for an organization of African American workers that would act like a United Hebrew Trades or a Women’s Trade Union League picked up steam:

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
It is becoming increasingly clear to all, that if labor is to conserve the gains already made and add to them, the Negro worker must become more truly an integral part of the labor movement. We feel that the invaluable service which the United Hebrew Trades and Women’s Trade Union League are rendering to labor among their respective groups may be duplicated among Negro workers with equal advantage to the organized labor movement.\(^{11}\)

At a special meeting of the Harlem Labor Committee on June 6\(^{th}\), he proposed setting up the machinery for just such an organization. First, he suggested that a conference committee be set up to outline a plan, program, and conference call for a meeting of both white and black delegates from across the labor movement to occur the following month. The conference would be a forum to discuss problems of African American labor and would provide the opportunity to establish a new United Negro Trades. He then suggested the formation of a finance committee to plan and conduct fundraisers and to obtain donations primarily from unions represented in the new organization. Crosswaith also wanted to set up a publicity committee to issue frequent press releases to the African American and mainstream press on the organization’s activities and on problems facing African American labor. This committee would also write and issue pamphlets on the benefits of trade unionism, as well as on general relations between African Americans and the labor movement. The motion for calling Crosswaith’s conference and immediately establishing his suggested committees was carried.

July 20\(^{th}\) was chosen as the date for the conference, and Harlem Labor Committee secretary Noah Walter was instructed to issue a news release to all local daily, African American, and labor newspapers announcing the conference call, and to write leaders like Julius Hochman and A. Philip Randolph requesting that they speak at conference

\(^{11}\) Minutes of special meeting of the Harlem Labor Committee, June 6, 1935, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 1, Folder 1.
sessions. Indeed, Walter attended the Local 22 Executive Board meeting on June 25th, asking for cooperation with the new labor organization that was to be formed at the upcoming conference. He asked that the local send two delegates to the conference, and Winifred Gittens and Edith Ransom were immediately appointed. They were then appointed to the new organization’s finance committee, while Crosswaith himself was appointed to both the conference and publicity committees. A membership committee to interest local unions in joining the organization and supporting its work was also established.

Crosswaith and Winifred Gittens also appeared before such organizations as the New York Joint Board of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers’ Union, the Workmen’s Circle, and the Joint Board of the Dress and Waistmakers’ Union of the ILGWU to garner further support for the conference. Invitations were sent to organizations such as the New York Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Socialist Party, all of which were expected to send delegates. The establishment of a new African American labor organization in Harlem purposefully involved people from a wide range of racial backgrounds and political persuasions.

However, participants in what was dubbed the first Negro Labor Conference were carefully chosen. Only delegates from bona fide labor unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor were invited in order to ensure that the conference was

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12 Ibid.; Meeting of Harlem Labor Committee, June 20, 1935, Report of Secretary, Special meeting of the Conference and Finance Committee, Harlem Labor Committee, June 26, 1935, and Harlem Labor Committee, July 1, 1935, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 1, Folder 1; Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., June 25, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1935; Proceedings of the first Negro Labor Conference, Frank R. Crosswaith Papers, 1917-1965, MG 100, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 2, Folder 5; Samuel Shore to Dressmakers Union, Local 22 ILGWU, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 28, Folder 3.
constructive and that its results would be enduring. On July 20, 1935, 110 delegates gathered, representing 350,000 organized workers in organizations such as the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the NAACP, the National Urban League, and at least a dozen ILGWU locals.\textsuperscript{13} Eleven resolutions were passed at the conference, including the first and most central resolution, on “The AF of L and the Negro”:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED} that this Negro Labor Conference of Negro and white trade unionists declare its unyielding opposition to all forms of racial prejudice and discriminatory practices in any part of the organized labor movement and pledges itself to combat this evil wherever manifested.

\textbf{BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED} that this Conference call upon every section of the labor movement to remove from their constitutions by-laws, or rituals such exists…and thus tend to maintain an unwholesome division within the ranks of organized labor, and

\textbf{BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED} that this Conference call upon labor everywhere to close ranks and effect that greatly to be desired solidarity of labor without which there can be no salvation for either Black or white labor.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

While this resolution focused on the issue of racial discrimination, other resolutions passed endorsed the agenda of the labor movement more broadly, supporting the pursuit of the 30-hour work week, and the enactment of both a Child Labor Amendment and a Workers’ Rights Amendment to the Constitution. Interestingly, two resolutions were set aside for congratulating and extending fraternal greetings to unions who set an example of solidarity. One resolution focused on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and the other was directed toward the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union. The


\textsuperscript{14} Proceedings of the First Negro Labor Conference.
ILGWU was lauded not only for its unparalleled record on relations with black workers, but also for withdrawing its 1934 convention from Chicago’s Medinah Club because of the venue’s discriminatory policies against African Americans. Clearly, Frank Crosswaith’s association with the ILGWU solidified the tie between the union and his new black labor organization, but it also solidified the perception that the ILGWU was one of the progressive unions blacks could trust to treat them equally.

Resolution 11 referred a number of other proposed resolutions on matters such as Angelo Herndon, the Scottsboro Boys, organizing a labor party, and opposing fascism to the new organization for further consideration. As these tabled resolutions and some of the conference’s speakers demonstrated, the organization being established would be concerned with more than just issues of discrimination or the particular concerns of African American workers. Greater legal and political problems were to be tackled, both at home and abroad.

The New York State Organizer of the American Federation of Labor William Mahoney spoke at the conference, reiterating the statements of AFL President William Green in a letter he had sent to the conference, that the Federation disallowed discrimination of all kinds within its ranks. President David Dubinsky of the ILGWU wrote a letter, as well, continuing his usual claims that his union had always welcomed African American members and treated them equally. However, as the ILGWU was in the midst of a surge in black membership, it could attest to the benefits of organizing African American workers as few other unions could. Dubinsky wrote:

I greet the idea of your Negro Labor Conference and the objectives which it strives to attain—the expansion of the trade union movement under a directing and coordinating agency—because of the experiences
we, in the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union have had with organizing Negro workers in our industries and of the highly satisfactory results we have achieved in this direction.\textsuperscript{15}

Following these expressions of support, the conference nominated A. Philip Randolph to be Chairman of the new African American labor organization. He declined, deferring to Frank Crosswaith, who was then nominated and elected. Randolph was elected to be a Vice-Chairman, as were Julius Hochman of the ILGWU, Abraham Miller of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, Morris Feinstone of the United Hebrew Trades, and Thomas Young of the Building Service Union Local 32B. The conference then voted to call the organization The Negro Labor Committee (NLC). The Committee was to be composed of 25 members of AFL-affiliated trade unions, both black and white, and its administration was to consist of a Chairman, five Vice-Chairmen, an Executive Secretary, and a Financial Secretary. Financial support was set up to come from trade unionists and labor organizations that agreed with the committee’s agenda. The NLC’s committee on organization was then established, including A. Philip Randolph and Local 22’s Edith Ransom, and its goal was to attract African Americans into NLC ranks, and then direct them into the AFL.

Randolph also spoke at the conference, reminding attendees of larger issues. For instance, he pointed to the Depression as a sign of the dissolution of capitalism. Then, he pointed to the plight of the labor movement in Europe, as it was being crushed under fascism. He then went on to explain that ever since the emancipation of slavery, blacks had been kept under various forms of slavery due to domestic fascist threats such as Jim Crow, lynching, and economic exploitation. Randolph not only represented the socialist

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
point of view with his focus on capitalism, but also demonstrated how much issues like fascism, in seeping into the labor agenda, made their way into the consciousness of black labor, as well. According to the rhetoric of black leaders, however, opposition to fascism did not stem from joining labor unions, but from the black experience itself.

Randolph expressed the position that the Negro Labor Committee was not established with the goal of entering into a cooperative relationship with the AFL, but that it was formed in the hope of forcing the Federation to eliminate racial discrimination in all of its unions or to expel any union engaging in such discrimination. However, despite his aggressive stance, he claimed that he didn’t want to fight against the AFL, only against discrimination and segregation. He pledged that combating these evils would strengthen the AFL, further empowering it to truly fight for the interests of all workers. Then, he focused in on the unique mix of people involved in the labor movement in Harlem. First, Randolph turned to Jews, the leaders of the garment unions with whom he worked so closely. He pointed to a strong current of anti-Semitism both in America generally and in Harlem specifically, and to Italian workers in Harlem who sympathized with fascism as threats. He saw the Negro Labor Committee as a tool for neutralizing these forces, and for bringing diverse groups of people together to defend each other as fellow workers, much in the way Local 22 sought to.

Finally, the members elected to the NLC were named. Crosswaith and Randolph were joined by Julius Hochman, Harlem Labor Committee Secretary Noah Walter, and numerous members of the ILGWU, including Winifred Gittens and Norman Donawa. They were joined by Local 22 members Edith Ransom and business agent Murray Gross. All of the ILGWU members in the new organization’s leadership were also members of
the International’s Executive Board, further illustrating the tie between the administrations of both organizations. Gittens, Ransom, and fellow Local 22 member May Walter were also appointed to serve as three of the five members of the NLC finance committee, with Gittens serving as the finance secretary, a central role in the NLC administration.

As the labor conference came to a close, Frank Crosswaith addressed the delegates, singling out both the Amalgamated and the ILGWU for the moral and financial support they had lent to the founding of the Negro Labor Committee. When attendants filed out at the end of the conference, they did so singing “Solidarity.”

Not only the message of solidarity itself, but also the use of music meant to cultivate unity between a diverse collection of unionists were integral elements of this new labor organization from its inception, a reflection both of labor’s growing focus on cultural programming, and of the culture of Harlem.

Yet the NLC also sought to be a source of labor activism in the African American community. Upon its founding, it was written into the governing rules that the Committee would assist unions in organizing and striking activities when they involved black workers, and also that it would help to adjudicate grievances. Technically, the NLC was set up as the executive body of the Negro Labor Assembly, but the two were practically

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one and the same, as the Assembly consisted of three delegates from each union affiliated with the Committee, and as the stated aim of the Assembly was to carry out the same goals as the Committee. However, in the rules governing the Assembly, a physical space for the organization was provided for. The space would be the Harlem Labor Center (HLC), which would be known as “Labor’s Home in Harlem,” a staging ground not only for strikes, but for all labor-related activities.

The HLC was to be self-sustaining, with offices and meeting rooms available for labor unions to rent. The Negro Labor Assembly’s housing committee, staffed by Frank Crosswaith, Noah Walter, and Winifred Gittens would have to approve of the use of the center’s meeting rooms or auditorium by any organizations not officially housed there. Thus, the Negro Labor Committee was charged not only with conducting an organizing campaign to affiliate local unions and attract African American members for the widest possible participation, but it was also responsible for maintaining the Harlem Labor Center as “the home of the legitimate labor movement among Negro and white workers in Harlem.” As the NLC sought to achieve its goals through education, fraternization, persuasion, and organization, its center would house educational programming, resources, and cultural activities in addition to providing a location for launching strikes.17

Three weeks after the Negro Labor Conference, Frank Crosswaith sent a letter out to members of his new organization to request their presence at its first meeting on

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August 12th. At the meeting, the Negro Labor Committee added two new member organizations and appointed members to sub-committees. The finance committee was changed from five members to six. Winifred Gittens remained on the committee, but her fellow ILGWU women didn’t, replaced by leaders in the NLC administration, such as Hochman, Miller, Feinstone, and Young. A committee on education was established, and Randolph was appointed to head it, while a committee on organization was also formed. Finally, a Negro Labor News Service Committee was founded and included Crosswaith, Randolph, and Samuel Shore of ILGWU Local 62. By this time, the NLC was already active, engaging in emergency work with unions that needed assistance with strikes, such as various Bakery and Confectionery Workers Union locals, and with locals that needed help organizing, such as Laundry Workers’ Union Local 290.

Many organizations, such as the NAACP, the National Urban League, and numerous locals of the ILGWU already chipped in their financial contributions to the NLC just weeks after its founding conference. By the end of August, Local 22 had given a donation of $5.00, more than all but one other member organization of the Committee had donated. Indeed, the local’s Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman said that no matter what the Joint Board of Dressmakers of the ILGWU decided with regard to financially assisting the NLC, Local 22 would make a separate donation, and he appealed to all of its members to chip in. This was important as the Committee decided in September that its finance committee would visit unions that participated in the Negro Labor Conference to solicit monthly contributions.18 The Educational Departments of the

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18 Letter from Frank R. Crosswaith and Financial Report, and minutes—August 12, 1935—Meeting of the Harlem Labor Committee, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, 1929-1965, Reel 1, Box 1; Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers’
ILGWU and the Negro Labor Committee also set up a joint conference, “The Negro in the Labor Movement,” for October 5th. Frank Crosswaith presided, while Julius Hochman spoke on the “Negro in the Garment Trades.”\textsuperscript{19}

Meanwhile, ILGWU Local 22’s Harlem branch carried on its Fall 1935 term in anticipation of moving classes into the Negro Labor Committee’s future center. Frank Crosswaith instructed a course on “The Negro in American History” that term. The course was divided into three parts, the first on “The Old Negro,” encompassing slavery and emancipation, the second on “The New Negro,” covering developments in African American history from 1860 to World War I, and the last on “The Newer Negro.” In making an intriguing play on Marcus Garvey’s “New Negro” nationalist terminology, Crosswaith implied there was something for African Americans beyond hopes rooted in African culture and hopes for return to the Motherland. The third part of the class focused on blacks’ place in American culture, not exploring their nationalist consciousness, but their affect on their home nation’s consciousness. Crosswaith also sought to examine the position of the black worker in an attempt to help students understand the economic element of African American identity.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} Minutes, Educational Committee, Sept. 4, 1935, and Minutes of Educational Committee of Local 22, October 23, 1935, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1935; Minutes, September 19, 1935, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Reel 2, Box 1.

\textsuperscript{20} “Harlem School – October 1935 Term,” Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Box 29, Folder 14.
The Harlem Labor Center

The location for the Negro Labor Committee’s center was being negotiated throughout the fall. By the organization’s September 19th meeting, tentative agreements for space in the planned Harlem Labor Center had been made with the Educational Department of Local 22, the Educational Department of the ILGWU, the Building Service Employees Union Harlem Council, and the Amsterdam News Chapter—Newspaper Guild. At the time, numerous potential sites were being considered for the location of the HLC. Finally, on November 1st, the NLC leased a loft at 312 West 125th Street for one year to house the center. Local 22 helped make this possible, as the ILGWU donated $150 toward three months’ rent for the local’s space. The date of the official dedication of the center would either be December 8th or 15th, depending on what was most convenient for the majority of NLC members, and the ceremony would be broadcast over radio station WEVD. A dedication committee was formed, chaired by the United Hebrew Trades’ Morris Feinstone, and including Frank Crosswaith.21

Though the dedication date eventually chosen was December 15th, the Educational Department of the ILGWU held a special opening night for its West Harlem Social and Educational Center at the Harlem Labor Center on November 21st. In many ways, the announcement of this opening event reflected the diversity promoted by the International’s educational programming, as well as the incorporation of social and cultural activities into that programming. The program for the opening night included music by the union’s Mandolin Orchestra, recitations by numerous ILGWU groups,

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group singing of labor songs, and welcome speeches by Vice President Julius Hochman, who also chaired the union’s Education Committee, and Frank Crosswaith. The opening night flyer also announced that the educational center would open on November 26th, with classes on Tuesdays on English and on labor problems. One session on “The American Labor Movement (with special reference to the Negro Worker)” taught by Crosswaith and A. Philip Randolph, and one session each of social dancing, calisthenics, and singing would be held every Thursday. Ironically, the latter session was actually longer than the former, giving the social activity as much, if not more emphasis than the educational activity. On the flyer, workers were promised “an interesting and enjoyable time” and asked to bring other workers with them to the center. The opening and the classes were free to ILGWU members.22

In fact, the public dedication of the Harlem Labor Center was chaired by Julius Hochman. The crowd at the event was flooded with ILGWU members, and Local 22 alone had nine official representatives there, including African Americans Edith Ransom, Eldica Riley, Ethel Atwell, and Clarissa Bostic. A program featuring black and white musicians and the ILGWU Chorus highlighted the HLC’s opening. In a letter Frank Crosswaith wrote to David Dubinsky just after the event, he referred to the chorus and its diversity by saying it “stood out in the setting like a rainbow in a cloudless sky.” The Harlem Labor Center provided a place where the ILGWU and the newly formed Negro Labor Committee could come together as never before. As a picture of Crosswaith, Julius Hochman, Fannie Cohn, Mark Starr, and Winifred Gittens singing in front of a Harlem

22 West Harlem Social and Educational Center of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union opening flyer, ILGWU records, #5780/166, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1; Social and Educational Center Special Opening Night flyer, I: D4, ILGWU folder, National Urban League Records, Library of Congress.
Labor Committee (the precursor to the NLC) banner demonstrates, these two organizations and their members joined forces.

One area of common ground between the ILGWU and NLC was the prevalence of socialism amongst their leaders. Not surprisingly, then, Crosswaith co-authored a letter from the Socialist Party claiming the new labor center as the party’s home. Though it is debatable how central the party itself was in creating the Negro Labor Committee and thus in initiating the establishment of the Harlem Labor Center, it did install the headquarters of its 19-21 A.D. branch in the center. The Socialist Party encouraged its members to sign up to assist at the center’s dedication and to wear something red to the event, where Norman Thomas and Charles Zimmerman represented both the national and local leadership of the party.23

The dedication was broadcast over WEVD that evening as a program called “Negro Labor and the Cry for Justice.” A number of speeches added to the broadcast, including one by Frank Crosswaith, where he asserted that the only way for black workers to improve their socioeconomic position was to reject those who would seek to mislead and exploit them and instead help themselves.

It is our intention to make the center the pivotal point from which will emanate all constructive efforts affecting the work-a-day life of Negro labor in Harlem and greater New York.

…We are determined also to protect the Negro proletariat from the baneful influence of a leadership that is servile, philanthropically supported by the funds of rich exploiters of both Black and white workers,

a leadership that has failed and that lacks courage, vision and a backbone. Negro labor must develop its own leadership if its best interest is to be conserved and advanced.  

No longer would Harlem’s workers be beholden to the broken promises of philanthropists, social workers, employment agencies, and fake labor unions.  

With a brand new center that was meant to serve as the locus of labor-related activities for Harlem’s African American community, the Negro Labor Committee expanded its educational programming in 1936. The NLC proposed establishing an Economic Parliament to be held every Sunday at the Harlem Labor Center. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the League for Industrial Democracy were invited to a meeting of the NLC’s Education subcommittee to discuss setting up the Parliament. Almost half of the groups invited to attend the meeting were educational departments of ILGWU branches, including Local 22, and the union’s central educational department. Thus, Edith Ransom of Local 22 and Fannia Cohn, Secretary of the ILGWU Educational Department, were at the subcommittee meeting on February 14th, where enthusiasm for the Parliament was made clear, but concerns over funding were expressed. Cohn led the voices of approval and suggested that the weekly meetings be called the Harlem Labor Forum, instead of the Economic Parliament. Perhaps this was meant to further identify the activity with the important communal landmark where it was to be held, but it also broadened the purpose of the meetings. She suggested these “forums” include a musical program in addition to the already planned lectures and discussions. Her enthusiasm for cultural programming here was clear.

There was also a representative of the Board of Education attending the subcommittee meeting. The hope was that a new economic forum could be classified under the Board’s Forum Division, which was a Public Works Administration program (PWA). Thus, the Negro Labor Committee would have access to PWA funding and resources to run the forum. However, while the Board member said he could provide professionals to help create the content of the forums, speakers for forum lectures and discussions, and assistance with publicity efforts, he said that he could not offer financial support. The Harlem Labor Forum was planned as a serious of meetings that required a fee for attendance. The Board of Education’s Forum Division, because it was using federal money, was not allowed to supply funding to any event that charged for entrance.\(^\text{25}\) It was becoming increasingly clear that support for activities at the Harlem Labor Center was going to have to come from the small group of organizations already associated with it: the NLC, a handful of progressive unions including Local 22, and a few community organizations.

However, the Harlem Labor Forum went ahead without the Board’s support, announcing through the Negro Labor News Service that it was launching in March. At the ensuing meeting of Local 22’s educational committee, Edith Ransom was appointed as the local’s representative to the forum, provided a report on its activities. Each of the forums in March were focused on foreign affairs, including one on Italy under Mussolini, one on the Soviet Union, and one on “The Psychology of Fascism.” Clearly, though the

forum’s funding was limited to a small, geographically limited constituency, its programs focused on a world far beyond Harlem. At the same educational committee meeting at which Local 22 declared its official participation in the Harlem Labor Forum, it also officially scheduled its next term of classes to be held at numerous section schools, including that of the Harlem section at the Harlem Labor Center.26

Indeed, the Negro Labor Committee was actively engaged in organizing across Harlem, and the Harlem Labor Center was its staging ground. It assisted District Council 9 of the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators, and Paperhangers Union with organizing and allowed them to use the HLC for their campaign. The committee also provided space in the center to Local 10 of the International Journeymen Barbers Union as it aided the local in its general strike. The NLC assisted in organizing numerous stores within various industries, and it advised locals in numerous other industries, such as those of bakers and motion picture operators, as they strategized how to go about their own organizing drives.27

Support for the NLC: The ILGWU’s Critical Role

By late 1936, the Negro Labor Committee was already struggling, as Frank Crosswaith admitted in a letter to various labor leaders in October. It was difficult to

26 In a February 20th letter, Frank Crosswaith, Winifred Gittens, and Samuel Shore thanked Charles Zimmerman for Local 22’s affiliation with the NLC: “Your affiliation greatly encourages us to carry on the constructive work of organizing the unorganized Negro workers and developing a greater solidarity among Negro and white workers for the general good of the Labor movement.” Samuel Shore, Frank Crosswaith, and Winifred Gittens to Charles Zimmerman, 20 February 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 3; Minutes of Educational Committee of Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., February 18, 1936, Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., Jan. 1, 1936 to Dec. 31, 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Box 1, Folder 1936.

27 Minutes of the Negro Labor Committee Meeting, May 14th 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 130, Folder 4 and Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 2, Reel 1.
maintain not only financial support, but also regular attendance at meetings, making it a challenge to carry out even the formalities of organizational life. Thus, Crosswaith suggested reorganizing the NLC and, in effect, starting over to make it more effective. He reminded those to whom he wrote his letter that although at the committee’s birth progressive elements of organized labor had offered their financial support, that support never materialized. He explained that without the necessary funds, his organization was handicapped and understaffed, and thus much of its efforts were aimed not at helping black workers, but at begging for funding. Therefore, he asked if leaders of various unions would attend a new labor conference in December and whether they’d attend monthly meetings. Evidence suggests that Crosswaith received a mixed response. The continued failure of union leaders to commit to funding and participating in the NLC thus continued.

Once again, members of the committee who belonged to the ILGWU, including May Walter and Edith Ransom of Local 22, made a direct plea to David Dubinsky for support. The International had not been responsive to their previous pleas, so they went directly to its leader to remind him that they had done much for the union, and that they expected an answer. They made a point of stating that they understood if ILGWU leaders were busy as a result of trying to promote the American Labor Party, but they claimed that the Harlem Labor Center was on its last legs. It was coming time to renew the lease on the building that housed the center and most speculated that the NLC did not have the money to pay the rental fee. To make it clear that the black community was becoming

28 Frank R. Crosswaith to Isidor Laderman, Murray Bacon, Abe Miller, Percival A. Moore, Morris Feinstein, Benjamin McLaurin, and [unidentified] Imbaltic, 21 October 1936, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Reel 1, Box 1.
frustrated, they told Dubinsky that Harlem’s workers were well aware of the ILGWU’s indifference.

This was especially notable as Walter and Ransom compared the Negro Labor Committee to the United Hebrew Trades. Clearly, they realized that they were talking to a largely Jewish administration, so they stressed the similarity of fledgling black labor organizations to the earliest Jewish labor organization. Thus, for the ILGWU to let African American unionists down would be to betray a group who looked to Jewish unionists for a model of effective labor organizing. They explained that a lack of financial support could be seen as racially motivated and that enemies of the union would seek to use that perceived discrimination as ammunition against the labor movement.  

Certainly, communists could also use it in an attempt to lure black workers away from the ILGWU and to their more radical organizations. Walter and Ransom saw the new National Negro Congress as one such organization, and they had reason to be concerned as to how the Congress’ establishment would effect the NLC’s relations with the ILGWU.

The ILGWU was an enthusiastic participant in the new Congress, but was growing increasingly suspicious of the NLC. In April, Frank Crosswaith had to reassure David Dubinsky that the committee had not formed its own united front with communists. He reminded Dubinsky that he had been a main target of communists, who sought to discredit and destroy him in the competition for the allegiances of African American workers. Crosswaith said that because of such attacks, he would never trust the

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29 Maxine Dandridge, Norman Donawa, May Walter, Anna Belle Curry, Edith Ransom, Winifred Gittens to David Dubinsky, 7 November 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/002. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 130, Folder 4.
communists and would never work with them. Yet, he then accused the NNC of being dominated and engineered by communists. A. Philip Randolph’s involvement in the Congress was not enough to quell accusations of communist control. Thus, Crosswaith told Dubinsky that he feared that local sections of the Congress would threaten local African American labor organizations: “If they can eliminate us in New York City, then their success will be assured and they will use the Negro in the labor movement for a campaign of destruction.” He expressed confidence that the NLC could defeat them, but was concerned that the lack of financial aid would hinder his organization from doing so.

Crosswaith tied the fate of African American socialist labor groups to the financial support of friendly, mostly white unions. Thus, if Dubinsky wanted such groups to make headway and to defeat the communists, the ILGWU would have to live up to its promises to give the Negro Labor Committee financial support; and it couldn’t use fantasies of communist involvement as an excuse not to live up to those promises. At that time, records suggest that while many ILGWU locals gave to the NLC independently, the union itself was inconsistent in paying dues. In fact, at some point in 1936, both the Educational Department of the International and Local 22, perhaps the committee’s most vocal supporters, withdrew financial support. It is unclear why this happened, and support was quickly reestablished, but the temporary withdrawal represented the instability of funding for the NLC.30

30 Local 22 reestablished support by July, when its executive board agreed to give the NLC $25 in exchange for an advertisement in a pamphlet the committee was publishing. Minutes of the Executive Board of the Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., July 7, 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1936; Frank R. Crosswaith to David Dubinsky, 27 April 1936, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union records, #5780/002, Box 130, Folder 4; Minutes of the Negro Labor Committee Meeting, May 14th 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Box 130, Folder 4 and Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 2, Reel 1.
In fact, by May, the committee was making direct appeals to the ILGWU’s General Executive Board for support. Committee members who also belonged to the International, including Edith Ransom of Local 22, sent the Board a letter appealing for support to keep the Harlem Labor Center open. Not only did they point out that ILGWU members were among the thousands taking advantage of the center’s facilities, but they also pointed out that despite the union’s liberal image, some of its black members still felt discriminated against and the HLC was where they went for advice. The letter’s authors claimed that many of those who felt victimized only felt reassured when they sought advice from fellow ILGWU members at the center. They asked for $1,000 to support the HLC, saying that without that money, they’d have to close its doors or sublet its building. Additionally, they asked the Board to endorse the purchase of stamps the NLC was selling, so that locals, especially those in New York, could begin to make those purchases in batches. Just as Frank Crosswaith had done, they reminded the union’s leadership that the National Negro Congress was hoping for the Committee to fail, so it could cultivate communism in Harlem without NLC opposition.\footnote{Norman Donawa, Maxine Dandridge, Lyra Sixto, Anna Belle Curry, Edith Ransom, Winifred Gittens to General Executive Board, International Ladies Garment Workers Union, 15 May 1936, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 130, Folder 4 and Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 1, Reel 1.}

ILGWU President David Dubinsky and members of the union’s General Executive Board met with Crosswaith and the treasurer of the NLC over the summer of 1937 and struck a funding agreement. They decided that each ILGWU local affiliated with the NLC would be asked to pay $10 in monthly dues to the Committee, double the $5 they had previously been responsible for paying. The NLC decided to ask other
affiliate unions to agree to a similar increase in dues.\textsuperscript{32} However, it became increasingly apparent that unions were unwilling to increase their payments, and that the ILGWU was not to be relied upon to live up to its agreements with the Committee, either.

While the support of the ILGWU central leadership remained in question, Local 22 had a more mutually beneficial relationship with the Negro Labor Committee because so many of their events were promoted jointly. 1937 was a year in which the fledgling NLC focused on cultivating its membership and garnering more power in the community. Not surprisingly, the Committee’s relationship with Local 22 was seen as key to achieving these goals. Indeed, In January, NLC Secretary Thyra Edwards wrote Charles Zimmerman to tell him that in the organization’s formative years, guidance from trade unions was critical. She said that such support from Local 22 was particularly important because it had an African American membership of several thousand. The cooperation with mostly white unions was a direct reflection of Frank Crosswaith’s belief that just as unions that barred African Americans were wrong, so were African American labor organizations that were open only to black workers. He felt that if the NLC was to oppose racial discrimination in white unions, it had to oppose similar discrimination by black unions. Hence, he insisted that his organization work with unions like the ILGWU, whose leadership was almost completely white.\textsuperscript{33}

In trying to encourage more involvement from progressive trade unions in the NLC, Frank Crosswaith continued to solicit financial assistance from them. For instance,

\textsuperscript{32} Minutes, Meeting, Negro Labor Committee, September 8, 1937, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 2, Folder 1.

\textsuperscript{33} Thyra Edwards to Charles Zimmerman, 22 January 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 27, Folder 4; “Higher Wages Boost Earning of Harlemites.”
members of the Committee had appeared before the ILGWU General Executive Board numerous times to ask that they be allowed to sell tickets to all organizations under the ILGWU umbrella in order to finance activities at the Harlem Labor center. The Board, however, rejected this request, instead proposing an increase in monthly payments to the NLC by the International and its locals. Yet, funding was not just a matter of formal agreement, but it also often relied on trust. Progressive unions, such as the United Hebrew Trades (UHT), demonstrated their close relationship to Crosswaith and the NLC by loaning the organization money. Morris Feinstone, Secretary-Treasurer of the UHT, wrote to Crosswaith upon receiving his repayment of a loan:

You see when I advanced you that loan a year ago, I knew you would surely return it, as soon as your circumstances made it possible! Had I lent that money to anyone else, in the labor movement, I might have entertained doubts – but I know my friends, and therefore the return of the sum was no surprise.

Clearly, funding hinged largely on the personal relationships between progressive labor leaders, demonstrating that political stances and organizational platforms weren’t all that mattered in creating coalitions.

By 1938, as the Negro Labor Committee ran the Harlem Labor Center and the Harlem branch of Local 22 members was housed there, the local and the NLC had become inextricably linked. When Local 22’s Winifred Gittens wrote Fannia Cohn to update her on the success of ILGWU educational programming in Harlem, she was writing about the success of classes at the HLC. Not surprisingly, Gittens’ report

34 President-General Secretary David Dubinsky to Charles S. Zimmerman, 11 August 1937, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 84, Folder 7A.

reflected what ILGWU officials had been saying about their educational programming: that it was going well, but ultimately not garnering the participation the union had hoped for. Indeed, in late January 1938, Gittens wrote Cohn that classes at the HLC were “progressing nicely, but still not as well attended as we would like.”

Cohn replied in March, however, that despite the low attendance, the ILGWU was happy to cooperate with the Negro Labor Committee in making the HLC into a real center for workers in Harlem. Cohn further assured her that the union was aware of the NLC’s challenges in promoting the center. It was clear that the ILGWU believed in the Harlem Labor Center and, by default, in the NLC, but its leaders recognized that as difficult as it was to cultivate participation in educational programming generally, it was that much harder to do so in a community racked by high unemployment and a historic distrust of labor unions. Yet, the NLC needed the ILGWU just as badly as the union needed the Committee, not only for funding, but also for basic attendance of its events. By 1938, anywhere from half to almost all students attending certain classes, groups, and events at the HLC were from Local 22. Thus, in order for the center to survive, which was critical to the NLC’s survival, the local had to be effective in organizing and militarizing Harlem’s workers. 36

At the end of November that year, Frank Crosswaith sent Local 22 a letter informing its members of the failure of its delegates to the NLC to attend monthly meetings of the Negro Labor Assembly. In fact, the local’s delegates were frequently absent, meaning they had to be reported to the local, so that they could be replaced with

36 Winfred Gittens to Fannia Cohn, 24 January 1938, and Fannia Cohn to Winifred Gittens, 14 March 1938, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library.
delegates who had a “greater sense of appreciation” of the NLC’s work. He sternly asked Local 22 to make sure it sent the required three delegates to the final Committee meeting of the year, to be held on December 9th. The minutes from that meeting indicate that delegates from Local 22 did attend, as did delegates from at least five other ILGWU locals. Edith Ransom, one of the Local 22 delegates, reported at that meeting that her local might be willing to share some of its airtime on its hour-long radio broadcast on radio station WEVD with the NLC.37

In 1939, the ILGWU and the Negro Labor Committee were more intertwined than ever. A list of the NLC’s affiliated unions for that year shows that the union, nine of its locals, and its Joint Board Dress and Waistmakers’ Union were all affiliates, as was the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. ILGWU Educational Department Secretary Fannia Cohn argued that the most important accomplishment of the Negro Labor Committee was to act as a meeting ground to foster interracial contact, and thus undermine prejudice. Labor unionists gained greater understanding of people of different races and nationalities by working side by side with them. Cohn thus felt that the educational, cultural, and recreational activities conducted by the ILGWU contributed greatly to that understanding. By playing, performing, and thinking through critical issues together, workers learned that no one racial or national group had a monopoly on intelligence or talent, and that everyone had a contribution to make to the labor movement. By associating with the organized labor movement, Cohn asserted, NLC members gained a stronger economic position and greater social prestige. Yet, through such associations,

37 Frank R. Crosswaith to Dressmakers Union Local #22, 28 November 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 3; Minutes of the Negro Labor Assembly, Dec. 9, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Box 130, Folder 4.
African Americans also contributed to the cultural life of the labor movement. Thus, she saluted the Negro Labor Committee for its support of what she called “real Americanism,” a commitment to defending workers’ freedom and equality no matter their skin color or national background.\textsuperscript{38}

\textit{The Negro Labor Committee Establishes Itself}

The Negro Labor Committee’s relationship with unions like the ILGWU was understandable given the tensions among black labor organizations in the mid to late 1930s. When the National Negro Congress was created, Frank Crosswaith immediately took aim, and he was similarly critical of the National Urban League, but not for radicalism. Instead, he claimed that the reason socialists had difficulty reaching African Americans was because of the influence of conservative groups like the NUL that advocated the maintenance of the status quo in economic and social conditions. He accused the League of being financed by wealthy white employers, of advocating strikebreaking, which left many blacks unemployed once strikes ended, and of depressing wages for all workers through these policies.

The National Urban League’s primary mission was to find employment for African Americans, and it largely worked within the system to fulfill this mission. In Crosswaith’s opinion, this goal, and the NUL’s approach to attaining it, were woefully inadequate:

\ldots we are further convinced that in modern society the man who works can get more for his labor when he organizes into a bona fide labor union, and that he can get most for his labor when he intelligently relates his work and wages problem to his ballot. This is elementary of course, but I

\textsuperscript{38} Fannia M. Cohn, “Real Americanism,” 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 6B, Folder 7.
mention it here because in this day of super-radicals and parlor revolutionists, there are some people who think that the thing for the Negro or white worker to do is to have some governmental agency now under the domination and influence of the workers’ class enemy step in and correct the wrongs inflicted upon the worker.39

Clearly, Frank Crosswaith felt that black workers had to join unions and vote for socialists to most effectively combat inadequate employment institutions that served only the interests of employers. Thus, while he perceived the communist-led National Negro Congress as attacking the socialist black labor movement from one side, he saw the NUL as attacking it from the other.

Therefore, in anticipation of the National Negro Congress in the fall, the Negro Labor Committee decided at its October 6th meeting not to endorse the NNC or send delegates to its event. The established NLC policy was to only endorse labor organizations already endorsed by unions affiliated with the Committee. However, Frank Crosswaith did speak at the Congress at a session on “Industrial Unionism and the Negro.” His pamphlet “True Freedom for Negro and White Workers,” co-written with Boston NAACP Secretary Alfred Baker Lewis, was also advertised in the Congress program as part of the full-page greeting sent from the Negro Work Committee of the Socialist Party.40

Crosswaith’s opinion of the NNC and NUL reinforced his reliance on sympathetic unions, most notably his own, the ILGWU, to support the Negro Labor Committee. Most of the Committee’s events were discussed and promoted at Local 22 meetings, and

39 Frank R. Crosswaith to Lester Granger, Industrial Secretary, National Urban League, 4 August 1936, I:D5, NLC folder, National Urban League Records, Library of Congress.

40 Minutes of Negro Labor Committee, October 6, 1937, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Reel 2, Box 1.
members of the local who were on the Committee always promoted union events at NLC meetings. In March 1937, Local 22 appointed three local members, Edith Ransom, Eldica Riley, and Jennie Silverman to the Negro Labor Assembly, the central governing body of the NLC.41 This paved the way for these members to be involved in the Negro Labor Committee’s first anniversary celebration. Thus, the promotion of the event was targeted not just at Harlem’s African American community, but also at sympathetic labor unionists, especially those in Local 22.

Marking “a year of the most constructive work among Negroes since emancipation,” the anniversary celebration was one of the largest events in Harlem that year. Invitations called upon black and white workers to attend, and to “join hands” and dance to the swing music played by Vernon Griffith and his celebrated Val Halla Orchestra. The anniversary not only demonstrated the NLC’s commitment to bringing workers of different races together, but also proved how far-reaching the Committee’s influence had become. Although outside funding for the organization and its Harlem Labor Center continued to disappoint, representatives from many different unions and other important figures paid to send words of praise and support through placing ads in the anniversary celebration program. For instance, the support of the ILGWU was clear from the number and tone of its advertisements. President David Dubinsky sent a half-page greeting saying that his union saw the growth of the NLC as instrumental in furthering interracial solidarity in the labor movement. As in the past, he insisted that the International supported that goal because it had been a central aspect of the union’s own

41 Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., April 6, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1937.
policies, even though for many years support for such solidarity was rhetorical and did not influence policy.

Julius Hochman, ILGWU Vice President, took out a half-page ad expressing similar sentiments supporting the NLC and asserting that the welfare of black workers affected working conditions for all:

By effectively combating the ruthless exploitation of Negro workers and obtaining for large numbers the advantages of unionism, your committee has been of inestimable service not only to Negro workers but to the entire labor movement. The miserable conditions under which unorganized Negro workers are compelled to work constitute a serious threat to the labor standards of all workers.\textsuperscript{42}

ILGWU locals such as Local 25, Local 62, Local 91, Local 60, Local 89, and Local 31 took out ads, as did Local 22, whose ad quoted its Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman as saying, “We know no race, nor creed nor color. We fight together for a workers world.” The ILGWU Eastern Out of Town Department, Miscellaneous Locals Joint Committee, Educational Department, General Executive Board, and Joint Board Dress and Waistmakers Union all took out ads, as well.

Other sympathetic unions and their officials also offered their support. The United Hebrew Trades’ ad started with a strong assertion: “The Negro is the most exploited worker in America.” It went on to say that black workers had become an important part of practically every industry and thus, all unions must be open to them. The Negro Labor Committee, it explained, had helped to increase the membership of many unions, thus aiding the labor movement substantially. The United Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers International Union, who took out a full-page ad, argued that the reason the NLC was so

\textsuperscript{42} 1\textsuperscript{st} Anniversary of the Negro Labor Committee program, Frank R. Crosswaith Papers, 1917-1965, MG 100, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 2, Folder 2 and Box 3, Folder 8.
important was that it encouraged workers to organize themselves, which was the only way to ensure economic progress. Rose Schneiderman, President of the Women’s Trade Union League, somewhat ironically welcomed the Negro Labor Committee to the “fraternity” of organized labor in her half-page ad. Other allies in the labor movement, such as the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the Workmen’s Circle, the Trade Union Committee of the American League Against War and Fascism, and the New York Joint Board of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America took out ads in the first anniversary program, as well.

United Mine Workers’ President John Lewis, who was also head of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), wrote an ad emphasizing the diversity of his union, claiming that it treated blacks as equal members. He repeated the argument made in other ads that only labor organizing could provide African American workers with the opportunity to improve their conditions. Interestingly, President of the American Federation of Labor William Green also took out an ad. While on one hand this could be expected, as the Negro Labor Committee helped usher black workers into labor unions including those under the AFL umbrella, on the other hand, it was surprising to see Green openly support an organization established by socialists and closely associated with numerous CIO unions such as the ILGWU. Despite the fact that the CIO accused the AFL of tacitly allowing member unions to practice racial discrimination, Green asserted that blacks were joining AFL unions in large numbers and becoming responsible, productive members. However, he continued to blame African American workers for accepting low wages and poor conditions, thus undermining the gains the labor movement sought to achieve. He thus seemed to contradict himself, congratulating blacks
for being good workers and good unionists on one hand and chastising them for setting labor’s cause back on the other, patronizingly telling them that they could better themselves “if they are ready to make the effort.”

In addition to labor allies, political allies showed their support through their program ads. Not surprisingly, many of these came from socialist organizations, such as the League for Industrial Democracy, the Socialist Party of Massachusetts, and the Socialist Call, which was the official organ of the Socialist Party. Socialist leader Norman Thomas invoked socialist utopianism in his call for interracial unionism, saying in his ad that there would be no hatred in the ultimate cooperative society, where peace and plenty would be attained for all workers. Thus, socialist believers had to support any organization that fought discrimination, particularly in the labor movement, whose success was key to socialist goals.

Yet, other political perspectives were also represented in the NLC’s program. The American Labor Party’s B. Charney Vladeck, who was also head of the Jewish Labor Committee, took out a fascinating ad where he advocated vigilance against discrimination. Yet, he not only attacked discrimination against African Americans, but also defended those discriminated against because of “the size of their nose.” Clearly, he felt that Jews and African Americans shared similar experiences of discrimination. He was particularly harsh in his analysis of the labor movement: “And while nearly everybody in the Labor Movement is rendering lip service to the principles of equality of labor, in real life only few practice it and still fewer fight for it.” Thus, even progressive unions like the ILGWU needed to live up to their rhetoric of equality, and progressive Jewish leaders like Vladeck pledged to make sure that the Jewish leadership of
progressive unions were implementing that rhetoric as policy. The Communist Party organ *Workers’ Age* took out an ad, as did the Harlem Division of the Communist Party. Finally, Republican mayor of New York Fiorello La Guardia, who campaigned for reelection in 1937 on the American Labor Party ticket, sent his greetings, called himself a friend of the Committee, and encouraged widespread support of its goals.

African American organizations like the Negro Labor News Service and the New York Urban League also took out ads in the NLC anniversary program to show their support, while various Harlem organizations also lent their support. These included the *New York Amsterdam News*, as well as the Amsterdam News unit of the New York Newspaper Guild, and a group of teachers representing the Harlem Labor Center including Frank Crosswaith and Local 22 member Winifred Gittens. The Savoy Ballroom and the Lido Ballroom, both of which hosted many unions’ social events, also took out prominent ads. Clearly, the Negro Labor Committee was viewed by many not only as a landmark African American organization, but also as a fixture in the Harlem community.

Committee members were not shy to accept such accolades. In its statement at the beginning of its anniversary program, the NLC claimed to provide an invaluable service to black workers and to organized labor in terms of promoting organizing and solidarity, and advancing worker education. This, the Committee claimed, caused more African Americans to be aware of their class interest than ever before. As a result of participating in unions in unprecedented numbers, NLC members claimed that black workers were achieving greater prestige and power. They also asserted that interracial unionism educated white workers on the experiences of black workers. As various groups of white workers had done, black workers were now fighting for equality and fair treatment. Yet,
the NLC claimed that they could bring something unique to the labor movement: their culture. The Committee held events like their first anniversary dance to celebrate African American culture and use it to their benefit. They felt that the “spiritual and cultural gifts which the Negro has made to America—his music, his song, his rustic working-class philosophy” benefited America and strengthened the labor movement.43

Despite the wide-ranging support for the Negro Labor Committee indicated by the participants in its first anniversary celebration and the greetings in its anniversary program, Frank Crosswaith sought to build further relationships within the black community to strengthen the Committee’s position. As part of this effort, Crosswaith had held a conference with black leaders in his office at the Harlem Labor Center on January 29th to discuss how to centralize and expand the NLC, but he found himself entering a political minefield. Manning Johnson, a prominent communist in Harlem, told the conference that he wanted to publicize the work of the NLC and the activities taking place in the Harlem Labor Center among trade union members. He spoke of the strike the pharmacists’ union was staging at the center and the assistance they were receiving from the NLC. He felt that such unions that were going to the Negro Labor Committee and its center for help should join with the Committee to create a larger, more powerful union.

Ben Davis, another prominent communist who had gained national notoriety as Angelo Herndon’s defense lawyer, also attended the conference. He reinforced the united front approach that was now being practiced in Local 22, saying that socialists and communists

43 Ibid.; Letter from Frank Crosswaith, 8 February 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 3; Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library.
had proven they could work together, meaning that the NLC should be able to work with communists to confront challenges facing black labor.

In response, Crosswaith told Davis to write him a personal letter to this effect, so that he could recruit someone from the Socialist Party to engage in discussions with Davis or other representatives of the Communist Party. He also concluded that he wanted the cooperation of progressive trade unions in helping to build up the NLC. Notably, though, despite the participation of communists in this conference, and Crosswaith’s pledges to work with them in labor’s best interest, he stressed that the Negro Labor Committee should not get involved in politics so as to keep it from being seen as a political organization. Despite the clear socialist bent of the NLC’s leadership, Crosswaith believed that associations with political groups, especially communists, could cripple his Committee’s ability to reach out to a diverse range of workers. This was also consistent with the policy to avoid involvement in the controversy between the AFL and the CIO, which had political implications and created a schism within the labor movement.44

In addition to concerns about politics, by the end of 1937, it was clear that the Negro Labor Committee was struggling to inspire enthusiasm amongst Harlem’s workers. At its final meeting of the year, the Committee’s Negro Labor Assembly made a troubling announcement. Its Entertainment Committee stated that because attendance of its meetings was so poor, it had to cancel its New Year’s Eve dance and postpone it until February. This event, which many felt should have been well attended, couldn’t garner

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44 Minutes, January 29, 1937, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Reel 1, Box 1; Minutes of Negro Labor Committee, October 6, 1937, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Reel 2, Box 1.
enough interest for planning to take place. Lack of interest and lack of funding would continue to plague NLC events, including social dances and educational classes, and became a constant underlying threat to the Committee’s existence, a sad development at the end of a year that seemed to hold more promise than peril for the organization.

Although it had to postpone its New Year’s dance, the NLC also saw positive signs by the end of the year. Most notably, four unions and union locals affiliated with the organization in the last few months of the year: the Transport Workers’ Union, and ILGWU locals 10, 102, and 132. This not only expanded membership, but also funding opportunities. Frank Crosswaith also saw the Harlem Labor Center as a thriving institution, claiming that it had become a place that workers went to on a daily basis to get advice and help adjudicate labor disputes. That represented a major change from the years before, when black workers often took their grievances to philanthropic organizations that were ignorant of and often unsympathetic to labor unionism, and that often espoused anti-union messages. By acting as a resource for workers and unions, Crosswaith argued that the Harlem Labor Center had both literally and figuratively established the Negro Labor Committee’s place in the community.

Crosswaith made a point of sending year-end letters out publicizing his Committee’s accomplishments. They said, in part: “As a result of our healthy, constructive work the number of organized Negro and white workers in Harlem today is over 50,000…Through our educational work a firmer bond of solidarity now exists

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45 Minutes, Regular Monthly Meeting, Negro Labor Assembly, December 10, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 130, Folder 4.
among the Negro and white workers." While the numbers may have represented an
accurate approximation of union enrollment in Harlem, the participation of those
unionists in activities such as striking, and social, athletic, and educational programming
was most critical to insuring their contribution to the labor movement.

One of the biggest events of the following year was National Sharecroppers
Week, which focused on black agricultural laborers in the South and their attempts to
organize to fight oppressive conditions and racial violence. Small events were held
throughout the week at the Harlem Labor Center under the auspices of the Southern
Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), an interracial CIO union of agricultural workers from the
Cotton Belt, and the Harlem chapter of the Workers Defense League, a socialist
organization set up to defend a black sharecropper who had been accused of murdering
his employer, which was part of a campaign that led to a constitutional challenge of the
poll tax. On March 7th, a large rally was held at the HLC to mark the start of National
Sharecroppers Week. The guest speakers at the event were Frank Crosswaith, Reverend
Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, and NAACP Secretary
Walter White. Numerous representatives from the STFU also spoke to update the crowd
on their union’s efforts. Then, on March 13th, the Workers Defense League held a mass
meeting to celebrate the close of National Sharecroppers Week. Once again, Crosswaith,
Rev. Clayton Powell, Jr., White, and STFU representatives spoke, as did figures from the

46 Frank R. Crosswaith to Friends and Brothers, 27 December 1937, and Regular Monthly Meeting, Negro
Labor Assembly, December 10, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box
130, Folder 4; Frank R. Crosswaith, “RE: Negro & White Workers,” September 30, 1937, Frank R.
Crosswaith Papers, 1917-1965, MG 100, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 5, Folder
16.
United Laundry Workers and the Building Service Employers Union, two other heavily black unions.\(^\text{47}\)

Some of the events at the Harlem Labor Center didn’t carry such an explicit agenda. The second anniversary of the Negro Labor Committee on May 21st, for instance, was a largely neutral celebration. The night’s program included a dance held in the center’s auditorium and the performance of several skits from *Pins and Needles*. In his invitation letter to friends of the NLC, Frank Crosswaith urged unions affiliated with the Committee to accept tickets as a demonstration of their solidarity regardless of race, creed, or color. He further urged that upon accepting those tickets, unions send a check to the NLC. He reiterated the need his organization had for funding, especially from progressive elements of labor, complaining that philanthropists gave to black churches and other institutions, but not to trade unions to build them up or promote interracial solidarity among workers. He also reminded the invitees that the NLC was established to serve black workers just as the United Hebrew Trades was founded to serve Jewish workers and the Women’s Trade Union League was created to defend female workers.

Thus, as the NLC’s second anniversary approached, its leader cast it as an heir and defender of labor tradition.\(^\text{48}\)

As much as the event itself was not explicitly political, the dance committee that helped organize the anniversary celebration was dominated by socialists including A. Philip Randolph and Socialist Party leader B. Charney Vladeck. Vladeck sent greetings in

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\(^\text{48}\) Letter from Frank R. Crosswaith, 15 April 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 3.
the anniversary program, lauding the Negro Labor Committee as a tool to resist the “fears, hatreds and sufferings” of war, fascism, and racial discrimination that were plunging the world into “madness and confusion.” A group called The socialists of Harlem and the Socialist Party of Massachusetts also sent greetings, and Frank Crosswaith’s booklet *True Freedom for Negro and White Labor*, a socialist view of economic challenges affecting blacks, was advertised in the anniversary program.

Finally, national socialist leader Norman Thomas sent his greetings, saying,

> The place for the Negro worker is in a labor movement in which he shares as brother and comrade. Without such a movement fascism will win in America. The recognition of the Negro is the test of democracy in and out of the labor movement.\(^49\)

For socialists, African Americans’ participation in the labor movement was critical not only in the struggle for racial equality and class-based empowerment, but also in the fight against fascism.

However, other political viewpoints were represented at the event. American Labor Party Executive Secretary Alex Rose was also on the NLC anniversary dance committee. He sent greetings from the Party, arguing that it was already a force on the political stage. He also claimed that the Party was leading the fight against discrimination, and to that end, it would offer the NLC cooperation on all problems concerning African Americans. Mayor LaGuardia, who was an ALP fusion candidate for reelection the previous year, also sent greetings. David Dubinsky, solidly in the American Labor Party camp, was also on the dance committee, once again reflecting the closeness of the ILGWU to the NLC. Julius Hochman’s continuing service as NLC Vice-Chairman

cemented that tie. In fact, Frank Crosswaith himself had reassured President Dubinsky that the black community held the ILGWU in high esteem in a letter he’d sent just weeks before the anniversary celebration. He had told Dubinsky that while many black newspapers remained critical of organized labor because of past and, in some cases, continuing racial discrimination, they invariably referred to the ILGWU as the exception. Dubinsky’s was a union in which Harlem’s workers felt they could be treated fairly.  

Hence, it was no surprise that ILGWU locals 22, 23, 25, 35, 38, 40, 60, 62, 91, 142, the Joint Board Dress and Waistmakers’ Union, the ILGWU Educational Department, and the General Executive Board all sent greetings published in the NLC anniversary program. Dubinsky and Hochman also sent their own greetings, while ILGWU members such as African American women Edith Ransom and Eldica Riley were part of the group of union delegates to the Negro Labor Committee that sent their greetings to the Committee’s anniversary. Greetings from ILGWU locals across the country also demonstrated the expansion of NLC influence. Such greetings came from Newark’s Local 21, Cincinnati’s Local 63, and the Joint Boards of South Jersey, Boston, and Kansas City.  

Other progressive unions joined the ILGWU in sending greetings in the anniversary program. A. Philip Randolph and his Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters sent greetings, as did the United Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers International Union, the New York Joint Board of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, the Joint Council Knitgoods Workers’ Union, the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL), and the

50 Letter from Frank R. Crosswaith, 15 April 1938; Frank Crosswaith to David Dubinsky, 25 April 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/002. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 130, Folder 4; Second Anniversary program, Negro Labor Committee, May 21, 1938.
Workmen’s Circle. WTUL President Rose Schneiderman chaired the NLC Program Committee, in fact. George Schuyler, editor of the NAACP’s *The Crisis* demonstrated that black unionization was also supported by his mainstream, moderate organization. He thus praised the Negro Labor Committee in his greeting, crediting it with the vast increase in black union membership in the preceding few years. Perhaps most notably, Schuyler praised Frank Crosswaith, who many moderates disliked for his more radical associations, for his leadership of the NLC.

The United Hebrew Trades sent its support, arguing that blacks could only transcend racial prejudice, a tool of capitalist domination, by organizing with fellow workers. However, the UHT declared that the Negro Labor Committee was critical not only in helping blacks, but also in strengthening the labor movement as a whole:

> You are carrying on a work of unparalleled heroism in the face of enormous obstacles, both historic and immediate, and you are accomplishing the seemingly impossible.

> The Negro question is of vital importance not only to the downtrodden and exploited Negroes but also to the whole white Labor Movement of America, which so very often forgets its own brother under the skin….

> The work you have done in the short time of your existence is the supreme test of the justice and righteousness of your cause. Your success in the future is assured because you are in the right.\(^51\)

Frank Crosswaith, in his poem at the front of the anniversary program, “The Negro Union Man On The 2nd Anniversary of the Negro Labor Committee,” expressed a similar opinion that race and class were intimately and inextricably linked.

> His poem, an acrostic spelling out the name of his organization, is as follows:

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\(^{51}\) Second Anniversary program, Negro Labor Committee, May 21, 1938.
Thus, as a little giant here he stands
Holding aloft in toil-warn hands, the key to
Equality and justice, as a Union Man.

Now he moves forward, to plow with
Ebonied hands rough and strong,
Ground which tyrants have soaked with the
Red blood of all working men,
Over the long stretch of centuries.

Lashed with the whip of slavery,
And bent with honest toil;
Broken, crushed and robbed, left
On the rack to bleed and die;
Remembered not by those who exploit him.

Cold as an iceberg though he be,
Or slaving still in mine or factory,
Millions of his kin and class will one day
March, and march to final victory.
In the fell clutch of circumstance,
Tormented by hunger and hate,
Toiling from sunrise until late,
Existing only to be exploited; he vows now to
Emerge triumphant with his class and race.\(^\text{52}\)

Certainly, a utopian socialist vision was still an important motivating factor for
Crosswaith. Yet, he knew the achievement of a utopia was not a necessary precursor to
interracial unionism. Instead, interracial unionism was necessary to the ultimate
achievement of socialist goals.

Harlem institutions like the *Amsterdam News*, as well as the Rockland Palace
ballroom, which hosted many NLC and ILGWU events, also sent greetings. Finally, the
office staff of the NLC and the Harlem Labor Center, which included Winifred Gittens of
Local 22, sent their greetings to the anniversary, as well. In a note representing the Negro
Labor Committee and the Negro Labor Assembly, Crosswaith asserted that his

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
organization had realized a large portion of its program in its first two years. The NLC had reason to celebrate on the occasion of its second anniversary, as Crosswaith claimed the Committee was responsible for the elevation of wage and living standards for 50,000 of Harlem’s workers.\textsuperscript{53}

\textit{Crosswaith’s Philosophy and the NLC in the Late ‘30s}

The organization of black workers proved to Frank Crosswaith that the emergence of the “New Negro” was aiding in the destruction of the conception of the black worker as one who passively endured economic subjugation “so long as he had Jesus.” Instead, black workers were now actively engaged in the struggle for economic and social justice. Crosswaith thus viewed the Negro Labor Assembly as a model for interracial unionism:

\begin{quote}
The Negro Labor Assembly which is composed of three delegates from each union affiliated with the Negro Labor Committee continues to grow in prestige, power and influence. Negro and white delegates sitting side by side as absolute equals during the monthly sessions of the Assembly, affords an example to us of the future relations of the peoples of the world of all races, creeds and nationalities, when they shall have shed their prejudices and learn to appreciate their common origin, their common daily needs and their common final fate.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

As he had indicated in his poem, Crosswaith saw the position of the black worker as inherently tied to the overall working-class agenda. Accordingly, he argued that the Negro Labor Committee had influenced the thinking of blacks in Harlem more toward economic and industrial matters than ever before. Finally, he felt that if African Americans could transcend a history of slavery and racial prejudice to achieve economic equality, that would also represent the transcendence of the forces of fascism and Nazism.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{54} Letter from Frank R. Crosswaith, 15 April 1938.
that sought to destroy democracy and plunge the world into war.\textsuperscript{55} Hence, Crosswaith tied the NLC to the larger progressive fight against fascism that became a lynchpin of American liberalism.

It was perhaps this fight that bound Crosswaith and his Committee most closely with Jewish unionists. Crosswaith and fellow socialists were also in agreement with the National Negro Congress and the National Urban League on the issue of fascism. They all saw the reactionary forces gathering in Germany, Italy, and Spain as a fundamental threat to workers around the world. Crosswaith felt that democracy had to be protected, as it provided critical means for the working class to defend its interests. As a result, he claimed that black garment workers in the ILGWU stood “shoulder to shoulder and side by side” with working-class sisters and brothers to combat fascism and preserve democracy.\textsuperscript{56}

In early November 1938, at the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the United Hebrew Trades (UHT), Crosswaith spoke of the forces of fascism, Nazism, and Ku Kluxism as subjecting the entire working class, but especially black and Jewish workers, to the tortures of social and economic oppression. It was for this reason that he claimed the existence of organizations like the UHT was so critical. He often described the Negro Labor Committee as working off the UHT model. When Jewish workers were attacked as foreign outsiders by labor leaders and union members in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, they founded the Hebrew Trades to organize all Jewish workers and, largely through education, to win equality within the labor movement. Crosswaith felt that the UHT had

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.; Frank Crosswaith to David Dubinsky, 25 April 1938.

been so successful that Jewish workers had not only become more generally accepted as
an equal in the ranks of labor, but also were more organized than any other group of
workers. Jews were also among labor’s most able and loyal leaders, in Crosswaith’s
opinion, and as a result of the UHT’s work, the most progressive labor groups were those
with predominantly Jewish membership and leadership. The NLC chairman wanted
blacks to follow in the Jewish workers’ footsteps.\(^57\)

Even though Jews had to fight for equality within the labor movement, unlike
blacks they didn’t have to fight for the most basic right of the working class:
employment. While many Jews found work in the garment industry under Jewish
employers, the number of African American employers across every field of labor was
negligible. Thus, Crosswaith established the Negro Labor Committee to help African
American workers with the challenges they faced and to encourage them to cooperate
with white workers in improving the fortunes of the working class. Crosswaith’s close
relationship with the ILGWU was no accident. The union was one of the most
progressive largely because its members and leaders were mostly Jewish, so it was a
leader in terms of its treatment of black workers, and it provided a model for organization
that Crosswaith could imitate in his attempts to establish independent black labor
organizations.

The United Hebrew Trades’s invitation to Crosswaith to speak at its 50\(^{th}\)
anniversary was a sign that Jewish labor leaders recognized the importance not only of
Crosswaith himself, but also of black labor organizing in general. The invitation was a
sign of both respect and solidarity, and Crosswaith responded by stretching out “the hand

\(^57\) Frank Crosswaith, “United Hebrew Trades,” November 7, 1938, Frank R. Crosswaith Papers, 1917-1965,
MG 100, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 5, Folder 17.
of working class comradeship” to the officers and members of the UHT across barriers of color and religion. This demonstration of solidarity seemed to be the embodiment of the Negro Labor Committee’s logo, which turned the Socialist Party’s symbol of two hands clasped to an image of a black and a white hand clasped surrounded by the words “Black and White Workers Unite!” It is important to point out that Crosswaith declared the interracial workers’ agenda was to build a cooperative commonwealth. For him, and for many of the Jewish labor leaders in the UHT and the ILGWU, solidarity was built on a foundation of socialist ideology.

The strength of the NLC’s connections to Jewish labor leaders and its role in the fight against fascism were most forcefully demonstrated in the telegram it sent to President Roosevelt at the end of 1938. In it, the Committee claimed to represent the organized labor movement among African Americans in joining with people of every color and religion to protest against Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany. As Frank Crosswaith pointed out in his speech to the United Hebrew Trades, the NLC declared that because blacks and Jews shared a history of oppression, they were sympathetic to each other’s suffering in America and abroad. Thus, the Committee called on Roosevelt to protest against the persecution of Jews in Germany and against intolerance everywhere.

At the end of 1938, the Negro Labor Committee wrote up a report of its activities over the course of the year. It had organized and procured a charter for salesmen who became the Sales and Service Employees Union Local 232, which began as a small all-black union, but came to be predominantly white by the end of the year. It aided the

58 Ibid.
59 Minutes of the Negro Labor Assembly, December 9, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/002. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 130, Folder 4.
Laundry Workers Union in organizing new members and solidifying its ranks, hosting the union’s elections in the Harlem Labor Center. The Committee also helped organize workers in meat packinghouses, with the United Meat Workers #635 especially benefiting, and reorganized the Barbers Union #8, which had been struggling and turned to the NLC for rescue. It further assisted unions of bakers, bookkeepers and stenographers, dry goods workers, millinery workers, hat salesmen, shoe salesmen, chauffeurs, grocery clerks, longshoremen, school and library employees, transport workers, and newsstand workers. The Committee stressed educational programming, having offered 36 lectures on workers’ problems in cooperation with the WPA Adult Workers’ Education division over the course of the year.

The Committee declared its cooperation with any unions that wanted to sponsor classes in the Harlem Labor Center. The Laundry Workers Union and the ILGWU had already been consistently working with the NLC on this basis. As far as cultural activities went, the NLC assisted The Negro Theatre Group in producing a play, *Our Daily Bread*, which was about the economic circumstances of African Americans. In addition to helping workers, the Committee was also intent on aiding the unemployed, initiating an Employment Placement Service. By the end of the year, the service had received hundreds of employment applications and was able to place many of the applicants. The NLC also worked with the moderate NAACP and Urban League, in addition to more socialistic unions like ILGWU Local 22. The Committee closed its 1938 report by saying that its services and the facilities of the Harlem Labor Center were at the disposal of all
legitimate labor groups regardless of affiliation.\textsuperscript{60} Though Frank Crosswaith was a well-known socialist, by 1938, his organization was working across political and racial boundaries to achieve whatever gains were possible for workers in Depression-era Harlem.

This was clear in an article Crosswaith had written for the \textit{Workmen’s Circle} in late March discussing May Day that year. He used the opportunity to discuss the spread of fascism and its hostility to the working class. He argued that Nazis, fascists, and Ku Klux Klan members sought to fan the flames of racial and religious hatred in order to divide people so that they could more easily advance their agendas. Instead, he said that this was the time for the working class to recommit to unity across lines of race, creed, gender, and nationality. As proof of that, he explained that over the previous few years, African Americans had begun to find their place in organized labor. They had increasingly come to the realization that workers had to fight for their own emancipation from “economic and political enslavement.”\textsuperscript{61}

As a corollary, Crosswaith emphasized the alliance between blacks and Jews, shaped by common experiences as persecuted minorities and oppressed workers. In speaking at the rally to a largely Jewish crowd, he said:

Most of you come from a race which like mine, has carried down the stretches of the centuries the cross of persecution, cruelty and injustice. Tonight in Europe, your faith like mine in Georgia, is unsafe … You and I together know what it is to be a minority group persecuted in this world. You and I know what it means to be born from the womb of a working woman and the child of a working man. And because of our common


\textsuperscript{61} Frank Crosswaith, “May Day,” \textit{Workmen’s Circle}, March 27, 1939.
knowledge,--because of the common hill that we have been forced to climb, I contend tonight that we have everything in common. We have every reason under the sun to stick together to fight together, and if necessary to die together!\footnote{Frank R. Crosswaith, “Friends, and Fellow Working Men and Women” (speech, 1939), Frank R. Crosswaith Papers, 1917-1965, MG 100, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 5, Folder 17.}

In Crosswaith’s mind, Jews and blacks faced similar foes in Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan, respectively. However, as their encounters in garment unions seemed to bear out, they also faced common hardships as members of the working class. Thus, interracial unionism seemed most logical and necessary between these two groups.

Yet, black labor activism wasn’t just directed at forging alliances with other groups, but also aimed at demonstrating that the African American community was evolving. Crosswaith wanted all Americans to understand that the “old type of black man which has been glorified in the pages of American history,” content and servile, was gone forever. The “new Negro” now had class-consciousness and sought better working and housing conditions, and freedom from poverty and discrimination. To Crosswaith, all who shared the same consciousness and sought the same goals, no matter their skin color, should join with these new Negroes in their fight.\footnote{Ibid.}

On May 20, 1939, the Negro Labor Committee celebrated its third anniversary with a dance and floor show in the Harlem Labor Center auditorium. Frank Crosswaith maintained that his organization remained neutral in the rift between the AFL and CIO, but most of the highlighted guests at the anniversary celebration represented CIO unions, including ILGWU President David Dubinsky, Vice President Luigi Antonini, Secretary-Manager of ILGWU Local 62 Samuel Shore, and Max Zaritsky, President of the
International Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers’ Union. With speakers such as these, as well as Norman Thomas, leader of the Socialist Party of America, and Morris Feinstone of the United Hebrew Trades, the Negro Labor Committee could not feign political neutrality. The bent of the speakers demonstrated support for socialism and the American Labor Party. This was not surprising, as Frank Crosswaith had been a long-time socialist and joined the ALP ticket in 1939.

Crosswaith claimed that, by its third anniversary, the NLC was responsible for organizing over 60,000 African American workers. In an article in the *Jewish Daily Forward*, he reiterated the fact that he established the Committee on the model provided by the United Hebrew Trades and the Women’s Trade Union League to represent the interests of a particular racial segment of labor. Yet, he argued that, just as important as organizing and advocating for black workers, the NLC also enabled black and white workers to identify their common interests and work together. He went on to assert that his organization helped to awaken Harlem’s African Americans to their class interests, meaning that they would no longer be willing to act as strikebreakers, as they had for so many years in the past. However, by saying that the NLC also kept blacks from being influenced by “anti-white, anti-Union propaganda” in Harlem, Crosswaith wasn’t just speaking of the resistance to strikebreaking or of political developments.  

Certainly, African Americans were moving away from the Republican Party, which was hostile toward the labor movement, but in terms of forces in Harlem, more immediate threats came from organizations like the Harlem Labor Union, Inc. and from charismatic leaders like Father Divine.

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But when it looked back on 1939 at the end of the year, the NLC saw itself as winning black workers over to organized labor, promoting worker solidarity regardless of race, gender, nationality, and religion, and securing equal treatment within the labor movement for black unionists. In practically every industry in which blacks were employed, the Negro Labor Committee had been responsible for an increase in black union membership. Thus was, in turn, making union organizing more popular in the black community. Appreciating the importance of education in combating race prejudice and promoting labor solidarity, and the necessity for carving out a place in the community, the NLC continued to run and cooperate in educational activities held at the Harlem Labor Center. In the Committee’s report of its activities in 1939, Frank Crosswaith made a point to mention the Joint Board Laundry Workers Union and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union for their educational programs at the HLC.  

Indeed, the Negro Labor Committee viewed itself as being so successful, that it encouraged the formation of a Committee in Boston. Frank Crosswaith and Local 22 member and NLC Secretary Winifred Gittens attended a meeting of trade unionists in Boston on December 8th. Local delegates included Rose Pesotta, a well-known ILGWU organizer who was now a member of the union’s Boston Joint Board, three members of ILGWU Local 12, and two members of the NAACP. Pesotta spoke at the meeting, welcoming the Negro Labor Committee in Boston and praising its progress in New York City under Crosswaith. She also asked Crosswaith for guidance in establishing a local unit of his organization. The meeting resulted in the appointment of a committee to call a

conference to form the Boston NLC as a permanent organization. Both Rose Pesotta and Ellena Clark, one of the members of Local 12, were on that committee, solidifying the ILGWU’s role in helping extend the Negro Labor Committee’s reach.66

Another sign that the NLC was thriving was that, in addition to its attempts to set up a Committee in Boston, the organization was receiving requests to establish similar organizations in other cities where black workers were playing a prominent role, such as Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago.67 Yet, in 1940, it would become clear that the Committee’s work did not necessarily translate to settings outside of Harlem, and that political rifts could undermine what seemed to be a fledgling, broad-based organization.

Efforts to establish a Negro Labor Committee in Boston had disappointing results. At a number of meetings over the winter of 1939-1940 that were held to set up the apparatus for a new organization, dissent prevented any action from being taken. One member of the provisional committee that had been organized to set up a Boston NLC, Jerry Blackwell, seemed to be obstructing the process, questioning whether or not the committee qualified as a quorum. By February, two other members of the committee, Theophilus Nunes from the Porters Union and James Cannady of the Longshoremen’s Union, claimed they were fed up with the attempts to establish a local Committee. They

66 Minutes of Negro Labor Committee – Boston, Massachusetts, December 8, 1939, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Reel 2, Box 4.

67 Ibid.
declared that they had been “coming month after month and were tired of just talking and were quite prepared to do something.”  

By late March, the provisional committee had split. Jerry Blackwell had an ally of his, Seaton Manning, elected permanent chairman of the committee even though Manning was not a member of the committee before that time. Meanwhile, ILGWU officials believed that their representative on the committee, Ellena Clark of Local 12, had been tricked into going along with Manning’s election. In order to fight Blackwell and Manning, Educational Director of the Boston ILGWU and District Educational Council Myriam Sieve gathered with Chester Eaton of the Dining Car Waiters’ Union, Theophilus Nunes, and James Cannady, to move ahead with forming the Boston Negro Labor Committee on their own. They decided simply to ignore the efforts of Blackwell and Manning, who they viewed as obstructionists. Just as troubling, though, suspicions swirled amongst members of the provisional committee that it was falling under communist influence. Many of those who made accusations of communist infiltration threatened to leave the committee. 

However, the failed attempts at establishing a Negro Labor Committee in Boston contributed to the establishment of a much more successful organization: the United Inter-racial Labor Committee of Boston. The aim of this committee was to bring the message of trade unionism to black workers to wrest them away from the control of bosses who sought to undermine the labor movement and advance their own interests

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68 Letter, Miriam Sieve, Educational Director, Boston and District Educational Council, 6 February 1940, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 4, Folder 2.

69 Ibid.
through using blacks as strikebreakers. Established in late March, the provisional United Inter-racial Labor Committee immediately called a conference of trade union delegates to create a permanent committee. Notably, although many of its members had been involved in the efforts to establish a Negro Labor Committee in Boston, the provisional Committee decided to affiliate with the NLC in New York. Thus, Frank Crosswaith was the keynote speaker at its conference, which was held on May 12.

Considering its relationship with Crosswaith and the fact that many of the members of the failed Boston NLC were from the ILGWU, it was not surprising that one-third of the provisional United Inter-racial Committee was from the ILGWU. Although the NLC was not able to spread to cities outside New York, its spirit of interracial unity on the basis of securing better wages and conditions for workers did. The ILGWU, a firm believer in interracial unionism and ally of the Negro Labor Committee, reaped the benefits. Just days after its formation was announced, a newspaper article celebrated the United Inter-racial Labor Committee of Boston’s absence of “narrow racialism.”

Despite the setback in Boston, Crosswaith claimed that, by 1940, the NLC had accomplished a large portion of its program in its few years of existence. For instance, he credited the Negro Labor Committee with helping to awaken economic consciousness in Harlem. Over 50,000 black workers living in Harlem were now unionized and had garnered better wages and living standards as a result. Furthermore, they were ascending into positions of importance in their unions, beginning to assert their own influence on

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the labor movement. Hence, the NLC was supporting the development of “the New Negro,” an empowered African American worker conscious of his or her economic status and interests, much like the politically conscious, active “New Negro” of Harlem Renaissance thought. Blacks would no longer stand to be viewed as passive, and Frank Crosswaith specifically sought to combat the notion that blacks were satisfied with whatever their working conditions were as long as they had their religion.

To him, the Negro Labor Committee, where blacks and whites worked together, provided a model for relations between people of different races, creeds, and nationalities; a model in which people abandoned prejudice and learned to appreciate their common daily needs and their common fate. In a world where fascists and Nazis sought to turn back civilization’s march toward democracy, the NLC’s work was of historic importance. It was helping African Americans to rise up from their traditional place at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder to which slavery and race prejudice had consigned them to a plane of equality with workers of all other races.71

By 1940, the Negro Labor Committee had cemented a place in Harlem, effectively helping many of the neighborhood’s workers to become more educated and class conscious. It assisted those workers in strikes and encouraged their participation in unions like the ILGWU. Yet, black workers continued to suffer unequal treatment in the labor movement and certainly in America more broadly, and the NLC never spread beyond New York. As a steppingstone to and model for greater African American

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participation in the labor movement that was to come following World War II, though, the Negro Labor Committee was a critically important organization.

**The National Urban League’s Workers’ Bureau and Workers’ Councils**

The fervor for labor education that had become so vital to unions like the ILGWU perhaps most affected the African American community. Not only did the Negro Labor Committee make such education a priority, but established national black organizations did so, as well. By the spring of 1935, the Workers’ Bureau of the National Urban League had set up local Negro Workers’ Councils across the country. They grew so quickly that by the time the Workers’ Bureau printed its second bulletin for council members, 42 councils had been established in 17 states with approximately 30,000 total members. Their purposes were laid out by the Bureau:

- To promote the interests of Negro workers within the organized labor movement.

- To eliminate racial barriers that prevent the free admission of Negro workers into organized labor groups.

- To promote increased understanding and cooperation between white and Negro workers.

- To acquaint Negro workers with the need of workers for collective action, and the history and methods of labor organization.\(^2\)

This agenda was to be buttressed by educational activities. Each Council was to plan regular meetings for their executive committees or for their entire membership at which the problems affecting African American workers in their community could be discussed. Then, each Council was to establish workers’ education classes on the theory and practice of trade unionism. Once it made those plans, a Council would become eligible for a final

charter and thus achieve official status. Finally, the Councils were directed to make lists of speakers who would be invited to meetings and classes. Clearly, education was a cornerstone of the activism the Negro Workers’ Councils were meant to engender.

African American labor activism also encompassed demands for equality in the administration of New Deal policy. For instance, Workers’ Councils in Illinois and Ohio lobbied for the passage of legislation outlawing racial discrimination in Public Works Administration projects. Beyond that, other Councils around the country were encouraged to consult with African American leaders in their community to write similar bills to propose to their legislatures. After all, the establishment of the Councils was in large part a reaction to the disenfranchisement black workers felt they suffered as a result of the way the New Deal was implemented:

Under CWA and in large measure under PWA Negro labor sat trustingly and waited for its fair share of jobs from city, state and federal sources. NEGRO LABOR WAS BADLY FOOLED! It was given the run-around on every hand. It saw jobs withheld from colored workers entirely, or given out grudgingly. It saw the better-paid jobs given to whites, while Negroes received laboring assignments.

Under the new “work relief” program, if Negro labor sits trustingly again and waits for its fair share of work, NEGRO LABOR WILL BE BADLY FOOLED AGAIN!!!

African Americans felt that they had to fight discrimination themselves, as they couldn’t be sure anyone else had their best interests in mind.

Workers’ Councils supported organized protests against what they deemed “starvation wages” under the New Deal works programs. They also called on Congressmen to fight the provisions of the pending Wagner Labor Disputes Bill that were harmful to the interests of African American workers, and supported an amendment

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to section 8 of that bill proposed by the National Urban League. The amendment said: “It shall be unfair labor practice for a labor organization to bar from membership any worker or group of workers for reason of race or creed either by constitutional provision or by ritualistic practice.” Thus, the Councils attempted to inject the fight for civil rights into the labor movement, by seeking to outlaw both de jure and de facto racial discrimination in unions.

That is not to say that the National Urban League didn’t support the Wagner Bill, a piece of legislation so crucial to the advancement of the labor movement. The League argued that the bill represented substantial progress for black labor because of its benefits to labor more generally. If passed into law, the bill would give unions able to enroll a majority of workers in any plant or industry control of bargaining power, thus empowering unions as never before and making it easier for them to organize. Yet, in a letter to AFL President William Green, Secretary of the NUL Workers’ Bureau Lester B. Granger expressed concern that the Wagner Bill would also give unions a monopoly on representing workers when many unions still excluded African Americans either by ritual or as a result of their by-laws. Thus, the Urban League, and likely many African American workers, feared that the passage of the Wagner Bill without the suggested amendment to section 8 would strip away important protections. As a result, many black workers could be locked out of unions and therefore be more vulnerable to being fired.

The National Urban League’s Workers’ Bureau tackled the issue of racial discrimination in New Deal agencies and in the labor movement. Lester Granger explained to ILGWU Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman that the purpose of the Bureau was to serve as a vehicle for expressing African American support of pro-
labor legislation. However, he made a point of saying that support of labor only extended to unions that had “proven themselves fair, in principle and in practice, to all workers, without racial discrimination.” To back up the work of the Workers’ Bureau and Negro Workers’ Councils, the League set up Emergency Advisory Councils in every city where one of its branches was located. These Councils were made up of active community leaders already cooperating with the League to secure full rights for African Americans under the New Deal. Thus, at every level, one of the most powerful black organizations in America threw its weight behind the campaign for racial equality under the New Deal and in the labor movement. Blacks themselves were taking the lead in fighting for their rights as African Americans and as workers.

In New York, the Harlem Negro Workers’ Council reflected the agendas of Workers’ Councils around the country as they pertained to local issues. When it came to its own community, the Harlem Council focused on education. The National Urban League’s Workers’ Education Project was initiated in Harlem with four black and three white teachers on staff. A Sponsoring Committee for the project was organized to support ILGWU organizer Floria Pinkney, who had been chosen to head the project in Harlem. Thus, although ILGWU Local 22 spread workers’ education throughout Harlem, African Americans designed their own curricula through the Harlem Workers’ Council, resulting in courses on labor economics, English, drama, and music.74

In 1936, when tensions between the CIO and AFL came to a head, the NUL Workers’ Bureau predicted that those tensions could result in a split at the American Federation of Labor convention coming up that fall that would lead to the expulsion of CIO member unions. However, the Worker’s Bureau looked forward to such a split, predicting that it would lead to the breakup of the AFL and the birth of a more progressive labor movement. In a special edition of its *Workers’ Bulletin*, the Bureau laid out how the Committee of the Executive Council, which had been put in charge of laying out the AFL’s conditions to the CIO, consisted of leaders of unions known to be hostile toward black workers. The Bureau also insisted that the majority of black workers were employed in industries such as steel, rubber, and the automobile industry, all of which had proven resistant to labor organization on the basis of the AFL’s craft unionism. Thus, the NUL asserted that, in order to organize black workers and garner them greater protections, the CIO had to survive, as only industrial organization could further these goals effectively.\(^7\)

Developments in the labor movement in 1936 dovetailed with increasing black labor activism. From February 13-15, the Urban League hosted the Negro Workers’ Conference in Chicago, the first nationwide meeting of its Negro Workers’ Councils. Each Council was allowed to send three delegates and all AFL unions were invited to send representatives, as well. As a result, a large number of black workers attended, especially from the garment, steel, and automobile industries. The topic of the conference was “Tomorrow’s Prospects for Negro Workers,” and matters such as the black worker’s chance for finding jobs and maintaining those jobs, trade union participation, and the

\(^7\) *Workers’ Bulletin (Special)*, May 28, 1936.
methods and practices of state and federal employment offices were discussed. The NUL
had wanted to coordinate the efforts of its Workers’ Councils and to discuss ways that
African American workers could protect their interests in the trade union movement and
increase their participation in that movement, as well. To encourage conference delegates
to action that would help them achieve these goals, the NUL gave them all accreditation
to attend the National Negro Congress (NNC), a groundbreaking event occurring in
Chicago at the same time.76

Thanks largely to the National Urban League, the Negro Labor Committee was
not alone in its campaign in Harlem to encourage greater participation of the
neighborhood’s workers in the labor movement. Lester Granger, head of the League’s
Workers’ Education Bureau, organized the Harlem Advisory Committee of Workers
Education, which consisted of representatives from unions that were prominent in
Harlem, as well as powerful union sympathizers. Granger focused on Local 22 as the
organization that could implement effective worker education across Harlem. In a memo
to Charles Zimmerman in April 1937, he said that from his experience, it appeared that
Local 22 could do more to improve its contacts with and influence upon African
American women in the dressmaking industry in Harlem. He argued that it would be in
the local’s best interest to build up its relationship with Harlem’s middle-class leadership
because their influence in the community was so strong. Granger felt that certain
professionals and businessmen understood the importance of unions for working-class
African Americans, and that such sympathy could be augmented through better educating
the community on the plight of its industrial workers.

Granger sought to do this by having his Harlem Advisory Committee sponsor a series of meetings to which 50–75 leading middle-class figures of the Harlem community could be invited. Speakers and guests representing Local 22, both black and white, could appear at these meetings to give attendees an inside look at the labor movement and at the problems confronting the community’s workers. The goal of these meetings would be to garner larger support for Local 22, as well as for smaller unions with a presence in Harlem. This support would be needed to make up for the cost of holding such a series of meetings, as Granger anticipated that Local 22 would arrange and pay for them. Such an approach indicated the differences between the Urban League and the Negro Labor Committee. While the former had relationships, and sought to form deeper connections, with middle-class blacks, the NLC insisted that the working class was on its own. It claimed that philanthropists donated to black churches and other African American institutions, while having no knowledge of trade union methods and lacking sympathy with organized labor. Frank Crosswaith argued that, as a result, philanthropists and the agencies they funded spread anti-union sentiment. The League took a comparatively moderate tack, pushing trade unionism, but trying to do so through alliances with influential members of the community not already sympathetic to labor.

However, Lester Granger also wanted to call Harlem’s attention to the “liberality” of Local 22 and felt a quicker step for doing so than holding a series of meetings was having an event to honor Edith Ransom, Local 22’s business manager, and the first African American to hold a leadership position in the ILGWU. He proposed to Charles Zimmerman that the Harlem Advisory Committee throw a testimonial dinner in Ransom’s honor through which middle-class blacks could join with black workers to pay
homage both to the business agent and her local. Also, Granger and Zimmerman had already agreed to produce and distribute a booklet called “The Negro Worker and the American Labor Movement,” in which Local 22 would get special mention. Granger also asked that Zimmerman’s local either contribute, or get the ILGWU to contribute, to the publication of the National Urban League’s *Workers’ Council Bulletin*. The idea behind this was that the bulletins supported black participation in labor unions, and since they were coming from such an influential organization in the African American community, they could have a tremendous positive effect on encouraging blacks to join unions like the ILGWU.

In fact, the NUL even took advantage of federal agencies to extend its influence in Harlem. Lester Granger reported that during the first two months of 1937, the Harlem Advisory Committee on Workers’ Education extended the WPA Workers’ Education Project to include 11 classes in six centers. Its staff of 78 included six black teachers and two black head teachers. Granger also addressed 19 meetings across New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, often speaking on African Americans and the labor movement. Clearly, his influence and the influence of his Workers’ Bureau spanned geographic borders, helping to link the Bureau up with large federal agencies, such as the WPA, and with smaller local unions. Indeed, Granger reported in early 1937 that trade unions were

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77 Letter, Thomas Young, Chairman, Negro Labor Committee Dance Committee, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 3; Frank Crosswaith, “RE: Negro and White Workers,” Frank R. Crosswaith Papers, 1917-1965, MG 100, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 5, Folder 16.
increasingly asking for assistance from the Bureau. One such union was the ILGWU, as Local 22 continued its relationship with Granger and the Workers’ Bureau.78

By the time of the 1937 elections, just as the American Labor Party moved to attract leftists, so did the National Urban League. It spoke out more vocally than ever in support of industrial unionism, claiming that craft unions focused more on shutting out undesirable members than on organizing new members. The “undesirable” sometimes referred to Catholics and Jews, but most often it was African Americans who were not wanted in the unions. Industrial unions, however, generally took in workers regardless of race or religion. The NUL argued that these unions were better suited to confronting existing industrial conditions and that their leaders were often better educated in labor economics. The educational programs of unions like the ILGWU, which helped to counteract racial prejudices, seemed to prove the League’s argument. Such unions were the founders of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and thus the NUL threw its support behind the CIO. The League argued that the Congress was a champion of the rights of the oppressed, including not just workers, but African Americans. Craft unions still were seen as indifferent to racial issues and lax toward organizing African Americans. When they did admit blacks as members, these unions often barred them from jobs, unlike industrial unions, which had over 100,000 black members, some of whom held union offices.79 With industrial unions’ progressivism on racial issues, the


NUL openly embraced the CIO, appealing to the increasingly militarized masses of workers in the black community.

By 1938, though, it was becoming obvious that progressive groups were often not living up to their promises to black organizations involved with the labor movement. For instance, in early March, T. Arnold Hill, Director of the National Urban League’s Department of Industrial Relations wrote a frustrated letter to David Dubinsky. He reminded the ILGWU leader that he had previously written him appealing to have his union make a contribution toward the League’s efforts in workers’ education and labor relations, but that he had not heard back. The frustration of League members was only magnified by a note handwritten on a copy of the typed letter in which someone asked, “Isn’t there something we can do to convince Mr. Dubinsky that we want to do a real job in this field?”

For some reason, despite the ILGWU’s own efforts in this area, it was loathe to assist black organizations in their organizing and educational work in the black community. Thus, in Harlem and across the country, black workers came to see the ILGWU as a friend, but also learned to be cautious about the depth and reliability of the union’s friendship.

*The National Negro Congress: Its Establishment and Its Struggles*

While the Negro Workers’ Conference had been mounted by the National Urban League, the movement to establish the National Negro Congress came from within the labor movement. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters’s A. Philip Randolph helped set up the NNC and was unanimously elected its President at its first meeting from

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80 T. Arnold Hill to David Dubinsky, 8 March 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 27, Folder 7.
February 14-16, 1936, which was attended by over 750 delegates. Those delegates represented over 550 organizations with over three million members, including hundreds of civic groups, and dozens of trade unions, religious organizations, and fraternal societies. There were 150 delegates from New York alone, and they were among the most active participants in the Congress. The organization divided the country into 15 regions, each headed by a director or vice-president. Lester B. Granger, Secretary of the Workers’ Bureau of the National Urban League, was named director of the New York-New Jersey region.81

Leaders like Randolph gave the organization a socialist character. While the NNC was vehemently opposed to fascism, just as many labor unions and socialist organizations were, it was also opposed to war. Both fascism and military action, which many perceived as the inevitable solution to the spread of fascism, were linked together as tools of capitalist ambition and domination. Hitler was seen as the ultimate symbol of capitalism’s campaign against the worker, but war was seen as a mechanism for the creation of greater profit, the consolidation of monopolies, and the pursuit of colonialism. However, as much as opposing war and fascism and attacking the economic challenges caused by the Depression were presented as the purposes for the NNC’s creation, the fight against discrimination was the organization’s highest priority:

However, our contemporary history is a witness to the stark fact that black America is a victim of both class and race prejudice and oppression. Because Negroes are black, they are hated maligned and spat upon; lynched, mobbed, and murdered. Because Negroes are workers, they are

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81 Resolutions of the National Negro Congress, February 14-16, 1936, 6-7, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 27, Folder 4; Call for Second National Negro Congress, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Reel 4, Box 7.
browbeaten, bullied, intimidated, robbed, exploited, jailed and shot down. Because they are black they are caught between the nether milestones of discrimination when seeking a job or seeking to join a union.82 Clearly, from the NNC’s perspective, the struggles African Americans faced because of race and those they faced as workers were inherently intertwined.

The militant socialist position of the NNC was reflected in its opposition to the New Deal. It criticized Roosevelt’s policies not only for failing to fundamentally challenging the capitalist system, but also for giving business interests direct government support. Those policies were also seen as ineffectual in that they did nothing to address the growth of fascism or to prevent an oncoming world war. Yet, the Congress felt that African Americans’ fortunes would be worse under Republican rule. A. Philip Randolph pointed out that blacks had been disenfranchised and lynched during periods of both Democratic and Republican leadership. Yet, if the National Negro Congress was to be the first successful nationwide organization for African American workers without taking a side in the election campaign of that year, it needed a concrete platform that could be pursued no matter who was President.

Randolph suggested “remedies” the NNC could pursue for African Americans. Firstly, he wanted the organization to aid in the struggle of workers against exploitation and against fascism. Then, he wanted to help build civil rights organizations. However, these remedies could only be achieved through unions, particularly industrial unions. Randolph felt that craft unions were weak and generally plagued by racial discrimination, while industrial unions were, by their nature, less discriminatory since they embraced all

workers in an industry regardless of skill, craft, race, or creed. This is where the organization’s ties to the labor movement came into play: the NNC’s central goal became to broaden and strengthen the movement to bring black workers into labor organizations and break down color barriers in unions that still had them. Beyond that, the Congress joined the fight for an independent working-class political party: “It is poor working class wisdom to fight big business for economic justice on the industrial field and vote for it on the political.” Randolph urged that such a party take the form of a farmer-labor organization, meaning he supported the efforts that led to the establishment of the American Labor Party later that year.\[83\]

Perhaps even more significantly, Randolph was convinced that in order to be successful, the NNC had to follow in the footsteps of unions like the ILGWU that focused on cultural programming and publicity. He advocated employing the tactics of the united front, which entailed bringing together churches, fraternal organizations, civil rights organizations, labor unions, and farmer, professional, and student organizations, so their efforts could be coordinated. Once those groups were united, they could be most effective by engaging in parades, picketing, boycotts, protests, and mass distribution of propaganda. Randolph crafted these tactics on the assumption that the participants in this united front would generally be black, though white workers would certainly be allies. However, he made it clear that the National Negro Congress represented a break from traditional black leadership, which had looked to white allies to pave the way for racial and economic progress.

\[83\] As if to offer further proof of the socialist influence on the NNC, Randolph singled out two organizations as those he meant to refer to when he touted involvement in building up civil rights organizations: the NAACP and the International Labor Defense. Resolutions of the National Negro Congress, 3-4; 1936 National Negro Congress Official Proceedings, 10-11.
An additional reason for wanting blacks to take control of their own movement for civil and economic rights was to stave off accusations that organizations like the NNC were run by outside forces, particularly communists. This would become especially key over the next few years, as Randolph himself became increasingly convinced that communists held undue influence in the organization. Yet, at the founding Congress in Chicago, the NNC’s leadership denied Earl Browder, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the United States, the right to speak.\footnote{Resolutions of the National Negro Congress, 4-5, 7; 1936 National Negro Congress Official Proceedings, 10-11.}

By the end of the Congress on February 16\textsuperscript{th}, its members had voted to continue as a permanent organization. A national steering committee of 75 people was elected to carry on the NNC’s organizational work. They were also to press President Roosevelt to implement policies in line with the NNC’s program. This committee consisted of representatives from unions, churches, and fraternal, civic, and political organizations, including Thyra Edwards, a member of the ILGWU. A Youth Continuation Committee also allowed the NNC’s youth section to become a permanent part of the organization.\footnote{Resolutions of the National Negro Congress, 6; 1936 National Negro Congress Official Proceedings, 36-37.}

The official platform of the Congress ostensibly emphasized African American issues over any allegiance to a political party. At the top of the agenda was aid to Ethiopia to help fight Mussolini and his invading forces. This was notable as such support reflected a brand of anti-fascism that was particularly relevant to the black community. Under its civil liberties plank, the Congress also supported anti-lynching legislation being debated in the United States Senate, while endorsing the communist
United Front Defense of the Scottsboro Boys. Perhaps the most notable aspect of the platform, however, was its embrace of workers’ education. It specifically lauded the efforts of the National Urban League’s Workers’ Councils to acquaint “Negro workers with the economic nature of their problems, with the essential unity of white and Negro workers’ interests, and with the history, technique and necessity of collective workers action.” Thus, the NNC pledged to lend all possible support to the Urban League Workers’ Councils in their membership campaign and in promoting interracial labor activism.86

The Congress also pledged to support other African American organizations, such as the NAACP, that fought segregation. This was particularly emphasized with regard to education, as the NNC declared its opposition to segregated schools, to racial discrimination in higher education, and to unequal funding for black and white schools. Notably, the organization’s platform also asserted that African American history should be taught at primary and secondary schools, and at colleges. Thus, the Congress was advocating that the kind of curriculum already taught by the ILGWU in Harlem be implemented nationwide. The NNC’s advocacy of interracial labor organizing intersected with its belief in worker education. Thus, much of the interracial plank of its platform advocated the approach already being practiced by Local 22:

Recommendations:—
1. That the National Negro Congress serve as a medium for the development of interracial groups whose functions will be an intensive program of education of the basic factors involved in race relations.
2. That a definite effort be made in each local community, city and county to coordinate the efforts of all interracial groups, to deal especially with the problems of that community.

86 Resolutions of the National Negro Congress, 9-10.
3. That emphasis be laid upon the necessity of Negroes, both individually and collectively, availing themselves of the opportunities for interracial contact which already exist.
4. That both colored and white be encouraged to use every means of bringing about natural contact between members of both groups.
5. That interracial groups concentrate upon the education of children so that a proper concept of race relations may be gained at an early age.
6. That emphasis be made of the importance of the teaching of Negro history in the courses of study in all schools.\(^\text{87}\)

Support for the kind of interracial programming the ILGWU, especially Local 22, already provided demonstrated that white-led union efforts at such programming were not dismissed by the black community, but could be co-opted for a more radical racial agenda.

In fact, the NNC insisted that black workers should join labor unions, but that those unions should then join together to create Negro Labor Committees to strengthen organizing efforts, expand educational activities, and end racial discrimination in AFL unions. This extra level of organization was seen as necessary to insure that African American workers could fight against discrimination and for economic survival more effectively than they could by working through unions alone.\(^\text{88}\) As in its guidelines for interracial programming, it took an idea that already existed (the Negro Labor Committee) and co-opted it to try an advance a comprehensive racial agenda. It is notable that the NNC platform never mentions Frank Crosswaith’s Negro Labor Committee in Harlem. This was, perhaps, a sign of the tension that existed between Crosswaith, who many saw as being too much a part of labor’s conservative establishment, and the NNC, who Crosswaith perceived as too radical, a likely communist puppet organization.

\(^{87}\) 1936 National Negro Congress Official Proceedings, 10-11.

\(^{88}\) Resolutions of the National Negro Congress, 12-13, 16-17.
As the National Negro Congress continued to grow, its influence reached deeper into every African American community across the country, presenting local organizations like the NLC with competition. From October 15-17, 1937, the Second National Negro Congress took place in Philadelphia. The call for the Congress invited all African Americans, African American organizations, churches, and labor unions, political groups, and “all organizations and persons of whatever race, who are willing to fight for economic and social justice for Negroes.” By the time the Second Congress took place, 70 cities had local NNC councils, which united many different types of organizations in an attempt to strengthen the labor movement’s influence on African Americans in their cities. The NNC claimed that such unity had moved thousands of black workers to join trade unions, and had improved the conditions of all black people.

The main objective of the Congress was now to continue these positive trends, and to continue the fight to defend the right of African Americans to work at jobs for a decent living wage equal to that of white workers, and to join trade unions on an equal basis to whites. It offered continuing support to the NAACP in its attempt to get federal anti-lynching legislation passed and pledged to seek out equal opportunity for blacks in education and economics. It also singled out black women as being in particular need of protection as they faced both racial and gender discrimination. There was nothing added to the original NNC platform that indicated the increasing influence of radicals, despite Frank Crosswaith’s assertions that the Congress represented a leftist threat to local black labor organizations. In fact, its support of social security and unemployment insurance demonstrated that it lent some support to Roosevelt’s New Deal policies, while its aim of “joining with all progressive forces to defeat the forces of fascism and war in America
and the world” mirrored the goals of many labor organizations, as well as those of the Socialist and American Labor Parties. 

The Congress actually included the participation of socialists and communists, and its program included a greeting from the Socialist Negro Work Committee, which was chaired by NNC President A. Philip Randolph. While it focused on equal treatment of blacks in the labor movement, the Communist Party expounded on its anti-fascist stance in its greeting, not only claiming that it was called the “Party of the Negro People,” but also calling on all African American organizations to unite against fascism. John L. Lewis, Chairman of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, also called for black activism and lauded those black men and women who were already involved in CIO unions and their push to advance the agenda of the American worker. He closed his greeting by saying that he was convinced that African Americans would play a greater role in the labor movement in the future. Indeed, he authorized donations to the National Negro Congress, which went directly to hiring black organizers.

Despite the inclusion of communists in the Congress, the Communist Party in Harlem disavowed the NNC. While those in the Party were excited for the Congress’ establishment and the opportunity it offered black workers to improve their conditions, they became suspicious when it was apparent that ministers, politicians, and even businessmen held leadership positions in the organization. Communists felt that the NNC could only be a truly progressive and effective organization if it was led by trade unions.


339
and members of the working class. As a result, the Harlem party leaders suggested postponing the October Congress, so that the NNC could be reconstituted with trade union leadership and with all “unsavory elements” weeded out. The Communist Party in the end rejected the postponement idea, but many perceived the program that resulted from the Second National Negro Congress as holding no militant working-class goals. Instead, the Party went on to claim that the Congress upheld the ideals of the businessman and the church, and downplayed the importance of independent political action for workers. Thus, according to the communists, the NNC separated itself from the progressive elements in the labor movement.\footnote{“An Open Letter to All Members of the Communist Party – Harlem Section,” Communist Party (Opposition) Harlem Section, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 41, Folder 8.}

In 1938, the National Negro Congress turned its attention to lynching, launching a program of action through the Anti-Lynching Conference on March 19\textsuperscript{th}. 130 delegates from 30 states representing over one million people assembled in Washington, D.C. for the conference. They agreed to execute a plan of action to secure passage of the Wagner-Van Nuys Anti-Lynching Bill during that session of Congress. The first point of the program was to broadcast it to religious, trade union, professions, civic, and fraternal organizations, as well as to women’s clubs and youth groups, so that they could participate. The second point was the establishment of a national Executive Anti-Lynch Committee to coordinate the activities of the NAACP, the NNC, and other organizations. The formation of local Anti-Lynch Committees was the third point of the program, while the fourth point was to send letters to the executive committees of organizations including the NAACP, CIO, AFL, and Labor’s Non-Partisan League urging immediate
cooperation. Finally, the program urged that a Scottsboro-Anti-Lynch anniversary be organized, which called for sending telegrams and letters to Congressmen. However, like so many anti-lynching bills before it, the Wagner-Van Nuys Bill was defeated.\footnote{“Resolution on Program of Action – Anti-Lynching Conference March 19, 1938 – Washington, D.C.” press release, New York Council, National Negro Congress, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 2.}

By 1940, when the Negro Labor Committee’s attempts to expand floundered, it seemed that hopes for independent black labor organizing lied with the National Negro Congress; but the NNC was facing its own troubles. At the May 1940 Congress, President A. Philip Randolph refused to accept reelection, as he believed his organization to be falling under communist control. He wrote a press release explaining his decision, saying that, at the very least, the Congress had not succeeded in removing its communist stigma. Randolph argued that until it did, the organization would never win significant support from the African American community. Significantly, this was not just a political argument, but also a racial argument. The reason why communist influence kept African Americans away was because it led to the domination of this presumably black organization by whites. Out of approximately 1200 members who attended the Congress in May, over 300 were white, which, in Randolph’s opinion, made the organization look like a joke:

It is unthinkable that the Jewish Congress would have Gentiles in it, or that a Catholic Congress would have Protestants in it, or that the famous All India Congress would have in it as members natives of Africa. Why should a Negro Congress have white people in it? …It was perfectly ridiculous and distracting, if not comical, to observe the white delegates dominating the applause for Communists’ policies and tactics.\footnote{A. Philip Randolph, “Why I Would Not Stand For Reelection For President of the National Negro Congress,” May 4, 1940, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 32, Reel 15.}
The Communist Party contributed $100 a month to the Congress, and most of the NNC’s funding came from CIO unions, which bothered Randolph as that money made the organization dependent upon groups outside of the black community. African Americans could only regain control of the NNC if they supplied more of the funding for it. Randolph believed that if the Congress lost its independence, it would lose its reason for being.

He also feared that taking money largely from the CIO was tantamount to taking its side in its split with the AFL. This went against the Congress’ united front approach and hurt its chances in organizing black workers under the AFL. He opposed the CIO’s influence because he felt it was unfair for any one group to gain an unfair advantage and because he was opposed to domination by any white organization. However, when it came to the communists, Randolph’s opposition was considerably more fervent. He not only opposed their influence in his organization, but he also described them as a menace and a danger to African Americans and to the labor movement because of their disruptive tactics and their rule or ruin approach. He perceived the NNC as turning toward a communist viewpoint and adopting resolutions that reflected the communist line. At the Congress in May, a known communist was selected to chair the Resolutions Committee, and Randolph felt that the Congress was packed with communists and with CIO members who were either communists or communist sympathizers. As a result, he felt that that year’s Congress was a “miserable failure” in that it didn’t properly represent African American opinion and interests.
Randolph’s opposition to communism was also apparent in arguments over elements of the new NNC platform. For instance, some wanted the platform to say that African Americans would not fight in the European war, which was deemed as an imperialist attack against the Soviet Union. Randolph felt opposition to a potential war with Russia was of no use; if asked to fight against the Soviets, blacks would do so with the fervor and patriotism of any other American. He powerfully argued that if the Soviet Union was devoid of race prejudice, it was only because there were no blacks in that country to attract such prejudice. However, the Soviets were willing to sell oil to fascist Italy to help it finance its invasion of Ethiopia. Randolph referred to the Soviet Union as a “death prison” for democracy and liberty where all opposition to Stalin was wiped out. Moreover, he was keenly aware of the broader unpopularity of communism in the country and the suspicion that communist activity engendered, especially in the wake of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. It was difficult enough to be black in America. Randolph argued that African Americans could not afford the additional handicap of “being red.”

Therefore, he could not abide communist control of the National Negro Congress, and not only refused reelection as its President, but quit the organization altogether. His aversion to white membership in the NNC was not symbolic of a total rejection of interracialism, however. He still wanted the Congress to collaborate with progressive, albeit apolitical white organizations. Randolph was never against working with whites for common interests, but he rejected communist and CIO control in the NNC because it resulted in whites setting the agenda for an organization established by and for African Americans.

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94 Ibid.
Frank Crosswaith strongly approved of Randolph’s actions, saying that by quitting the National Negro Congress, he had done all African Americans a service. Crosswaith explained that when the NNC was founded, progressive whites and blacks had embraced it largely because Randolph’s leadership implied that the organization would be completely independent. Instead, the truth had been revealed that Randolph was merely a cover to obscure the communist motives behind the NNC’s founding and the fact that, once established, the Congress was largely under communist control. Crosswaith pointed out that when this control became more obvious after the first Congress was held in 1937, many progressives declined to associate further with the NNC. He also made a point of saying that, in the labor movement, numerous trade unions that had a tradition of racial solidarity put their efforts toward supporting his Negro Labor Committee, not the National Negro Congress.

Crosswaith felt that progressive trade unions could not work with the Congress if it was a largely communist organization. As proof of his belief, he mentioned one occasion in which the Harlem Labor Center hosted a conference for the New York unit of the NNC. The purpose of the conference was to secure the backing of the trade union movement, but African American communists representing the Congress butted heads with the unionists who attended, none of whom were communists. Thus, the conference was plagued by disagreements and broke up with relations between the two groups more strained than ever.

However, Crosswaith had decided to give the NNC one more chance as a favor to A. Philip Randolph. He attended the second Congress, but still found the communist influence blatant, and his perception was confirmed by the NNC Executive Secretary.
John P. Davis’ trip to Moscow immediately following the Congress. Without his knowledge or consent, Crosswaith was elected as a national Executive Committee member at the Congress, but the one and only Committee meeting he attended was the last straw. He found the Congress’ leadership there was dominated by communists, so he left the Committee and cut all ties with the Congress. He felt the organization was merely a tool to perpetrate the communist agenda. Thus, since communists were using African Americans to advance their goals, Randolph was doing right by the black community to disassociate himself from an organization that seemed to have fallen under communist control.

By 1940, the Negro Labor Committee was floundering as it continued to receive inadequate support from trade unions and other friendly organization and as Frank Crosswaith engaged in an obsessive pursuit to destroy the Harlem Labor Union, Inc. The National Negro Congress had finally declared itself a communist fellow traveler, but lost its leader and many of its members as a result. The political conflicts that hindered the growth of the NLC and NNC echoed the deterioration of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union’s united front in the last few years of the 1930s. However, with its large membership and an educational program that entertained and motivated its members, the ILGWU was able to thrive despite political infighting and offer black garment workers an avenue to political influence.

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CHAPTER 6:
A UNITED FRONT?
PROGRESSIVES, SOCIALISTS, AND COMMUNISTS IN THE ILGWU, 1937-1940

When, in mid-1937, the communists in the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union joined with the union’s progressive wing, which had been widely identified with the Socialist Party, a new period of peace and success seemed certain. However, over the next few years, old suspicions would reemerge, threatening further rifts. This would come to a head in 1940, when the communists would make a strong, ultimately decisive push to regain power within ILGWU leadership. The result was an end to communist influence within the union that, while only temporary, forever changed the nature of ILGWU politics. While battles between communists and socialists had defined much of the union’s history and agenda to that point, the united front would usher in a new era. Yet, this was not just because it brought about a diminution of communist power, but also because it accompanied the movement of socialists and of union members generally to the American Labor and Democratic Parties.

By 1940, the united front had collapsed, but so had the old communist versus socialist paradigm. Now the ILGWU, nurturing strong relations with Democratic politicians who secured the implementation of pro-labor policies, was defined by its support of those politicians, most notably President Roosevelt. Inside the union, supporting the national political status quo became the key to maintaining power, solidifying a hard-fought victory for moderates who had long argued for working through the political establishment against radicals who sought to work outside it, or even tear it down. With the New Deal coalition now becoming a solid political bloc, unions were
now not only a political force, but political insiders. This ended radical visions for the ILGWU’s future, but made it part of one of the most powerful political movements in the nation’s history.

Socialists Fall in Line and Communists Continue to Fight

One of the political figures who encouraged unionists to vote for a major party candidate was New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. Despite A. Philip Randolph’s progressivism and his long-established ties to the Socialist Party, he considered joining the Citizens’ Committee to re-elect Mayor LaGuardia in July 1937. When Frank Crosswaith was nominated for City Comptroller on the socialist ticket, Randolph wrote him to congratulate him and ask him for feedback on whether or not he should join the Citizens’ Committee. However, he pointed out that his movement toward supporting the Republican mayor was reflective of the will of most socialists, as LaGuardia was running on an American Labor Party fusion ticket. The Socialist Party convention had adopted a resolution pledging that their mayoral candidate Norman Thomas would withdraw if conditions warranted the reelection of LaGuardia. However, Randolph still felt insecure about the situation, checking with Crosswaith that his work on the Citizens’ Committee wouldn’t conflict with Socialist Party policy.

Crosswaith quickly wrote back suggesting that Randolph delay accepting, or outright reject, the invitation to join the Committee. Instead, he pointed out that the socialists and the American Labor Party were actually working together, choosing subcommittees to plan joint action during the year’s political campaign. In fact, if all went well, the Party was looking to become part of the ALP to make a stronger push for
independent labor political action. He pointed out that Norman Thomas would pull out of the race for mayor and the socialists would shift support to LaGuardia if the two parties united.¹

David Dubinsky’s position indicated support for Mayor LaGuardia from both socialists and the ILGWU itself. He claimed that the mayor did not have to declare himself pro-labor to garner support because his actions spoke for themselves. During the garment strike of 1936, for instance, LaGuardia came out to help workers picket, giving them the advantage in public opinion and in negotiations with employers. Thus, he, not the Tammany candidate, was viewed as labor’s true ally. Indeed, in the issue of Justice that came out just before the elections, the cover said “Re-elect LaGuardia and Keep Tammany Out of City Hall.” However, the mayor also represented elements of a burgeoning liberalism that surpassed the local opposition to Tammany Hall. This political movement was built upon a diverse coalition, like that which the American Labor Party saw itself as representing. That base coalesced around a number of central tenets, one of which was anti-fascism. LaGuardia thus fit the bill as an ALP candidate perfectly, as he often spoke out vehemently against Hitler. And a LaGuardia victory was seen as the key to making the ALP the majority party in New York City. The effort to form a joint campaign between the ALP and the Socialist Party in New York was successful, so

¹ Interestingly, Crosswaith also took the opportunity to remind Randolph that his Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters had not been paying its dues to the Negro Labor Committee. Thus, the NLC was still having difficulty garnering financial support even from its closest allies. A. Philip Randolph to Frank Crosswaith, 23 July 1937, and Frank R. Crosswaith to A. Philip Randolph, July 26, 1937. Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Box 32, Folder 15; “Labor Party Nominates Mayor, Praising Him as City’s Greatest,” The New York Times, August 5, 1937.
Norman Thomas dropped out of the race, and the ALP officially drafted LaGuardia as its candidate for mayor.²

In early August, the state executive committee of the party nominated LaGuardia with a declaration stating:

In this current municipal campaign…the American Labor party speaks the voice of our truly cosmopolitan city, without regard to race, color, religion or extraction…who are resolved that the claws of Tammany shall never again regain their deadly clutch upon New York City…³

Clearly, the party viewed its candidate as a progressive outsider despite the fact that he was a political incumbent and had been a member of one of America’s two major political parties. For New Yorkers, opposition to Tammany Hall represented a type of radicalism in itself, a fundamental challenge to the city’s political system that LaGuardia, not socialists, represented. The Tammany candidate was Democrat Jeremiah Mahoney, a State Supreme Court Justice who sought to align himself with Roosevelt and the New Deal. David Dubinsky claimed that Tammany Hall even sought to form a Tammany Labor Party to try to garner the critical support of the labor movement, but their pro-labor talk was seen as a tactic to manipulate working-class voters.

The ALP’s attempts to work with socialists intensified as it attempted to expand its influence. By the fall, the party nominated Frank Crosswaith, who had been the Socialist candidate for city comptroller, to be one of its candidates for city council. The ALP also nominated another socialist, League for Industrial Democracy executive

² “Labor Party Nominates Mayor, Praising Him as City’s Greatest”; David Dubinsky (speech, Meeting of Local 22, 19 October 1937), International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union records, #5780/002. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Box 399, Folder 9; Justice XIX, No. 21, November 1, 1937.

³ “Labor Party Nominates Mayor, Praising Him as City’s Greatest.”
director Harry Laidler, for city council. As African American socialists had joined the Negro Labor Committee because it provided a more left-wing alternative to the National Urban League, black and white socialists joined the American Labor Party because it seemed a more progressive alternative to the Democratic Party. However, as the party backed candidates like LaGuardia, and came to embrace President Roosevelt, as well, socialism was undermined.

The elections went the way the ILGWU wanted, with Mayor LaGuardia winning reelection. In the Harlem districts, LaGuardia got twice as many votes as Mahoney when both the votes for him on the American Labor Party ticket and the Republican Party ticket were combined. Notably, though, the number of votes the mayor received on the Republican ticket was more than double the number he received as an ALP candidate. As African Americans, traditionally Republican, drifted toward the Democratic Party over the 1930s, the ALP would have seemed a logical way station between the two parties. However, African American attitudes toward both the Democratic and American Labor Parties were fraught.

As Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the future Congressman who had just taken over his father’s post as pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church, pointed out in a December 12th editorial in the New York Amsterdam News, many African Americans had switched their allegiances from the Republican to the Democratic Party. He argued that this switch was a critical sign of political independence, but also that it garnered blacks much more

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5 1937 election results, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 144, Folder 3D.
power on the political stage. He said that Democrats lured African Americans by giving many of them positions of local and national importance. However, despite these benefits, he argued that African Americans should carefully consider the American Labor Party, as they were a “working class race.” Nonetheless, he criticized the ALP’s treatment of African Americans. For instance, only two African Americans sat on the high councils of the party. If the new party was progressive, then there was no reason it couldn’t afford blacks the same opportunities for leadership that the two major parties provided. Until it did so, Powell recommended that blacks wait to join the party.

However, he himself admitted that he had voted for the American Labor Party in 1936 and 1937 elections. He felt that the major parties had broken too many promises to African Americans to vote for either one of them. Thus, he was confident that once the ALP satisfied his demands for leadership opportunities, New York’s African Americans would fully back the party. Powell’s editorial hit on a number of key points. Despite the rise of the American Labor Party, blacks proved hesitant to join or give the new party their votes, as the voting tallies from the 1937 elections demonstrated. Blacks had gained considerable power on the political stage by the end of 1937 and they wouldn’t give their support to any party that didn’t recognize that. Like any other constituency, they had to be given certain benefits to secure their allegiance. As blacks underwent a political transition, many of them struggled with the best way to pursue their interests. Powell himself admitted voting for a party he didn’t yet believe in joining. As the decade continued, African Americans would increasingly join the Democratic Party, partially

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because it served their interests, and partially because other progressive political efforts like the ALP never managed to gain traction in the black community.

The 1938 Socialist Party platform explained that the party had joined forces with the American Labor Party because both of the mainstream political parties had failed the working class. The Republican Party offered nothing but negative, even hysterical criticism of President Roosevelt. Yet, according to the socialists, even though the Democratic Party made attempts at reform, it hadn’t tried to implement systemic change and had been unable to affect the desired redistribution of wealth. Additionally, socialists blamed Roosevelt for crafting a foreign policy that was likely to lead to American involvement in World War II. The Socialist Party, therefore, was thrilled over the establishment of the American Labor Party and nominated a number of ALP candidates on the Socialist ticket. Socialists believed that any strong labor party had to be a farmer-labor party. Hence, they were willing to join forces with the ALP, which began as the Farmer-Labor Party. Just as importantly, though, they argued that farmers and city workers had a common interest in keeping their sons and daughters from having to fight in a foreign war. They argued that American participation in the war would not be driven by the goal of conquering fascism, but by the pursuit of profit. Socialists saw fascism as a product of capitalism, so despite their opposition to fascism, they also opposed involvement in the war, which they saw as a tool of capitalists.

Despite socialist loyalty to the American Labor Party, signs of strain between the two groups began to manifest. The Socialist Party criticized the ALP for throwing away its potential on cynical political deals in the 1937 campaign. As a result, it ran candidates from numerous parties on its ticket, including not only Republicans and Democrats, but
also communists. For instance, the ALP made a deal with the Republican machines in Manhattan and Staten Island, endorsing numerous congressmen who had previously been lambasted by men who now led the labor party. One Republican who the ALP had aligned with that the socialists did not attack was Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. After all, he was wildly popular. However, the endorsement of Joseph A. Gavagan, a Democrat who ran for Congress to represent Harlem, angered the neighborhood’s socialists. In endorsing Gavagan, the ALP was seen as aligning with Tammany Hall. Frank Crosswaith shared the anger toward Gavagan’s endorsement, but in keeping with the attitude of the Socialist Party, he remained loyal to the American Labor Party, albeit now with strong reservations.7 Thus, the romance between the ALP and more left-wing elements of labor in New York was already over.

However, when the Socialist Party did not poll enough votes in 1938 to remain on the ballot in the next election, rumors swirled that the Socialist Party asked the American Labor Party to take it over. Frank Crosswaith told A. Philip Randolph that he fully expected the socialists to join with the ALP at some point, and hoped that they could influence the party to address some of its shortcomings, such as its willingness to align with Tammany Hall to gain political power.8 Socialists needed to make a move if some vestige of their party was to survive in New York City.

The situation of the national Socialist Party was no better. In January 1940, the national office of the party told its branches that it was aware that the worldwide socialist

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movement was in chaos and in need of reconstruction. Thus, the National Council of the Party had decided to undertake numerous steps toward that end. It wanted to work with an organization called the International Workers Front Against War in order to create a program to fight for peace on a socialist basis. It also wanted to launch a broad political campaign in the 1940 presidential elections with the purpose of advancing the struggle against involvement in World War II and furthering the cause of independent labor-based political action. The Socialist Party felt that it had the greatest chance of executing its platform if it allied with progressives. The Executive Committee of the Socialist Party therefore crafted a new policy in consultation with ILGWU Local 22. This wasn’t totally surprising, as many members of the local, including its manager Charles Zimmerman, were current or former socialists.

According to their new policy, socialists not only turned away from left wingers, but aligned with the right wing of the American Labor Party. Alex Rose, who led the party’s conservative wing, charged the Progressive Committee to Rebuild the American Labor Party with being under communist control. He claimed that communists had supported Mayor LaGuardia in 1937 and Senator Lehman in 1938 on the grounds that they were partners with progressives in the united front, but that after the establishment of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, communists became fanatically anti-Roosevelt and anti-American Labor Party. The socialists, who had been fighting the so-called Progressive Committee, were attracted to the conservative wing of the ALP because of its anti-communist stance. Thus, at the very end of March, on the eve of the American Labor Party’s primary election, the Socialist Party announced that it had aligned with the ALP’s right wing. Socialist leaders warned workers that if the communists captured the
American Labor Party, they would turn it into a communist front organization, thus securing for themselves two places on the ballot and leaving the real ALP with none. They also argued that a vote for the conservative wing of the ALP was a way for each worker to protest the Hitler-Stalin Pact and to show that they believed that the current ALP administration upheld progressive values.⁹ Yet, the left wing did well in the party primaries.

Meanwhile, because moderate progressives were increasingly united and powerful in unions such as the ILGWU, the communists were left scrambling. The Communist Party (Opposition) Harlem Group even said that the party was generally sowing “race confusion” in an attempt to cause African Americans to turn away from the union, and they also argued that the party’s view on race was “false in theory and harmful in practice.” To try to shore up support, the International Labor Defense (ILD) called an emergency conference for February 20, 1937 to confront violations of Harlem residents’ civil rights. The ILD insisted that every progressive organization should address problems such as crime and housing discrimination, which were plaguing Harlem. The local branch of the ILD claimed that it had been battling these problems since the early 1930s, but that civil rights violations had grown so severe by 1937, that an immediate plan was needed to address them. Then, when it came time for the ILD’s national conference in June, the organization reached out to Local 22.

As much as the International Labor Defense viewed itself as a progressive leader, it realized that certain outstanding people from labor unions stood out as progressive leaders, as well. One of these was Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman, who

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the ILD asked to speak at its convention on deportations of immigrants and how they affected foreign-born populations of trade unions. The conference discussed civil rights issues including what it perceived as “repressive legislation,” anti-lynching legislation, and the defense of African Americans. Clearly, the ILD was able to attract blacks through a progressive agenda that included specific attention to African Americans interests, as further demonstrated by the organization’s Scottsboro Defense Committee.10

In its 1938 election platform, the Communist Party (CP) accused the Democratic and Republican Parties of red-baiting, and of sowing discord between the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), as well as between labor and the middle class, between workers and farmers, between the jobless and the employed, and between blacks and whites, Catholics and Protestants, and Jews and Gentiles. Thus, despite the New Deal, and the emerging diverse coalition backing the New Deal of which union members were such a major part, communists still insisted that the Democratic Party sought to drive wedges between groups inside the labor movement in order to weaken it. Meanwhile, the CP called Trotskyites and Lovestoneites “agents of fascism,” as they sowed further disunity in labor’s ranks.11

In May 1938, when ILGWU member Josephine Martini spoke at the 10th convention of the New York State Communist Party, after she praised her union’s educational activities, she then said more could be done to spread those activities

10 Frank D. Griffin, International Labor Defense To All Organizations: To All Friends of the Harlem International Labor Defense: To All Defenders of Liberty and Democracy, 10 February 1937, and Anna Damon to Charles Zimmerman, 5 June 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 15, Folder 9.

11 Communist Election Platform, 1938, National Committee, Communist Party, U.S.A., October 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 146, Folder 4B.
throughout the union. She immediately said that the reason education wasn’t as widespread as is should have been was because socialists ran the ILGWU Educational Department. Furthermore, the teachers were Trotskyites and Lovestoneites, who she called “rats.” She claimed that they were concentrated in the educational programming of Locals 22 and 155 because while adults in the union knew that those groups had been discredited, children and young adults could still be confused and manipulated by them.\(^{12}\)

Communists also accused these same forces of stoking socialist resentment against communists, undermining the united front movement that had been an essential part of the labor movement for the previous two years.

However, there were other groups that the CP praised, such as the CIO and the National Negro Congress. Praise for the latter was particularly significant, as the Congress had been trying to shake accusations of communist influence. Yet, communists, as they had for years, incorporated racial issues into their platform, arguing for equal educational and job opportunities and fair distribution of government relief for blacks and whites, and against discrimination and segregation. They also called for the passage of anti-lynching legislation, the enforcement of the death penalty for lynching, and the abolition of the poll tax and all other barriers that kept blacks from voting or holding political office.\(^{13}\) The united front had allowed the labor movement to grow since 1936 by joining left wingers together to fight for common goals, but the CP became increasingly aggressive and antagonistic in 1939, partially as a reaction to the Hitler-

\(^{12}\) Josephine Martini (speech. 10\(^{th}\) Convention, New York State Communist Party, May 1938), ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 5, Folder 1.

\(^{13}\) Communist Election Platform, 1938, National Committee, Communist Party, U.S.A., October 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 146, Folder 4B.
Stalin Pact. Once news of the Pact spread, American communists scrambled, looking to reinforce their commitment to class and racial equality and their opposition to war and fascism, while the Soviet Union was now associated with fascist Nazism, which perpetrated racial persecution and sought to destroy labor unions, moving Europe toward war.

May Day, 1937-1940: Unity with Growing Tensions

The fortunes of the united front from 1937-1940 could be traced in the planning of May Day activities. In New York, the planning of May Day events in 1937 was devoid of the controversy that had left many Local 22 members torn as to which event to attend in previous years, as the united front approach shaped the day’s events. In mid-April, plans were already in full swing, with Local 22 leading the way. They were holding a parade in Union Square, but wanted to direct all of their members to go to the ILGWU’s general celebration at Randall’s Island Stadium upon the parade’s conclusion. The local’s leadership expressed a desire to make the union look good by helping fill the Stadium, while helping themselves through making a strong showing at the May Day event. It was significant that, unlike in previous years, there was not a competing event set up by left-wing members of the ILGWU to compete with the main union event.

Plans went forward without a hitch. Local 22 scheduled a meeting on April 17th to plan for May Day, and the Junior 22 Club held its own meeting that same day to rehearse a skit they planned to put on as part of a children’s May Day festival to be held before the Local 22 celebration in Union Square. That festival was to include costumes, folk dancing, skits, and a picnic lunch. The rehearsal meeting was similarly fun-filled, ending
with social dancing and ping-pong. Will Herberg, the Educational Director of the local, also set up a rally on April 25th where members could finalize May Day arrangements. The idea for the rally was apparently put forth by the Athletic Board, which wanted to provide an opportunity for all participants in union sports, cultural, and social events to meet and mingle before the large and hectic May Day activities.  

The calls that went out for participation in ILGWU’s May Day demonstration touted familiar themes. Flyers called on workers to protest against war, saying that if America participated in a European war, workers would be the ones chosen to fight, while bosses would profit off of the conflict. They asserted that the best defense against war was for the world’s workers to join together to prevent it. However, the union continued its fervent opposition to fascism, saying that, as European fascist regimes launched campaigns against labor organizations, any victory for such regimes would threaten American labor by emboldening its domestic enemies. Thus, the ILGWU opposed fascism, threats to the labor movement, and racial persecution. The latter was key because persecution against Jews was a symbol of the growing power of fascism in Europe, while union members saw discrimination and violence against African Americans as a manifestation of fascism in America. The union also lauded the CIO for

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14 Agnes Sailer, who headed up the Children’s May Day Committee encouraged Local 22 to invite all the children of its members from ages 9–15 to join the festival with the Junior 22 Club. Although many of these children were not already in union clubs, Sailer felt that there still needed to be ways to make them feel connected to their parents’ union and to the labor movement in general. Agnes Sailer to Charles Zimmerman, 22 April 1937, and Will Herberg to Sister or Brother, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 25, Folder 3; “Junior 22’s Meeting This Week (Saturday, April 24th), at Union Headquarters,” “All Out On May Day,” and “Junior 22, The Last Club Meeting Was A Real Success” flyers, and “Get together and Rally” postcard, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 25, Folder 3; Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., April 13, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Box 1, Folder 1937.
bringing unionism to mass-production industries, and advocated for a national labor party.

One area of legislation that the union felt was being neglected was anti-lynching law. The union’s May Day flyers called for the enactment of effective anti-lynching legislation, an end to racial discrimination, and the economic, social, and political equality of African Americans. The ILGWU claimed that black workers were experiencing an awakening and taking an equal place in the trade union movement, so the union called for the unity of workers of every race and creed. Local 22 had a list of slogans meant for putting on banners for the Union Square parade and the Randall’s Island celebration on May Day. These included: “Against War and Fascism”; “Defend the Soviet Union”; “Curb Dictatorial Powers of the Supreme Court”; “End Negro Discrimination”; “Support Anti-Lynch Bill”; “For a National Farmer-Labor Party”; “Support Italian and German Workers in the Fight Against Hitler and Mussolini”; “For Industrial Unions in Mass Production Industries”; and “Admit Negro Workers to All Trade Unions.”

Insofar as the union touted its diversity, galvanized against fascism, and fought for greater labor organization, a picture from Union Square on May 1, 1937 bore out that Local 22 lived up to ILGWU tenets. The picture shows a throng of people, many of the men in fedoras, many of the women in small hats or wearing stoles, parading down a New York street. Many of them held Local 22 banners, most of which were simply the number 22 in a circle. The picture also shows that cultural groups in the local, such as its

15 “United May Day Slogans – 1937,” and “Down Tools On May Day!,” “All Out On May Day,” and “All Out ILGWU Members, May Day Celebration and Demonstration” flyers, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 25, Folder 3.
dance group and its dramatic group, marched together. They preceded the United May Day Committee, which brought progressive and left-wing unionists in the ILGWU together. The Committee members held a banner that said “Labor Unite Against Fascism” and “Organize the Unorganized.”16 The factions of the International had united, and in doing so, they focused on issues in which they found common ground. In fighting against “reaction,” they fought the forces of war and fascism, and they continued to push for the growth of the labor movement by encouraging unorganized workers to join unions.

One year later, though, Local 22 discussed pursuing independent May Day activities. Charles Zimmerman suggested arranging an indoor meeting and concert with other locals. Demonstrating rifts in the local itself, some members thought that with the specter of war and fascism hanging over the country, it was more important than ever that all trade unions come together and present a united front on May Day. The left wing, however, generally believed that unity couldn’t be demonstrated where there existed political turmoil. Most members of the local’s Organization Committee would end up voting with Zimmerman. It was important to them that those unionists who were like-minded seek greater unity, and an independent May Day celebration was one means to bring them together.17

Workers were invited to leave work to attend the May Day celebration in order to declare their opposition to fascism and Nazism, to racial and religious bigotry, to war,

16 Photograph, Union Square Local 22 May Day parade, ILGWU records, #5780/014P. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 15.

17 Minutes, Organization Committee, April 2, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 9.
and to political and organizational splits in the labor movement. Toward that end, Local 22 had held a joint celebration with Locals 117 and 155 on April 30th including a concert by a Filipino marimba band and Filipino vocalist Jovita Fuentes, and the New York Hippodrome Opera Company Corps de Ballet and its Ballet Symphony Orchestra.

ILGWU President Dubinsky and Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman spoke at the event, as did Fernando De Los Rios, the Spanish Ambassador to the United States. The ambassador’s speech offered Local 22 a chance to publicize its support for Loyalist Spain in the Spanish Civil War. The Hippodrome Opera Company then closed the night by performing the opera *Pagliacci* for the event’s attendees. Then, on May 1, 1938, members of Local 22 came out in support of democracy, tolerance, peace, and unity.  

Since the beginning of the united front, the wounds made manifest on May Days past had begun to heal. Thus, by 1939, more unified celebrations seemed less noteworthy. That year, ILGWU locals 22, 60, 62, 89, and 155 sponsored a joint May Day celebration and left-wing opposition was not as prevalent as it had been the previous year. While these mostly left-leaning locals threw an independent celebration, their event did not conflict with others under the ILGWU umbrella. In fact, David Dubinsky, a moderate, was the event’s principal speaker. Charles Zimmerman assured Dubinsky that the audience for his speech would be large and enthusiastic. By all accounts, the day went off without a hitch.

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18 “Celebrate May 1st” flyer, and Sixth Year of Grand Opera program, May Day Festival, April 30, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 25, Folder 4; Manager’s Report, Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, ILGWU, April 22, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Box 1, Folder 1938.

19 Meanwhile, Frank Crosswaith was in Boston at the ILGWU’s city-wide May Day celebration, where he spoke and the ILGWU Chorus and ILGWU Orchestra performed. “May Day Celebration” flyer, 1939, Frank R. Crosswaith Papers, 1917-1965, MG 100, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 362.
By 1940, although May Day plans went smoothly, signs of political tensions with communists reemerged. The Lovestoneite Independent Labor League of America, which was now working closely with Local 22, had thrown its support behind ILGWU May Day celebrations of the previous few years. It declared its support for the upcoming celebration in 1940 by March and encouraged its members to support progressive unions. While the Labor League’s National Executive Committee considered endorsing Socialist Party meetings, it openly disavowed all communist activities. The ongoing hostility toward communists that marked the planning of May Day events reflected how little relations between political factions had truly changed over the course of the 1930s. As in previous years, the ILGWU’s 1940 celebration was marked by opposition to war, fascism, and all forms of racially based hatred and persecution. Once again, the ILGWU blamed these ills on capitalism, calling them tools used in the pursuit of profit.

May Day was a time to declare labor’s opposition to racial discrimination, to anti-Semitism, and to all forms of fascism around the world that sought to oppress various racial groups. The refusal of Congress to pass an anti-lynching bill was viewed as further reason why the union needed to speak out. Thus, “PASS THE ANTI-LYNCH BILL” became one of the May Day celebration’s main slogans. Thus, on May 1st, ILGWU members and officials, accompanied by four large bands, joined a large united parade to Union Square that included many unions from the AFL and the CIO. Tens of thousands of workers participated. 20 Though May Day events went smoothly, the political tensions

5, Folder 3; Charles S. Zimmerman to David Dubinsky, 26 April 1939, ILGWU Union records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 84, Folder 7A.

20 “May Day,” National Executive Committee, March 25, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 15, Folder 5; “All Out May First” flyer, United May Day Committee of ILGWU
that surrounded planning for those events were indicative of the tensions that had resurfaced between communists, socialists, and moderates. However, the massive united parade was a show of labor’s strength, demonstrating that the power of labor unions in the United States was at a historical peak.

The ILGWU’s Growing Disillusionment with the CIO

The importance of the ILGWU’s relationship with the Congress of Industrial Organizations was one topic under serious discussion at the International’s 1937 convention. A vocal minority of delegates opposed continuing affiliation with the CIO, arguing for “peace at any price” with the American Federation of Labor. However, Local 22 insisted that the only route to lasting peace in the American labor movement was recognition of industrial unionism as the necessary basis for organizing mass production industries. Thus, the local proposed that the ILGWU officially declare its continuing affiliation with the CIO. Specifically, it called for the convention to instruct the General Executive Board to continue its support, including financial assistance, of the CIO, while encouraging the Board to work toward reconciliation with the AFL. Not only was the proposal received enthusiastically, but similar resolutions were also introduced by almost 20 other locals and joint boards. The Local 22 delegation called a caucus of all delegates supporting the CIO to formulate a plan of action to submit to the convention. Julius Hochman and Charles Zimmerman spoke at the event.

Then, the pro-CIO forces got a huge boost from CIO President John Lewis’ speech to the ILGWU convention on May 12th. According to Local 22’s convention

Members, April 16, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 25, Folder 3; “Join the United May Day Parade” flyer, United May Day Committee, April 16, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 25, Folder 4.
report, delegates greeted Lewis with chants of “C-I-O” and sat spellbound by his speech. Not surprisingly, then, the final report of the Officers Report Committee closely matched Local 22’s resolution, advocating continuing affiliation with the CIO, declaring that peace and unity in the labor movement was possible only on the basis of industrial unionism, and pledging continuing support of the CIO, financial and otherwise. The report was adopted unanimously by the convention. The official report of the convention described the scene: “Whole delegations rose and stood in the aisles, banging wooden blocks on the tables. There had been many ovations in the course of the convention but none could equal this in intensity of emotion. It lasted twenty-nine minutes…”

While the CIO was seen as progressive on race issues, the AFL was seen as inexcusably indifferent. A. Philip Randolph had introduced a resolution to the AFL convention year after year to outlaw racial discrimination in all AFL member unions, but his efforts were to no avail. In arguing for his resolution, he pointed out that black workers had demonstrated that they possessed the will and ability to organize, strike, and fight in the labor struggle along with white workers. This was particularly demonstrated in the garment and coal industries, but it was no coincidence that Randolph mentioned these industries specifically, as their workers were represented by CIO unions, which took a far more progressive stance on interracial unionism. Furthermore, his resolution argued, unions needed the strength that such interracial unity could provide, as forces were coming together to carry out a fascistic campaign against the labor movement:

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WHEREAS, In this period of crisis, when the employing class is seeking to crush and stamp out the trade union movement with fascist ferocity, and gives no thought or consideration to a worker because he accidentally may be a white man, and seeks only to coin the blood and sweat of all workers into dollars for profit, the A.F. of L. should cease to pussy-foot, evade and dodge the question of Negro rights in the trade unions and frankly face it in the interest not only of the Negro worker but of its own moral, intellectual and spiritual growth and power and future…  

Opponents of labor often used race to create a wedge between workers, but they ultimately sought to undermine the labor movement as a whole, not merely attack black workers. If labor’s opposition could be that color-blind, certainly its supporters should be.

Thus, Randolph’s resolution asked the AFL convention to go on record in condemning all forms of discrimination against black workers and to eliminate discriminatory practices from every element of every AFL-affiliated union. Additionally, it proposed that any union that failed to abolish such practices be automatically expelled from the Federation. Finally, the resolution asked that all AFL bodies and unions undertake the task of educating workers on the need for and value of interracial working-class unity.  

The AFL would take decades to pass the resolution, while the CIO continued to build credibility on race issues.

A few months after the ILGWU convention, Frank Crosswaith pointed to the progressivism of CIO unions as being critical in helping African American workers free themselves from the shackles of wage slavery. Indeed, he compared the plight of the worker in his day to the plight of slaves:


23 Ibid.
We were bought and sold in their days even as today our industrial masters buy and sell labor and the products of labor. The white workers who were called “indentured servants” were for all practical economic purposes as much enslaved as the Negro worker.24

He explained that all workers, regardless of race, had common interests, just as those who lived off of the profits accumulated from selling the products of workers’ labor had common interests, as well. Because workers greatly outnumbered employers, Crosswaith continued, employers exploited racial and religious differences to keep workers disunited. He claimed that by ignoring divisions of race and creed, industrial unions not only empowered African American workers, but also achieved more for their members through unity. Thus, he argued, the high wage standards and favorable policies on required working hours in mass production industries like the garment and mining industries were partially due to CIO unions’ equal treatment of their black members.25

But the CIO’s battle with the AFL took up much of its energies. From October to December, the two organizations held a series of conferences in an attempt to reach détente, but the deadlock continued. The Congress proposed an agreement wherein the AFL would accept the 33 unions of the CIO and grant them charters. In unions where conflicts between CIO and AFL loyalists continued, joint committees would be appointed to mediate. The AFL rejected this proposal, ending the series of “peace conferences,” as they were being called, before year’s end. The CIO vowed to consolidate its unions, call a


25 Ibid.
national convention, and promote the establishment of industrial union councils across the country.

David Dubinsky had been lauded for promoting the peace conferences, but the ILGWU’s loyalties were clear. From the time of the union’s convention in May until the end of November, its monthly contributions to the CIO topped $300,000. The ILGWU General Executive Board restated its belief that only the recognition of industrial unionism as the basis for organization could bring about peace between the CIO and AFL. It said, “After this fundamental is conceded, all the other obstacles to reconciliation should be ironed out in a spirit of good will and equity.”

Perhaps that was a rosy prediction, because in 1938, the ILGWU would support the CIO in its development as an organization separate from the AFL.

On January 1, 1938, Justice published an editorial lamenting the failure of peace negotiations between the AFL and the CIO. The ILGWU’s organ expressed the opinion that proposed terms for an agreement had seemed viable, and argued that the question of readmitting CIO unions to the AFL should have been a formality. Despite the union’s insistence that peace was not attainable until the American Federation of Labor accepted the industrial form of union organization, the editorial claimed that the compromise of laying aside the question of readmitting CIO unions to the AFL and settling jurisdictional conflicts between the two organizations was reasonable. The editorial told of how the union had fought, in the face of costly attacks, for industrial unionism, and said that for

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enduring such struggle, ILGWU members had the right to hope and expect that when
peace with the AFL appeared possible, it would be achieved. The editorial concluded by
saying that it refused to believe that the CIO would accept its state of permanent civil war
and a “policy of suicide.”

Yet, despite this ambivalence about the Congress of Industrial Organizations’
refusal to accept an agreement with the AFL, ILGWU President Dubinsky declared only
10 days later that his union would not withdraw from the CIO. He claimed that this was
the position of the union’s General Executive Board. In fact, he praised the CIO and
placed the blame for its split with the AFL squarely on the Federation’s shoulders,
reiterating that the split didn’t come from the withdrawal of the CIO from the AFL, but
from the AFL’s suspension of the Congress. However, he lamented the split, saying that
disunity in the labor movement was undermining labor’s political position. Thus, he
stood behind the Justice editorial, saying that despite the ILGWU’s loyalty to the CIO,
the union didn’t always agree with CIO policy. He made it clear that such a defense of
this editorial was necessary because communists were attacking it as evidence that the
ILGWU was betraying the labor movement. In fact, Dubinsky saw the editorial as proof
of his union’s independence and non-partisan nature. Conversely, he accused the Daily
Worker, a communist newspaper that was the main source of criticism of the Justice
ingoing editorial, of parting from the united front. To him, many communists were now fleeing
the Front at the first sign of disagreement with communist positions. Dubinsky wanted to

27 “Labor Peace Yet to Come,” in The Position of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union in
Relation to CIO and AFL, 1934-1938, 47-48.
make it clear that the ILGWU remained loyal to the CIO, but did so not as part of any larger movement, but as an independent union with its own particular agenda.28

Meanwhile, the CIO seemed to pull further away from the AFL. Toward the end of January, a number of the Congress’ unions gathered for a conference to discuss setting up an industrial union council in New York to coordinate CIO activities. Allan Haywood, regional CIO director, was chosen as the council’s temporary chairman and Charles Zimmerman was chosen to be its temporary secretary. Not surprisingly, this conference antagonized AFL officials. Federation President William Green publicly denounced Zimmerman as a “Lovestone communist” and condemned the establishment of a CIO council as a move designed to further split the Congress from the AFL. Green also claimed the conference was a direct insult to David Dubinsky, who had worked toward forging a peace agreement between the dueling organizations. Zimmerman responded to Green’s accusations by saying that any split that existed was “obviously” created by Green’s order to expel the CIO unions from the AFL.29 Thus, Green alone was responsible for the continuing rift.

The question of CIO unions rejoining the AFL was critical. By the spring of 1938, the CIO and the AFL had comparable memberships. Thus, if the two groups combined, it was expected that either the CIO would hold a majority over the AFL membership, or would at least hold a large enough minority to prevent being steamrolled by the AFL on policy decisions. A union would no longer gain a clear power advantage by joining one

28 Attacks were evident in such places as the Daily Worker, which published an editorial attacking the ILGWU editorial on December 30th, 1937. “The CIO, AFL and Peace,” in The Position of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union in Relation to CIO and AFL, 1934-1938, 49-54; “Dubinsky Declares ILGWU Will Remain In Ranks of C.I.O,” Daily Worker, January 12, 1938.

29 “Zimmerman Declares CIO Council is Help to Unity,” Workers Age.
organization over the other. The ILGWU continued to insist that it would not leave the CIO even though it openly disagreed with some fundamental aspects of its policies and strategy. Firstly, it was believed to be of no use to the labor movement as a whole for any union to leave one of the two central labor organizations in the country. Secondly, the union still believed in peace between the CIO and the AFL, and it wanted to make its contribution to a reunited labor movement, which it wouldn’t be able to do if it wasn’t still a member of one of those organizations. The ILGWU Executive Board thus passed a resolution at its quarterly meeting in May vowing to continue pursuing every opportunity for peace, and setting up a committee including Vice Presidents Julius Hochman, Luigi Antonini, and Isidore Nagler to initiate a new round of peace conferences. It is not difficult to see that, by this point, the ILGWU’s reasons for remaining in the CIO did not connote a great deal of loyalty or enthusiasm.

The ILGWU had been a part of the CIO in the belief that industrial unionism complemented, even perfected, craft unionism. When the Congress was established, it argued that it should not be expelled from the AFL because it did not constitute a duel union. Even after the AFL-CIO split, the ILGWU continued to insist that the CIO was not a duel union. Although the International believed that industrial unionism was a more effective form of organization than craft unionism, it never believed that the CIO should replace the AFL. Thus, when the New York State CIO sought to form a permanent organization as a precursor to a national CIO that would be similar in structure to the AFL, accusations of duel unionism followed and all ILGWU locals refused to participate.

30 Unknown and “ILGWU Peace Committee’s Report,” in The Position of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union in Relation to CIO and AFL, 1934-1938, 61-62, 75, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 14, Folder 2B.
At the same time, rumors spread that David Dubinsky was working with Homer Martin, President of the United Auto Workers, the second largest CIO member union, to build up a coalition that would pursue another peacemaking effort with the AFL. Dubinsky and Martin were reportedly trying to gather support from fellow CIO unions such as the rubber and shoe workers to fight for a peace agreement based on industrial unionism in mass production industries. It was widely believed that if this effort failed, in combination with the plan to set up the CIO as what seemed to be a permanent duel union, the ILGWU would be compelled to withdraw from the Congress. Yet, Dubinsky had actually approached both AFL President William Green and CIO President John Lewis to appoint committees to reinitiate peace conferences like those that had taken place the year before.

Green met with the ILGWU committee of vice presidents on August 22nd, agreeing to pick the conferences up where they had left off, with the acceptance of industrial unionism for some of the mass production industries on the table. On the following day, the vice presidents and Dubinsky met with Lewis, who said resuming conferences was futile unless the AFL was ready to issue charters to all CIO unions. In cases where disputes still existed, he argued that they should be dealt with only after the unions involved were granted reentry to the Federation. The ILGWU officials tried to impress upon Lewis that his proposals would merely carry the ongoing conflict over into the AFL, still causing dissension within labor’s ranks. Instead, they insisted that all
disputes had to be settled before reconciliation between the AFL and CIO could take place.31

The New York State CIO went ahead with its conference in September, moving toward setting up a national labor organization. The ILGWU General Executive Board had recommended that locals not send delegates to the conference as it was still mulling over the union’s relationship with the Congress. In its statement on the conference, Local 22 pointed out that the ILGWU was one of the initiators of the CIO and had given active support to industrial unionism. However, the union had also made every effort to encourage unity in the labor movement, understanding that division did irreparable damage. Thus, the union chose not to participate in the CIO conference, fearing that the event was going to aggravate the split between the leading labor organizations. Local 22 wanted to stand behind its parent union to maintain a united position on the issue. Thus, Local 22 issued a statement saying that it refused to send delegates to the CIO conference. It is important to note that when a member of the local’s executive board proposed an amendment to the statement expressing disapproval and regret toward the ILGWU’s decision against sending delegates to the conference, that amendment was defeated by a vote of 15 to 7. The defeat came despite Charles Zimmerman’s outspoken support for sending delegates to the convention to push for labor unity from inside the CIO.32 Clearly, there was broad discomfort with the CIO’s increasing movement toward


32 Minutes, Organization Committee, Sept. 1, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/014. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 9; “Statement of Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U. on the State C.I.O. Conference,” Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., September 6,
establishing a national union organization to oppose the AFL, and broad support for the ILGWU’s approach.

President Roosevelt inserted himself into the controversy between the CIO and the AFL when he sent telegrams to both the AFL convention and the first national CIO convention in October and November respectively. In them he said that, as someone who was friends with so many AFL officers and leaders of AFL unions, he held out sincere hope for peace and progress in the labor movement. He stated that unity would vastly increase the power of the labor movement, increasing its ability to fight against reactionary forces. At its convention, however, the Federation continued pointing fingers. It said that the reason peace negotiations with the CIO had broken down in 1937 was because it was impossible to satisfy the demands and ambitions of its president John Lewis. The convention reiterated its position that it would welcome back the ten suspended CIO unions and would engage in further peace negotiations, following President Roosevelt’s request, but asserted that Lewis continually rejected any such advances. Thus, it held that the CIO was being run by a dictator. Also, it picked up on accusations popular amongst political conservatives that the Congress was under communist influence, saying it would not negotiate with a dictatorship or with communist leadership.³³

¹³ In American Labour and Consensus Capitalism (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1991), Patrick Renshaw argued that the CIO was led by strong anti-communists, but that it employed a considerable number of communists as organizers. Their employment, however, was merely due to the fact that they were the most effective organizers (33); “President Roosevelt’s Message” and “AFL Re-States Position,” in The Position of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union in Relation to CIO and AFL, 1934-1938 67-68, 70-71.

1938, and “General Executive Board Meeting,” Minutes, Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, ILGWU, November 22, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Box 1, Folder 1938.
At this point, the ILGWU sounded almost desperate for peace between the AFL and CIO. The union portrayed itself as having been the lone advocate for peace, but now saw itself as the leader of a growing consensus. Even the President of the United States had come out in support of peace between the AFL and the CIO. Yet, the CIO announced its first convention almost simultaneous to the reception of President Roosevelt’s telegram, which greatly disappointed the ILGWU and created a roadblock to peace. As a result, the union believed that the President should go further by calling a conference of CIO and AFL leaders to explore paths to reconciliation. The ILGWU had come to believe that Roosevelt was the only one who could bring the battling labor factions together. Ever playing the part of conciliator, the ILGWU insisted that unity would only result from a recognition that there is room in the labor movement for both craft and industrial unionism, and from “the sincere adoption of the thought that the new and the old, the conservative and the progressive, can merge into one powerful army of labor…”34 Yet, without the President as mediator, the achievement of this realization seemed impossible.

The ILGWU then had to decide if it would participate in the CIO’s first national convention. The General Executive Board passed a resolution refusing to participate in the convention, which it viewed as a move to form a permanent duel union to compete with the AFL. The union had always been opposed to duel unionism, arguing that the division of labor would be disastrous for the labor movement and for workers themselves. Yet, because it had been expelled from the AFL and was in the CIO camp, the ILGWU had to decide its future if it was to not participate in the Congress moving forward. Thus, the Board declared that the union would remain independent until peace between the

AFL and the CIO was established, or at least until the union decided by passing a convention resolution to affiliate with one of those organizations. ILGWU President Dubinsky reaffirmed this stance in a radio talk on WEVD, but clarified that this plan did not symbolize a withdrawal from the CIO. However, he explained that with a convention to establish a permanent national organization, the old CIO that his union helped to establish as a complementary, not competing, organization to the AFL would no longer exist.\(^\text{35}\)

The ILGWU’s position seemed to be confirmed by the attitude of the CIO as reflected in its report from its first convention. The Congress placed the blame for the breakdown of peace negotiations squarely on the Executive Council of the AFL because it insisted on an agreement by which they would admit CIO unions subject to certain craft limitations, while leaving all other CIO unions to be split up between various craft unions and destroyed as industrial unions altogether. The CIO refused to agree to a peace agreement whose terms were written solely by the AFL without consideration for the maintenance of industrial unionism. Yet, with Republicans making considerable gains in 1938 midterm elections, the ILGWU felt it could no longer abide the CIO’s hostilities.\(^\text{36}\)

Local 22’s Executive Board said in a report from their November 22\(^{nd}\) meeting:


\(^{36}\)At the same time the New Deal coalition was forming, the 1938 midterm elections marked the emergence of another coalition between Republicans and Southern Democrats, which largely controlled Congress until the 1960s. Renshaw, American Labour and Consensus Capitalism, 32; “CIO Convention Position,” in The Position of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union in Relation to CIO and AFL, 1934-1938.
The results of the last elections showed that the conservatives and reactionaries in this country are gaining the upper hand and that unless there is a united labor movement to counteract these reactionary forces, they might attempt to pass anti-labor legislation.\footnote{37}{“General Executive Board Meeting,” Minutes, Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local 22, ILGWU, November 22, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1938; ILGWU records, #5780/002, Box 2, Folder 5.}

Indeed, the desire for peace between the AFL and CIO was largely a political reaction, as many in the labor movement fought not only for more favorable conditions for workers, but also against fascism and American involvement in World War II.

Points that united the labor movement became the focus of the CIO conference, so it declared not only support for the New Deal, but also opposition to fascism. Leon Jouhaux, the general secretary of the French Confederation of Labor spoke to the convention, saying that no neutrality was possible in the struggle against fascism. He said that the countries of Europe needed America’s help in that struggle and warned that if fascism went unchecked it would spread to places like Czechoslovakia and, eventually, the United States. Then, at the International Congress Against War and Fascism in Mexico City, which included over 50,000 labor leaders, CIO Chairman John L. Lewis pledged his organization’s support in the global fight against fascism.\footnote{38}{“John L. Lewis Pledges C.I.O. Support Against Fascism,” \textit{Cutters Voice for Peace and Democracy} 1, No. 1, October 1938, 1.} The Congress tried to place itself back at the center of progressive labor as it moved toward becoming a permanent organization.

The ILGWU certainly had enough to worry about by the end of 1939 and did not want further tensions to encourage a split within its own ranks. It was already on its way to splitting with the CIO, a controversial move that left many in the union uneasy. The
union had been loyal to the Congress since its founding just a few years earlier, but President Dubinsky was coming to see CIO President John Lewis as a demagogue who refused to come to terms with the AFL despite the Federation’s repeated attempts to make peace. ILGWU locals were notified by the end of 1939 that if unity between the AFL and the CIO was not achieved by the union’s May 1940 convention, the question of rejoining the AFL would be put to the convention delegates. The ILGWU believed in industrial organization, but it could no longer abide John Lewis’ seeming unwillingness to make any concessions to the American Federation of Labor. Its attempts to build up a separate permanent national organization was a final sign that the Congress of Industrial Organizations was willing to make the split in the labor movement permanent, something the ILGWU felt would cause the movement irreparable harm. Even though the CIO provided progressive leadership that matched the ILGWU’s platform, particularly in its positions on racial issues and fascism, the union could not be a part of an organization that would undermine the very movement all workers depended on for protection and advancement. With the AFL and the CIO still miles apart in May, the ILGWU convention voted to reaffiliate with the AFL.

_The ILGWU’s United Front Crumbles_

Once the left wing and progressives joined forces, broader political action became a focus. At the ILGWU’s 1937 national convention, Local 22 submitted a resolution in favor of establishing a national labor party. The resolution declared the Democratic and Republican Parties as being capitalist at their root, defending employers’ right to exploit

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39 Minutes of the General Membership Meeting of Dressmakers Union Local 22, ILGWU, Dec. 14, 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1939.
and oppress workers. Thus, all agencies at every level of government were on the side of employers, as well as bankers and other industrialists. Labor’s Non-Partisan League was supposed to provide an independent political voice representing workers’ interests, but Local 22 declared the non-partisan approach a failure, preventing workers from organizing and accumulating political power, and making unions subservient to the capitalist interests of the existing political system. The local proposed the creation of a labor party constituted by a federation of trade unions, workers’ organizations, and working-class political organizations. To this end, their resolution proposed that the AFL Executive Council call a national conference of unions to take up the question of an independent labor party. The convention affirmed its support for such a party, but adopted a report looking to Labor’s Non-Partisan League and its affiliates, such as the American Labor Party, as the facilitators for independent political action.40

Charles Zimmerman followed the union’s lead, arranging for all Local 22 members to be taken into the ALP. Thus, the local’s Organization Committee called an active members meeting for September 25th to start a membership drive for the party. Indeed, there was plenty of reason for excitement about the ALP in the ILGWU in New York City. Two prominent union leaders, Isidore Nagler and Salvatore Ninfo, were running on the party’s ticket for public office that year. Nagler, General Manager of the ILGWU Cloak Joint Board, was running to become Bronx Borough President, while union Vice President Ninfo ran to become a City Councilman. The union was also strongly behind now-ALP fusion candidate for re-election, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia.

Thus, it held a mass rally on October 7 in Hunts Point Palace in the Bronx to support the ALP candidates and to “publicize the political strength, power, and determination” of the ILGWU. President David Dubinsky, First Vice President Luigi Antonini, and other vice presidents including Julius Hochman and Charles Zimmerman spoke to the rally, as did Nagler, Ninfo, and Alex Rose, Executive Secretary of the American Labor Party.41

Local 22 members embraced the fledgling American Labor Party because they learned from experience that they couldn’t be in organizations with employers, whose interests were diametrically opposed to theirs. They saw the two major parties in American politics as being controlled by employers, so they declared the need for a political party run by the labor movement in the interest of workers. Thus, Local 22 threw its support behind the ALP, much as the leadership of the ILGWU had. On November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, the Thursday before Election Day, the union and the party threw a joint mass meeting at the Bronx Winter Garden.42 But Local 22 was still torn in two different directions. On one hand, Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman had numerous friendly exchanges with Senator Robert Wagner, as they agreed on much of the legislation being considered

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41 Minutes of the Organization Committee, Sept. 16, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 9; Letter from Charles S. Zimmerman and Minnie Lurie, Oct. 1, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 2, Folder 2.

42 The ILGWU's support for the American Labor Party was well established by this time, as evidenced by events throughout the election campaign, such as a large demonstration on behalf of ALP candidates, some of whom were union members, on October 19. David Dubinsky gave the keynote address, while ILGWU Vice Presidents Luigi Antonini and Julius Hochman, Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman, and ALP Executive Secretary Alex Rose also spoke. “To All Members of I.L.G.W.U.” flyer, I.L.G.W.U. Committee for Election of Isidore Nagler, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 29, Folder 14; “The American Labor Party is Your Party!” pamphlet, Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 145, Folder 2B; “ILGWU ALP Mass Meeting” flyer, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Box 141, Folder 2.
by Congress that year. They pledged to support each other’s efforts, and Local 22’s participation in the ALP reflected that.⁴³

On the other hand, the left wing still held considerable sway in the local, and Zimmerman also had a well-established relationship with Jay Lovestone, a nationally known communist splinter group leader. Lovestone wrote to his friend “Sasha,” using Zimmerman’s Russian birth name. He stressed the importance of publishing a pamphlet for African Americans, saying that it would be of inherent value to the union in honoring its diversity and promoting its membership campaign amongst African Americans. Yet, he also sought to draw moderate black leaders like Lester Granger of the National Urban League into a closer relationship with the labor movement and the Communist Party.

Indifference toward making an effort to reach out to the black community could be read in the most negative light: “The apparent unending delay in getting it [the pamphlet] published only breeds suspicion and cynicism, particularly amongst the Negroes who feel constantly mistreated, and easily fall into the same groove in regard to us.”⁴⁴ Local 22 was also asked to give contributions to the Scottsboro Defense Committee. In July, the local had deferred the International Labor Defense’s request for assistance to the Joint Board, but Zimmerman decided to send a telegram to greet the release of four of the Scottsboro Boys and to pledge his local’s continuing support of the Scottsboro Defense

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⁴³ Telegrams, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 21, Folder 11.

⁴⁴ Jay Lovestone to Sasha Zimmerman, 29 October 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 43, Folder 11.
Committee’s efforts to get the remaining boys released.\textsuperscript{45} Local 22 couldn’t ignore its left wing and it couldn’t ignore the African American community.

With Republicans making significant gains in the 1938 midterm elections, the ILGWU began militating in defense of the New Deal in 1939.\textsuperscript{46} David Dubinsky sent a letter to the union’s locals and joint boards warning of Congress’ consideration of a bill cutting $150 million from the appropriation for the Works Progress Administration. If the bill were to pass, Dubinsky argued that a million WPA workers would lose their jobs and several million people who depended on the agency would be condemned to starvation and poverty. Hence, he vowed that the ILGWU would support President Roosevelt and do whatever it could to fight the reduction of the WPA budget.\textsuperscript{47} Support of the President cemented the union’s continuing allegiance to the ALP.

ILGWU organizer and Negro Labor Committee President Frank Crosswaith ran for city council on the local American Labor Party ticket, as did a number of other unionists running for various municipal positions. Thus, it was no surprise that the ILGWU coalesced behind the party. A few weeks before the election, the managers of all New York locals of the International came together to express support for the ALP. They

\textsuperscript{45} Minutes of the Executive Board of the Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., July 27, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1937.

\textsuperscript{46} Richard Oestreicher argues that support of the New Deal was a “Devil’s Bargain.” Those who supported the New Deal generally accepted FDR’s hands-off relationship with racist Southern white Democrats, which left in place a solid political bloc that, in tandem with Republicans, would oppose progressive legislation for decades. He further claims that supporters of the New Deal lacked the political will, or perhaps even the necessary morality or wisdom to take advantage of their most powerful moment in American politics and confront the racial ethos of Southern Democrats. Instead, they knowingly accepted racially discriminatory exceptions and limitations in virtually every key New Deal program and agency. Oestreicher, “The Rules of the Game: Class Politics in Twentieth-Century America,” in \textit{Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994, The Labor-Liberal Alliance}, ed. Kevin Boyle (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 26-27.

\textsuperscript{47} David Dubinsky to All Our Affiliated Local Unions and Joint Boards, 19 January 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 16, Folder 8.
agreed that, instead of responding independently to requests for political contributions, they should form one general fund of $15,000 not only for the 1939 campaign, but also to help the ALP pay its debts. The ILGWU general office pledged $10,000 to that fund, leaving the union’s locals to contribute the rest. Local 22 was told it owed $900. In addition, the managers decided to make a special appeal to all of its locals’ officers to bring the need for supporting the American Labor Party and its candidates to the attention of their members. The ILGWU as an organization was firmly behind Crosswaith and all ALP candidates, even if it would turn out that all of its members were not.

Meanwhile, in *Justice*, the Executive Board of Local 22 had sent what it called “A Message and a Warning” to its members. The Board went on to explain that communists had started a campaign against the local aimed at causing confusion and undermining the ILGWU as a whole. They charged the union with trying to provoke hysteria aimed at fomenting support for going to war in Europe. The Board reminded its local’s members that their Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman was known to be a supporter of the Keep America Out of War Committee. It further asserted that the local had always been, and remained, opposed to war. Communists’ assertions were also aimed at destroying the unity that was the very foundation of Local 22’s success. Their campaign was painted as a reaction against Charles Zimmerman’s outspoken opposition to the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Thus, the local’s Executive Board portrayed communists as not having a true interest in the dressmakers and their economic plight, but as wanting to browbeat the union into

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48 Supporting the American Labor Party at this point was not an easy move, as the New York party organization was undergoing a split between its left-wing and conservative members. “Right Wing Upheld in Laborite Row,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 1939; Frederick Umhey, Executive Secretary, ILGWU to Charles Zimmerman, 24 October 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 2, Folder 2.
accepting an alliance with Hitler. Now, opposition to communism wasn’t just a product of long-standing animosities within garment unions, but was a complementary stance to anti-fascism.

In fact, the Communist Party in New York was in disarray. In mid-December, two members of ILGWU Local 22, Ben Gerjoy and Sol Lipnack, were expelled from the Party because they refused to follow the new party line. The communist leadership accused them of going over to “the camp of the Lovestoneites, Trotskyites and Social Democrats, the pre-war, Red-baiting stooges of the bosses and the Dies committee against the best interests of the working class.” Gerjoy and Lipnack, however, merely felt that changes in party policy would disrupt its work in trade unions, including the ILGWU. Apparently, a number of people agreed with them, as five communist officials also associated with the International withdrew from the CP once the expulsions were announced. These officials joined the expelled party members to create a leaflet for distribution to ILGWU members denouncing the party’s accusations. Not only was the Communist Party wrong about Gerjoy and Lipnack, but also it detrimentally placed factional politics above the interests of workers. Charles Zimmerman also offered his full support for the now ex-communists, lauding them for putting the union first.

Zimmerman claimed that communists had been coming under increasing attack since WWII had begun in Europe. Because Local 22 had also expressed concerns about communist influence, it was automatically deemed an enemy of the CP. Thus, Zimmerman saw the party as automatically classifying any member who also belonged to a trade union as being a turncoat. Indeed, with the united front, the 500 or so communists

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49 “To the Dressmakers of Loc. 22,” Justice, November 1, 1939.
in Local 22 had worked in close cooperation with other political factions in the local. However, enthusiasm for working with communists had waned significantly among the local’s membership in the wake of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the Soviet invasions of Poland and Finland. Yet, Gerjoy, Lipnack, and the five ILGWU officials who left the Communist Party with them asserted their continuing belief in the united front policy, and pleaded with the union’s members not to dissolve into factionalism. They thus warned against Red-baiting, as that would only serve reactionaries who wanted to crush the labor movement.50

Fallout from these political rifts and the split between the AFL and CIO continued throughout 1940. The active communist rank and file met on January 4th to discuss the expulsion of seven so-called “Stalinites,” who were members of Local 22 and had expressed dissension from the Communist Party’s platform. One of the expelled members spoke in Yiddish at the January meeting, saying his group had been sent into Local 22 by fellow dressmakers to fight for them and protect their conditions. Due to continuing economic struggles in the garment industry and in Depression-era America, the Stalinite argued that the ILGWU should not be spending its time hashing out political issues. He felt that if political questions were discussed at membership meetings, due to the diversity of viewpoints represented, no constructive solutions would be reached. He looked around the meeting and pointed out that many of the older communists attending belonged to the ILGWU during its civil war between socialists and communists in the 1920s. They knew the price the union had paid for such conflict, and he didn’t want the Party to bring about the same turmoil at the outset of the 1940s.

Yet, he also admitted that the Stalinites no longer agreed with the Communist Party platform. He explained that he could accept that the party disagreed with ILGWU leaders like Zimmerman and Dubinsky, who were seen as supporting an imperialist war in Europe. However, he would not align himself with his party on that point because it was a direct attack on the union. The CP also accused the Stalinites of being ready to abandon the CIO and go over to the AFL. Yet, they merely took the position of the ILGWU, again not wanting to create conflict in their union, and wanting to support unity in the labor movement. Furthermore, effectively addressing the problems on the communists’ agenda, such as class inequality and war in Europe, required labor unity above all.

The Stalinite also claimed that the CP had changed, no longer supporting labor unity, so that it could block developments that might help Roosevelt get reelected. Indeed, by the end of the year, those on the far left were so opposed to FDR’s reelection, that some even came out in support of Republican presidential nominee Wendell Wilkie. Thus, due to the Communist Party’s obstructionist attitude toward labor unity and Democratic electoral success, many communists in the ILGWU could no longer support the party. The Stalinites in Local 22 also couldn’t accept the communists’ antagonism toward their union. They had been ordered to attack their Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman for being a warmonger, and were told if they did not do so, they would be expelled from the party. Their refusal to go after Zimmerman and to pass out leaflets also attacking Dubinsky and Roosevelt was a large factor in their ultimate expulsion.51 Yet, the Stalinite’s speech on demonstrated that many communist members of the ILGWU

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51 Minutes, Meeting of Active Rank and File, January 4, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 31, Folder 2.
were finally ready to break with their party, valuing their union over their political loyalty.

However, the left-wing rank and file held together, with African Americans constituting a large part of its membership. Bertha Edgecombe, an African American Local 22 member, spoke at the rank and file’s March 18th meeting, declaring that black workers were with the left-wing group and not with the progressive clique that backed the sitting ILGWU administration. She claimed that the administration had become so entrenched that they had grown reticent and indifferent. The left wing sought to win the union elections to replace Dubinsky’s administration, but they were particularly determined to get left wingers elected as convention delegates to fight against the policies of “reactionaries and war mongers like Dubinsky and Zimmerman” and for re-affiliation with the CIO. Disturbingly, though, the left wingers couldn’t let go of their inside battles with Stalinists. At the March meeting, they made a point of attacking not only the current union administration, but also the Stalinists who they and the Communist Party had expelled. They declared themselves happy to be rid of these “deserter,” saying that they now had “a clean house.” The meeting concluded with a plea to vote against Charles Zimmerman in Local 22.  

The Progressive Group of Local 22 fought back, declaring itself the ally of African Americans by making opposition to all forms of racial discrimination by unions and employers a central part of its platform. Notably, though, the progressives directly challenged the left wing for attempting to undermine the united front that had been successful for the previous few years. Thus, they also made labor unity an integral part of

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52 Minutes, Mass Rally of Left Rank & File, March 18, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 31, Folder 2.
their platform, advocating for united action with no regard to differing political beliefs. The progressives implied that attempts to sow dissension in union ranks ultimately came from outside political organizations. Clearly, they saw the left wing as a tool of the Communist Party that was once again attempting to take control of the ILGWU. The Progressive Group maintained its political focus on fighting the forces of reaction, war, and fascism, and declared its continuing support for the American Labor Party. It also saw labor unity as requiring that the CIO reunite with the AFL. Thus, it called for the immediate resumption of peace negotiations between the two organizations. Finally, the Local 22 progressives touted their leadership in the area of workers’ education and determined to continue those efforts in hopes of cultivating union consciousness in young members to draw them closer to the ILGWU and its activities.53

As in previous years, the progressives were victorious at election time. Local 22 unanimously nominated Charles Zimmerman to run unopposed for reelection as its manager. The communists lobbied for local members to vote “no” to Zimmerman, but while just over 2,000 such votes were cast, over 10,000 were cast in favor of Zimmerman’s reelection. All 29 members elected to the executive board, all 25 members elected to serve as delegates to the ILGWU convention, and all 31 business agents elected were from the progressive slate. The New York Times declared these election results to be the end of Local 22’s “united front.” After all, when the results came in, Charles Zimmerman immediately celebrated “the defeat of Stalinist intrigues in our union…The union members have demonstrated that they understand fully the objective of the Stalinists, which is to divert their interest and attention from union affairs to

53 Program of Dressmakers Progressive Group, Local 22 I.L.G.W.U., February 26, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 9, Folder 8.
Communist politics.” Indeed, he felt that the communists were pursuing a policy of factionalism in Local 22, attempting to use the local as a vehicle to infiltrate and take control of the entire union. He was also confident that, in the wake of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, most of the local’s members felt great resentment toward the communists and wanted to permanently disassociate from them.

He also claimed that progressive victory was a sign of approval for the ILGWU’s prevailing stance on the CIO-AFL split. The union supported peace and unity in the labor movement, and Zimmerman argued that the election solidified support for the union’s intention to re-affiliate with the AFL if CIO President John Lewis continued to pursue making his organization a permanent duel union. Finally, the proof of the communists’ overall decline in the union could be found in elections in 1940 in numerous locals across the union, including 9, 35, 38, 60, and 117. Out of all of those locals, only one business agent and one delegate to the ILGWU convention were elected from the communist slate.54 Although communists would continue actively recruiting within the ILGWU for a few more decades, 1940 marked the beginning of the end of its electoral power and influence within the administration in the ILGWU.

A number of African Americans were elected as convention delegates in Local 22’s 1940 elections, including Eldica Riley and Maida Springer. Notably, Bertha Edgecombe, a prominent member of the left wing, did not receive enough votes to win a delegate position. Harlem Local 22 members may have gotten their preferred candidates elected, but they were worried about being disenfranchised in the local’s administration. While each district represented in the local had two members on the Election and

Objection Committee, Harlem only had one. This was because it was the smallest district, but at a special meeting, its members unanimously adopted a motion to seat two candidates from Harlem on the Committee. Two Hispanic members, Santiago Corrales and Maria Ramos, were elected to be the proposed Committee members. Though the Local 22 Executive Board refused to change the policy to permanently allow for two delegates from Harlem, it accepted Corrales and Ramos on the Committee as a courtesy to the district. This was ironic, as one of Harlem’s most prominent Local 22 members, Ethel Atwell, was elected to represent the Executive Board on the Election and Objection Committee. She joined other African American members Mabel Brown and Oretta Gaskins on the Committee. Atwell was appointed the Committee secretary.55

Victory by progressives also reinforced the ILGWU support for President Roosevelt, and the union would be a major supporter of his reelection for an unprecedented third term later that year. Union President David Dubinsky was a member of the Labor Division of the Committee for the Celebration of the President’s Birthday, so all ILGWU members were called upon to send personal birthday greetings to Roosevelt. Apparently, the previous year, the ILGWU had raised more money toward celebrating the President’s birthday than any other union. Many union members, especially those in left-leaning Local 22, held out hope that they could continue to support Roosevelt through the American Labor Party. The ALP reached out to the local in February, asking it to insert ads into the journals of its New York County and Queens

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County branches. The New York County journal was being published for a dance its branch was holding on April 12th at Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom, while the Queens County journal was being published for its branch’s February 21st celebration.56

The national office of the Socialist Party plotted to help the Progressive Group of Local 22 win its 1940 elections and to insure it led in an effective manner. It felt that it could help the local play its rightful role as a leading militant force in the ILGWU, and in the labor movement as a whole. As had been the case in the past, though, fighting communists was a prominent a goal of socialists, and so the partnership with progressives came with the intention of completely eradicating communism from the ILGWU. For this reason, socialists attacked the union’s left wing because of its advocacy for ridding the union of political disputes. They claimed that the left wing did not seek peace within the union, but merely sought to sweep the communist embarrassment of the Nazi-Stalin Pact, and the ensuing invasion of Poland and attack on Finland, under the rug. Thus, the socialists sought to fully embrace all of those union members who were breaking away from Local 22’s communist left wing. Hence, the progressives of Local 22 vowed to accept all fellow local members who were willing to break away from the communists.57

The left wing did, in fact, do well in the ILGWU elections, where they received 35 percent of the vote in the union’s major locals. These results encouraged them in their fight against the progressive leaders whom they called warmongers. They accused Dubinsky and other conservative former socialists represented by the Jewish Daily

56 Letter from F.F. Umhey, Executive Secretary, ILGWU, 13 January 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 16, Folder 6; Minutes, Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local #22, I.L.G.W.U., February 6, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Box 1, Folder 1940.

57 National Office, Socialist Party of America memorandum to All Branches and National Council Members, 16 January 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 15, Folder 5.
Forward of launching a vicious campaign of slander against them that was aided by the mainstream press. Leading up to the ILGWU’s 1940 convention in late May, the rank and file of Local 10 launched a vicious attack on President Dubinsky and his administration. Instead of following the progressive course that union members had agreed upon at previous conventions, the local claimed that the reigning administration followed the more conservative line advocated by institutions like the Forward that had fallen in lockstep with the policies of President Roosevelt.

According to Local 10’s left wingers, the ILGWU administration was thus responsible for the union’s withdrawal from the CIO, for splitting the American Labor Party through pro-war advocacy and Red-baiting, and for destroying unity within the International by destroying its true representative of progressivism, the left wing. Dubinsky and other union leaders could therefore be blamed for ALP candidates’ losses in recent elections, and for failures to organize workers in open shops. At the coming convention, the left wingers wanted Dubinsky and other leaders like Zimmerman out and wanted to pursue policies that followed a truly progressive line, such as fighting against involvement in World War II.58

The left wing of Local 22 was less harsh in its analysis, focusing on what it believed was the best path to labor unity. The ILGWU General Executive Board had stated in November 1939 that it would take up the question of re-affiliation with the AFL if peace had not been achieved between the AFL and the CIO by the time of its 1940 convention, which the left wingers understood as a signal that the union’s leadership was

already leaning toward re-affiliating. Yet, the Local 22 left wing was convinced that such a move would not promote peace within the labor movement, but would exacerbate the current split, as AFL affiliates had to pay a tax to the AFL Executive Council that was perceived as being used to fund the fight against the CIO. Ultimately, though, the left wingers really wanted to insure that the principles of the CIO would be upheld.

Reflecting the criticisms of socialists and other left wingers, the left rank and file from Local 22 criticized the administration of their manager Charles Zimmerman, claiming that it had joined forces with anti-CIO elements. The left wingers thus felt that they had to influence the ILGWU convention to support the goals of the CIO.  

International issues were also of great concern to the left wingers, one of whom published an open letter to President Dubinsky in the March 1940 issue of *Rank and File Dressmaker*. Abe Skolnik had gone to Spain to fight in its civil war against fascist dictator Francisco Franco, and received a letter from Charles Zimmerman detailing the support of the 1937 ILGWU convention that buoyed his spirits. The letter was then printed in the Spanish press and Loyalists hailed the union and President Dubinsky for their dedication to progressive ideals. Skolnik recounted the horrors he witnessed in battle, and then angrily denounced reactionary forces who attacked Spanish Loyalists and American progressives. He pled with Dubinsky to remain firmly on the side of progressive politics, as he perceived that the union president was becoming increasingly intimate with business leaders and members of the Republican Party. Skolnik used the Spanish Civil War as a metaphor for the American labor movement. He said that Franco was fighting against a workers’ republic, where unemployment would be abolished, anti-

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Semitism would be criminalized, and workers would live happy lives. In other words, in order to defend everything workers stood for, Dubinsky would have to take a stand against Franco in Spain, and for the ideals embodied by the workers’ republic at home. Skolnik’s utopian vision reflected the degree to which socialist ideology still framed the views of many in the left wing and its expectations of David Dubinsky.

The most critical issue looming on the international stage, however, was that of the war in Europe. The ILGWU had declared its opposition to U.S. involvement in the war, and the left wing also pointed out that all across the country, AFL and CIO unions passed resolutions condemning war-related government spending. It referred to CIO President John L. Lewis’ charges against President Roosevelt that he had abandoned the New Deal in favor of a war economy. The left wingers declared that amongst true progressives in AFL and CIO unions, there was talk of the need for a new political party that would serve as a peace party for the labor movement. It would unify labor against the alliance between Roosevelt and Wall Street that supported engagement in the European war.

The left wing rank and file also made serious charges concerning politics within Local 22. An editorial in the Rank and File Dressmaker described how, under the united front administration, the left wing rank and file was represented as a minority within the local. Because they had representation, and because they agreed with the objective of the united front, to bring about unity, the left wing cooperated with the administration.

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60 Indeed, Dubinsky did speak for a committee associated with Herbert Hoover and gave $5,000 to that committee. A fellow donor was Father Coughlin, who the left wing sarcastically referred to as a “devoted friend” of labor. A.F. Lance, “Straight Seams,” Rank and File Dressmaker, March 1940, 3, and Abe Skolnik, “A Letter to President Dubinsky,” Rank and File Dressmaker, March 1940, 2.

Naturally, though, as the left wing was the minority group, many of its policy proposals were defeated. In the editorial, the left wingers claimed that, when they tried to offer constructive criticisms of the local’s leadership, the administration accused them of “stabbing unity in the back.” Thus, disagreements always led to infighting, and instead of being a truly united local, Local 22 remained politically polarized. For instance, the progressive group had apparently been handing out buttons as identification tags for its members. The members would therefore be visually labeled as progressives, immediately dividing them from all of those who weren’t progressives, undermining unity and promoting discrimination within the shops.

The left wingers demanded that the administration represent everyone in the local, that no one group have full control over the local’s governance, and that all members be allowed to express constructive criticism of the local’s leadership. To support their argument, they insisted that they remained a vital part of Local 22 whose headquarters were bustling with activity and who were receiving large amounts of financial assistance from dressmakers. They also claimed that recent forums they had held had drawn capacity crowds, leading to the planning of many more such forums. If the left wing could prove itself valuable through attracting money and bodies, the Local 22 administration would have to treat it with respect.62

They unveiled their program, hoping that some of its “most vital points can be put immediately into effect by a willing Administration.” One such point was to continue and extend the local’s already impressive, standard-bearing educational work. However, the program explicitly stated that this move was meant to insure that all views were

represented in educational programming, a sign that the left wing would not accept marginalization in what was perhaps the most influential realm of the local’s activities. Another point was to establish a drive with the cooperation of the Joint Board of Dressmakers to place unemployed dressmakers in jobs and to establish a Labor Bureau through which all workers could be hired and protected from discrimination based on race or nationality. This was related to another major point, which was to redouble efforts to draw black and Hispanic workers into Local 22. Left wingers felt these workers were particularly sympathetic to their position, describing them as “militant and devoted.”

With the ILGWU convention approaching, they also called upon the union to press for the passage of anti-discrimination bills in Albany and anti-lynching legislation in Washington. The anti-lynching bill was a more volatile issue, as the left wing rank and file accused the Roosevelt Administration of striking an agreement with Republican leaders to bury the bill in committee. The left wing was continuing its long-standing fight to be a leader on racial issues and to attract the allegiances of black Local 22 members, but Frank Crosswaith was working in tandem with the ILGWU to derail attempts at communist infiltration into the black community. In August, ILGWU President Dubinsky wrote to all the New York City locals and joint boards warning that several African American organizations that had appealed to the union for support were actually part of the communist front. They were using the problems of African Americans to insinuate themselves into the black community and tricking ILGWU locals into aiding them in their causes, which were actually antithetical to the union’s and the labor

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63 “We Propose: A Program For Dressmakers,” Rank and File Dressmaker, March 1940, 3.

64 “Labor Bureau Sought To End Job Bias,” Rank and File Dressmaker, March 1940, 2.
movement’s interests. Therefore, Dubinsky told all the locals and joint boards to contact the Negro Labor Committee anytime that a black organization claiming to represent the working class came to them for support. The NLC was best suited to help the ILGWU discern which groups were legitimate and deserving of the union’s help.65

The most prominent issue splitting union ranks, however, remained the controversy over American involvement in World War II. Charles Zimmerman said that he supported giving all possible support to the Allies in Europe because workers had a large stake in the outcome of the war. Hitler’s victory would sound the death knell of the labor movement, and even if all of the nations at war had imperialist designs, it certainly made a difference which one of those nations emerged victorious. If they were to fight imperialism, unions like the ILGWU needed to secure their very existence, which could only happen through Allied victory. In Germany, the labor movement had been ruthlessly destroyed and labor leaders had been murdered. Zimmerman believed, as did many others, that if Hitler succeeded in wiping out the labor movement across Europe, he would do the same in South, and then North, America. If victorious in Europe, Hitler could flood the markets with cheap goods, undermining the American standard of living. Notably, Zimmerman said, “…we cannot isolate ourselves.”66 The resistance to war was now seen not as a utopian yearning for peace or as a necessary act to oppose capitalist imperial ambitions, but as isolationist obstructionism.

65 David Dubinsky to Our Local Unions and Joint Boards, 19 August 1940, Negro Labor Committee Record Group, 1925-1969, MG 17, Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library, Box 29, Folder 14, and ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 146, Folder 3A and #5780/014, Box 4, Folder 7.

66 Minutes, Executive Board of Dressmakers Union Local 22, ILGWU, June 18, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1940.
This greatly angered communists, who published “A Shameful Chapter In the History of the I.L.G.W.U.,” a pamphlet listing their grievances. They chastised the union for not using its convention to protest against potential involvement in the European war, which they believed was merely a tool for the Roosevelt administration to distract workers from attacks on unions, living standards, and civil rights. The communists even went so far as saying that the convention had been a platform for people who spoke the language of the Ku Klux Klan, Father Coughlin, fascists, and the Dies Committee. As they had in the past, the communists focused especially harsh criticism on socialists, claiming that they were of the social-democratic, or Nazi, variety. They said that the socialists in the ILGWU were of the ilk that had allowed or even aided the spread of the Third Reich, cut from the same cloth as socialists from the *Forward* who advocated engagement in World War II, and part of a group that Father Coughlin praised for their opposition to communism. Because of Coughlin’s anti-Semitism, the communists found it particularly egregious that the ILGWU could hold any views similar to his. To them, the Jewish leaders of the union were only fueling Coughlin’s anti-Semitism by supporting involvement in the war as the demagogue frequently charged Jews with trying to drag the United States into the European war.67

Yet, the truth was becoming clear that the left wing was out of step with the policies of the union and the opinions of most union members. At the ILGWU convention, resolutions in support of electing President Roosevelt to a third term and in favor of giving aid to Allied forces in the European war were passed enthusiastically. Even more traditionally left-leaning locals, such as Local 22, signed on to these

67 “A Shameful Chapter In the History of the I.L.G.W.U.” pamphlet, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 5, Folder 1.
resolutions. Charles Zimmerman explained these votes to his local’s membership, some of whom he knew were still not on board with the Roosevelt administration or could not accept any action that might deepen American involvement in the European war. He said that a majority of ILGWU members supported the President because he had introduced sweeping social and labor legislation that was of great benefit to the working class, even if it was in need of further improvement:

We are in favor of continuing this social and labor legislation and improving it and although we are not fully satisfied with everything that was done or we don’t think that they went far enough, still it is the best that we ever got. The election of any other candidate at the present time, whether democratic or republican, will mean a step backward for the workers of this country.  

Roosevelt was now seen as labor’s best hope by most in the ILGWU, and so supporting any other candidate, whether from the Socialist Party, or even from labor’s own party, was unthinkable.

When Roosevelt won reelection by a landslide, telegraphs of congratulation to him and Vice President-Elect Henry Wallace poured in. David Dubinsky wrote Wallace that the ILGWU was gratified with the country’s overwhelming endorsement of the principles and policies of the New Deal. Notably, he sent almost the same exact telegraph to Local 22 Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman except for the last sentence, where he pointed out that the election returns demonstrated that efforts at betrayal within labor couldn’t hamper its march toward progress. The ILGWU clearly saw Roosevelt’s victory as the communists’ defeat. Dubinsky also wrote Roosevelt that he was happy with the part labor had to play in his victory:

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68 Minutes, Executive Board of Dressmakers Union Local 22, ILGWU, June 18, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1940.
More than ever, the organized forces of labor, turning a deaf ear to
demagogues and misleaders, have proved in these days of stress and trial
that they are the backbone of a free, progressive and constructive national
American community. More than ever, embattled democracy the world
over feels that its foremost champion in the western hemisphere has
obtained a renewed mandate from the American people to retain aloft the
light of civilization and to defend the precious heritage of freedom,
tolerance and humanity.  

Clearly, Dubinsky and the ILGWU were now some of Roosevelt’s most staunch
supporters and talk of defending freedom suggested a further softening on the war issue
that had been indicated by the union’s endorsement of giving all possible support to
Allied forces.

**Joining the New Deal Coalition: ILGWU Support For Roosevelt Crystallizes**

Despite promising developments for the ILGWU and the Negro Labor Committee
in 1937, the year had begun with troubling signs on the political front. At the very
beginning of January, a resolution was proposed to the New York Chamber of Commerce
mandating unions to incorporate. Under this legislation, any union that didn’t incorporate
would lose what were described as the “privileges” unions then enjoyed. The resolution
also proposed that union elections be held in secret and supervised by the government.
Finally, it urged that stringent laws be passed to prevent unions from pressuring
employees to join and to restrict the power of unions to make demands on employers.
Thus, the resolution would place unions under much stricter control and divest them of
much of their organizing power.

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69 Telegrams, David Dubinsky to Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt, 6 November 1940, and David Dubinsky to
Hon. Henry A. Wallace, 6 November 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University,
Box 141, Folder 1A; Telegram, David Dubinsky to Charles Zimmerman, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box
7, Folder 3.
ILGWU manager Murray Gross, who was also the Chairman of the Labor Committee of the Socialist Party of New York State, wrote a letter to the Chamber of Commerce denouncing the proposed legislation as a tool to cripple the labor movement. He explained that forcing unions to incorporate would be to treat them like businesses, and pointed out that fascist countries commonly sought to integrate unions with business and government so that they could be vulnerable to the control of both sectors. Democratic countries were supposed to leave unions alone, so that they could remain autonomous. Thus, the Socialist Party was launching a campaign to mobilize every labor union in New York State to oppose the Chamber of Commerce legislation and any other similar proposals in the future. However, the Chamber adopted a report at the beginning of February calling for the passage of state and federal legislation to carry out the resolution that had been proposed to them. Numerous employers’ associations endorsed the report, but Murray Gross responded by sending letters to every union organization in the state asking them to protest such legislation. He made a point to suggest that these organizations join the Socialist Party to make the movement against the legislation stronger.70

The ILGWU sought to protect the gains it had made through the New Deal and argued that social legislation should go even further, providing unemployment and disability compensation, for example. Though the ILGWU referred to Social Security as a great step forward, it claimed that the social program needed to be strengthened. Yet, support for the New Deal was made clearest in the union’s support for President

70 Murray Gross to Friends and Brothers, 13 February 1937, and “Socialists Denounce Chamber of Commerce Resolution as Anti-Union: Launch Campaign to Have Labor Unions Oppose It” press release, Socialist Party, New York State, January 19, 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 29, Folder 7.
Roosevelt’s court-packing scheme. The scheme was to supplement Supreme Court Justices over age 70½ with justices hand-picked by the President. This was meant to insure that further New Deal legislation would not be threatened with being struck down by the Court, as much of the previous New Deal legislation had been.

Labor’s Non-Partisan League saw this effort as an extension of the support it threw behind Roosevelt to get him reelected in 1936. The League claimed that the Supreme Court contained old men who were out of touch with political and industrial developments, and that the President’s court-packing scheme would ensure that new justices would be appointed who would make the Court more responsive to popular will. More specifically, the League explained how court reform was necessary for progress on labor issues:

Labor organization depends upon legal protection of the right to organize and to bargain collectively; wages cannot be stabilized without minimum wage legislation; hours cannot be shortened as they should be without legislative action. None of these vital laws can be made effective in the face of hostile courts.71

With a court friendly to Roosevelt so vital to the labor movement, Labor’s Non-Partisan League asked all of its members to galvanize behind the court-packing scheme. The ILGWU quickly answered, asking all of its local unions and joint boards to join together in support of Roosevelt’s proposed legislation. The union took the League’s suggestion to let members of Congress know of labor’s support for court reform even further, telling its

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71 E.L. Oliver, Executive Vice President, Labor’s Non-Partisan League, to All State Committeemen, 10 February 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 21, Folder 2.
members to immediately write letters and send telegrams to their Congressmen and Senators expressing support for the court-packing bill and demanding their cooperation.\footnote{Ibid.; David Dubinsky To All Our Affiliated Local Unions and Joint Boards, 19 February 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Box 16, Folder 8.}

But this effort didn’t always pan out. For instance, on July 20\textsuperscript{th}, David Dubinsky sent a telegram to his friend Governor Herbert Lehman, chiding him for attacking the court reform bill. He told Lehman that all of his supporters in the labor movement were deeply disappointed, feeling that the governor was contradicting his declared support for the New Deal. Yet, just two days later, the Senate voted overwhelmingly to send President Roosevelt’s Judiciary Reorganization bill back to committee, where its controversial court-packing language was stripped. Lehman then answered Dubinsky, arguing that no New York governor had ever shown greater interest in labor and social legislation or had been so successful in securing the enactment of such legislation. He then insisted that opposing the court reform bill was compatible with serving the interests of New York’s workers. In his opinion, if the bill were enacted, it would create a dangerous precedent that could be used in the future to justify curtailing people’s constitutional liberties. He thus argued that he would not sacrifice the nation’s future to give the labor movement a fleeting advantage. He sent copies of his letter to Dubinsky to Luigi Antonini, State Chairman of the American Labor Party, and Julius Hochman, General Manager of the Dressmakers’ Joint Board, to try and rally support amongst the progressive union forces who had backed now-defeated court reform.\footnote{Telegram, David Dubinsky to Hon. Herbert H. Lehman, 20 July 1937, and letter, Herbert H. Lehman to David Dubinsky, 29 July 1937, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 83, Folder 4.}
As support for the court-packing scheme demonstrated, by 1938, it was becoming labor unionists were solidly behind Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. Even the American Labor Party, set up to support Roosevelt, but explicitly tied to labor and labor’s agenda, was faltering. In March, for instance, the Chairman of the ALP’s Membership Committee complained that Local 22 members, who had been active in the 5th Assembly District for the party the previous year, had largely stopped attending party meetings. In fact, the 1937 campaign had plunged the New York branch of the ALP $60,000 into debt. The inability to clear the deficit was hampering the work of the party, so the New York Board of the ILGWU ordered that the union and its locals raise $12,000 to cover part of the deficit. This was meant to cover the amount of money spent on campaigns in the Bronx, where a number of ALP candidates who had run in 1937 had also been ILGWU officials.74 Local 22 agreed to pay a tax toward this $12,000, but it voiced protest. In view of the fact that practically all union locals faced a deficit in the terrible economic climate, the local felt that it was wrong for the American Labor Party to continue relying on unions to finance its work. In fact, Local 22 suggested that the party was not on solid footing. If it was, its own clubs and local branches should have been able to finance its activities. Thus, part of the reason many union members moved away from the ALP and ended up voting with the Democratic Party was because the ALP was poorly financed and poorly organized, and thus not trusted to be effective in defending labor’s agenda.75

74 Letter, from Nathan Margolis, 12 March 1938, and David Dubinsky to Charles Zimmerman, 10 May 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 2, Folder 2.

75 Minutes of the Executive Board, Dressmakers Union Local #22, ILGWU, May 17, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/036, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 1, Folder 1938.
Then, the Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1938 would irrevocably alter the political
dynamic between the ALP and labor organizations. Once again, the stance of Frank
Crosswaith became symbolic of broader political developments and their effects in
Harlem. For the first time, in 1938, Crosswaith ran for political office on a party ticket
that wasn’t socialist. Despite his frustration with the American Labor Party’s political
machinations, he ran for councilman in Manhattan as an ALP candidate. He was a friend
of the CIO, but as 1938 moved forward, suspicions of communist influence in the labor
organization grew. Things came to a head, though, when news of the Hitler-Stalin Pact
broke. The détente between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany caused many to distance
themselves from anything associated with communism, and thus the CIO became more
vulnerable to attack. This had consequences for the Crosswaith campaign.

James B. Carey, President of the CIO Electrical Workers’ Union resigned from
Crosswaith’s campaign committee in the fall of 1938, complaining that groups hostile to
the CIO had begun an anti-CIO campaign inside the American Labor Party. In fact, the
ALP had responded to the Hitler-Stalin Pact by requiring its candidates to dissociate
themselves from dictatorship by openly condemning the alliance between Germany and
Russia as bringing the world one step closer to war. Crosswaith responded to Carey’s
accusation by insisting that condemnation of the Hitler-Stalin Pact was not an attack on
the CIO. At this point, he could still argue that there was little evidence of communist
influence on the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Thus, the American Labor Party
still backed the CIO, and as a member of the party, Frank Crosswaith backed the CIO, as
well. They wanted to protect the CIO, and the labor movement in general, from any
charges of support for Stalin, Hitler, or the brutal totalitarianism those leaders
represented. Thus, standing firmly against the Hitler-Stalin Pact was not an attack on the CIO as James B. Carey had implied, it was a means of defending the organization, as well as the labor movement as a whole, which was threatened by fascism of every kind.

As for his own candidacy, Crosswaith claimed that all sections of the labor movement had rallied to his campaign, which he felt was a sign of unity between socialists, ALP loyalists, and progressive Democrats. After all, A. Philip Randolph, head of the National Negro Congress and leader of an AFL union was the chairman of Crosswaith’s campaign committee, while Joseph Schlossberg, a prominent CIO unionist with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, was the committee’s treasurer. David Dubinsky of the ILGWU and Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated also represented the CIO as members of the committee, while Hillman was simultaneously acting as a state committeeman of the American Labor Party. Crosswaith also felt that he garnered support from various factions of labor because of the work of his Negro Labor Committee. He insisted that the CIO had no stronger arm in Harlem than the NLC, but also pointed out that while the organization assisted CIO unions, its assisted AFL unions and independent organizations, as well. He claimed that all forces in Manhattan that were truly interested in building up the economic and political strength of labor would support the American Labor Party.76

The tie between the CIO and the ALP worked to President Roosevelt’s advantage. At the CIO’s first state convention in mid-September, delegates expressed unqualified support for Roosevelt and the New Deal and railed against the obstructionist tactics of Congress, as well as its Red-baiting Dies Committee. Indeed, the resolution affirming

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76 Independent Citizens’ Council, Crosswaith for Council press release, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 141, Folder 2.
loyalty to the New Deal was adopted unanimously. The CIO also affirmed its relationship with the American Labor Party. *The New York Times* had written about the CIO’s reception of Governor Herbert Lehman at its convention, saying that the ovation delegates gave him was a rebuke to the ALP, which had tentatively excluded the governor from its state ticket. James Carey, secretary of the resolutions committee, declared that the *Times* account was “a distortion and misrepresentation.” The idea that the CIO should not condemn a political party was in line with the argument of Sidney Hillman, who gave an address at the convention in which he urged CIO unions to be open to all workers regardless of political affiliation. He further argued that politics should be kept out of union affairs.77 If the communist-socialist split of the 1920s hadn’t offered enough evidence, tensions between the Democratic, American Labor, Socialist, and Communist Parties in the late ‘30s served as evidence that politics often harmed labor unity and progress.

Although socialists saw fascism and capitalism as going hand-in-hand, by 1938, most unionists perceived fascism as having become a greater enemy than capitalism. As Europe accelerated toward war in the wake of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the urgency of the fight against fascism reached new heights. In the meantime, complaints against capitalist modes of production and the hierarchies they created faded into broad support for President Roosevelt and the New Deal. The American League for Peace and Democracy had done a study in which it found that, by June 1938, 997 local unions and 25 industrial

councils and central labor unions had adopted resolutions endorsing Roosevelt and the policies of the New Deal. Among these were the CIO, AFL, and 17 ILGWU locals.78

Yet, the respect the ALP showed Roosevelt and the Democratic Party wasn’t fully returned. At the beginning of October, ILGWU President Dubinsky sent a telegram to Democratic Governor Lehman, lauding him for running for re-election. His victory seemed assured, guaranteeing four more years of liberal government in New York. However, Dubinsky expressed disappointment that the Democratic Party had failed to give the American Labor Party recognition on its state ticket despite the fact that he had nominated Lehman as an ALP fusion candidate. In his nominating speech at the ALP convention, Dubinsky called the New Deal labor’s “new bill of rights,” giving the movement a place in the country’s political system.

He credited the governor with playing a decisive role in mediating labor disputes, such as those in the garment industry throughout the 1920s and early ’30s. Dubinsky said that, during Lehman’s six years in Albany, the governor had carried out a comprehensive program of labor, social, and welfare legislation. This included: statewide versions of the NRA and the Wagner Act; increasing the mandatory school age from 14 to 16, cutting into the use of child labor; giving union wages to public works employees; making temporary hours laws permanent for public works employees; and expanding workers’ compensation and social security, which included unemployment insurance, and pensions for the elderly. When he nominated Lehman, Dubinsky described him as “one who enjoys the absolute confidence of the working masses of our State, one who represents so marvelously the progressive, courageous and forward-looking spirit of our times.”

78 “Unions Support Roosevelt Policy,” Cutters Voice for Peace and Democracy 1, No. 1, October 1938, 1.
Lehman thanked Dubinsky for nominating him, but in line with the Democratic Party’s refusal to include the American Labor Party on its ticket, Lehman never accepted the ALP’s nomination.79

More traditionally left-leaning elements of labor, including many socialists like Frank Crosswaith and Local 22’s Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman, threw their support behind the ALP. In an invitation to a special membership meeting for Local 22 on October 15th, the Executive Board of the local declared that Local 22 was part of the ALP and wanted to be active in building it up so that it could become a powerful tool for labor. The membership meeting was being held to educate the local’s members on the ALP agenda and party activities. David Dubinsky, Julius Hochman, and Luigi Antonini addressed the meeting, indicating the importance of fomenting locals’ support behind the fledgling political party.80

However, Frank Crosswaith was still frustrated with the ALP. The party’s eschewed Crosswaith’s candidacy and endorsed Joseph Gavagan, a Democrat widely identified with Tammany Hall, which angered many in Harlem. Harlem’s residents, now largely black, wanted to send someone with their skin color to Congress. Many believed that tying Gavagan to Roosevelt would ensure his election, undermining the hopes of Crosswaith and Dr. Lorenzo King, the Republican candidate for Congress from the 21st


80 “Attention! Dressmakers of Local 22, I.L.G.W.U.” flyer, 1938, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 25, Folder 6.
district, to be the first blacks to represent Harlem.\textsuperscript{81} This belief came to pass. Gavagan won election to Congress. One of the tools Crosswaith felt Democrats had used to convince Harlem’s voters that Gavagan cared about their interests was an anti-lynching bill. They had Gavagan introduce such a bill, but his fellow Democrats, particularly from the South, demolished it in Congress. However, this also demonstrated an increasing awareness of blacks on the national political stage.

Labor’s Non-Partisan League also provided critical support for the Roosevelt administration, and sought to expand in 1939. The organization extended membership to all workers, saying anyone who agreed with its tenets could join. It also began a membership campaign in numerous states, aiming for a huge convention in the middle of 1940, in which delegates from the League in all states, and from national labor and progressive organizations would be represented. The convention would be aimed at authorizing the League and its political candidates to work within the framework of the Democratic Party, selecting their own delegates to the party’s 1940 national convention. The League would work within the party to assure that it selected progressive candidates for national office. It now saw working within a mainstream political party as a better way to achieve remedies for unemployment, inadequate health care, dangerous working conditions, and violations of workers’ rights than working under the umbrella of the labor movement was.\textsuperscript{82} This was critical, as workers active in the labor movement were now being encouraged by the League not only to vote for Democrats, but also to work in the


\textsuperscript{82} “Statement by John L. Lewis, Chairman, Labor’s Non-Partisan League,” December 17, 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/002. Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 148, Folder 3A.
Democratic Party. This rendered the non-partisan approach dead, as it became clear that labor now viewed joining one particular party as their best chance at garnering more power.

**The 1939 Crosswaith Campaign and the 1940 Elections**

When Frank Crosswaith ran for City Council in 1939, many unionists, both black and white, joined to support him. The Independent Citizens’ Committee, Crosswaith for Council included ILGWU President David Dubinsky, Vice Presidents Luigi Antonini and Julius Hochman, Educational Department Director Mark Starr, Department Secretary Fannia M. Cohn, and *Justice* editor Max Danish. Local 22 was particularly well-represented, as Secretary-Manager Charles Zimmerman, members from the Harlem branch including Winifred Gittens and Edith Ransom, Local 22 member from the Harlem Spanish branch Saby Nehama, and director of Local 22’s Educational Department Phillip Kapp were also on the Independent Citizens’ Committee. Considering that Crosswaith was running on the American Labor Party ticket, it was notable that leading socialists, such as A.J. Muste, Norman Thomas, and the wife of B. Charney Vladeck were on the Committee, as well.

Indeed, with many of the members of the Committee being leaders of unions and union locals, they were able to inspire many union members to participate in Crosswaith’s campaign, as well. For instance, Committee Chairman Randolph wrote Charles Zimmerman, thanking him and the members of Local 22 for donating $100 to the campaign. Support from across the African American community also coalesced around Crosswaith’s candidacy, as Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and National Negro
Congress President A. Philip Randolph chaired the Independent Citizens’ Committee, and the Brotherhood’s Vice President Ashley Totten, writer Countee Cullen, Secretary of the National Urban League Workers’ Bureau Lester Granger, and journalist Ted Poston were all members.83

However, despite his wide base of support, Crosswaith fought an uphill battle. He didn’t change the primary issues he fought for to give himself a better shot at election. Even though anti-fascism was popular, other candidates took on fascism while also addressing the terrible economic situation on the ground in America. Crosswaith’s language remained more lofty and theoretical, in line with his socialist beliefs, but not with the daily realities voters faced. He continued to speak of how workers needed to join together regardless of race, religion, and gender to fight for better conditions, and of how fascism, race prejudice, and economic exploitation all went hand-in-hand. At a speech made at a rally in support of friend and political candidate in a neighboring district, the Amalgamated’s Joseph Schlossberg, Crosswaith insisted that capitalism was in decline and that those who sought to keep it alive were supporting fascism by helping to preserve a cruel and unfair economic system. It is important to note that Crosswaith now included communism alongside Nazism and Ku Kluxism as an enemy of labor. Past socialist hatred of communists, and the reverberations of the Hitler-Stalin Pact encouraged such a view.

At the rally for Scholssberg, Crosswaith used almost revolutionary terms to describe why he wanted himself and his “Comrade” to get elected. He hoped that they

83 A. Philip Randolph to Charles S. Zimmerman, 4 October 1939, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 3; “3 ILGWU Men On Am. Labor Party N.Y. Council Slate,” Justice, October 1, 1939.
could “raise a lot of havoc in Congress.” Even more so, he wanted to experience the joy that could only come from a Jew and a black, both labor unionists, walking into Congress to face Ku Klux Klan loyalists and Southern Democrats who derided Jews, blacks, and the labor movement. However, the “new Negro” also reconsidered his or her political loyalties.

Crosswaith not only fervently opposed fascism and communism, but he lashed out against Tammany Hall. Tammany controlled the City Council and, in his opinion, blocked all legislation introduced by representatives of the American Labor Party. The party focused on issues such as housing, slum clearance, public utilities, and the elimination of government waste. Tammany Councilmen, however, fought progressive social legislation, including measures proposed by the LaGuardia mayoral administration. Thus, Crosswaith urged people to elect him and other ALP candidates to replace these obstructionist politicians. However, he also confirmed that African American loyalty to the Republican Party was waning. He claimed that the reasons blacks once had to vote for that party had disappeared, and that they instead were awakening to the fact that their fate was tied to that of the working class regardless of creed, gender, or color. Crosswaith hoped that a victory and service on the City Council could help African Americans turn the page on a history of economic, social, and political turmoil. Furthermore, he wanted


413
to bring credit to African Americans and to prove himself worthy of the votes of blacks and whites.\textsuperscript{85}

As the election approached, the Independent Citizens’ Committee, Crosswaith for Council felt it had reason to be confident. A. Philip Randolph, the Chairman of the committee, claimed that the response to the committee’s drive for support had been overwhelming. Yet, he continued to solicit funds for publicizing the Crosswaith campaign through establishing a branch headquarters, broadcasting radio speeches, and producing and distributing campaign literature. Also, on November 1\textsuperscript{st}, the Independent Citizens’ Committee held a testimonial dinner to honor Crosswaith, which required attendees to purchase tickets. By that point, the New York Amsterdam News had endorsed Crosswaith. The paper’s editorial board argued that Crosswaith was well informed about the issues affecting Harlem, as well as those affecting the entire city. Perhaps even more importantly, though, the paper recognized Crosswaith’s record: “For a quarter of a century he has been in the vanguard fighting for the rights of the oppressed, regardless of race, color or creed.” As a labor leader, he could speak and vote intelligently on labor problems. Most critically, he recognized that such problems affected both black and white workers. The Amsterdam News asserted that nothing was more vital to the interest of labor than understanding and cooperation between workers of different races, which Crosswaith had demonstrated a long-standing commitment toward nurturing.\textsuperscript{86} But in a


\textsuperscript{86} A. Philip Randolph to Charles Zimmerman, 17 October 1939, and from A. Philip Randolph, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 28, Folder 3.
shocking turn of events, the Board of Elections removed him from the election ballot because he did not have enough names on his petition to run for City Council.

When his name was removed from the ballot, Crosswaith accused the Communist Party and Tammany Hall of conspiring to prevent him from having any chance of getting elected. He claimed the shortage of names on his petition to run was largely the result of communists pretending to collect signatures for his campaign, and then throwing those signatures away. He further explained that after the communists had nominated their candidate for City Council, they created a non-partisan committee to find their own African American candidate. Crosswaith argued that the purpose of this move was not to find a candidate who could win, but one who could steal African American votes from him. He further claimed that this was the result of a vendetta against the American Labor Party, which had tried to rid itself of communist elements. He compared the Communist Party’s actions to those of Southern Democrats who, in much more overt and violent ways, sought to undermine the voting rights and political power of African Americans: “Whether they use a rope to hang a voter or an Election Board to lynch a candidate—it’s still the same thing. The Negro is deprived of a voice in deciding questions which affect his daily life and democracy suffers.”

Yet, Crosswaith also insisted that his removal from the ballot wasn’t a total loss for the black community. He said that there was now an unstoppable movement amongst blacks in Harlem to build their own political organizations and break free from Tammany control, and that the American Labor Party would do all it could to educate and organize
blacks in support of independent action.\textsuperscript{87} Surely, Crosswaith could take some credit for cultivating political consciousness in Harlem through his work with the Negro Labor Committee. African Americans’ drive to subvert Tammany Hall’s power in Harlem was also a sign that they were casting off traditional political loyalties, as they cast their lot with the Democratic Party and the New Deal. While some chose affiliation with the American Labor Party as a way station on the road toward joining with the Democrats, by 1939, they voted for the Democratic candidate in large numbers.

As a result of so many voters aligning with the Democratic Party, the American Labor Party was struggling in 1940. The Progressive Committee to Rebuild the American Labor Party warned members of the party that their votes were critical in determining the party’s direction. The Committee claimed that it adhered to the ALP’s founding principles and advocated a “Return to the New Deal.” In addition to supporting Roosevelt’s domestic policies, the progressives in the ALP were more determined than ever to keep America out of World War II, which now embroiled Europe. However, they also claimed that the party had largely been controlled by officials from needle trades unions and their lawyers since its establishment. Representatives of other trade unions and union members were denied leadership positions. The progressives further maintained that any party members who criticized the ruling clique were harassed and threatened with expulsion. This was disastrous because they claimed that progressive dissent actually represented the majority opinion amongst party members. As a result, party candidates kept losing elections. For instance, four of five ALP candidates for State

Assemblymen in New York failed to get elected in 1938, and four of six Party candidates for New York City Councilmen were defeated in 1939. That year, votes for the ALP across New York State dropped by 50 percent.

In this case, the fight against communists was seen as particularly damaging. The progressives claimed that the policies they advocated, such as slum clearance, had been labeled “communistic.” Then again, they also claimed that President Roosevelt and Mayor LaGuardia had been labeled as communists when advocating policies that would cut down business profits or otherwise go against business interests. Even ALP leaders Alex Rose and David Dubinsky, who the progressives now opposed, had been labeled communists when they had advocated progressive measures. Yet, despite these labels, the progressives claimed that they represented the overwhelming majority of ALP members. For example, 83 of the 93 party clubs in New York City endorsed the Progressive Committee, and the Committee also claimed that almost every chairman, trade union leader, and past ALP candidate supported it.

Thus, when leaders of the party nominated a Tammany leader in the 14th Congressional District in New York City without notifying the progressive majority on the County Executive Committee, it was seen as official confirmation that right-wing forces sought to completely strip progressives of power. The State Supreme Court stepped in and set aside the ALP leaders’ 14th District nomination because it flagrantly disregarded the rights of the County Executive Committee that was supposed to be empowered to make such decisions. The progressives felt that this kind of leadership threatened the very future of the ALP. Their view was well articulated in a *New Republic* article they quoted in their materials:
The impression is spreading that the party is under the thumb of a narrow-minded sect of right-wing socialists who have contributed to the political ruin of every other movement in which they have been influential. Unless that impression is removed, the party is in danger of stagnation of extinction.88

Thus, the Progressive Committee encouraged all supporters to vote in the April 2nd primaries for progressive candidates for the ALP’s State Executive Committee in order to advance their cause and push the party toward a new administration that was more reflective of its progressive majority.

Not surprisingly, leaders of the ALP like Charles Zimmerman quickly fought back. He told members of Local 22 that it was up to them to insure that the party their union helped to establish remained under trade union leadership and did not fall under communist control. He claimed that because the party was led by trade unions, it was opposed to war, despite what the progressives charged. In fact, he even asserted that the name “Progressive” was merely used to mislead people into following a group that claimed to represent the party’s founding principles, but was in actuality a communist organization. Thus, Zimmerman urged all supporters of the ALP to vote for official slate of candidates for the Party’s State Executive Committee.89

The American Labor Party was closely tied to the ILGWU administration, and it came to endorse Roosevelt’s reelection to a third term, nominating him as its candidate for the presidency. In late September, the party declared itself committed to his reelection and to the maintenance and extension of New Deal policies. It, however, insisted that it

88 “Progressive Committee to Rebuild the American Labor Party” booklet, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 2, Folder 2.

89 Ibid.; Letter from Charles S. Zimmerman, 28 March 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/014, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 2, Folder 2.
wasn’t turning Democratic by once again nominating the Democratic leader as their own candidate. Party leaders explained that Roosevelt simply better represented the interests of American workers than any other public figure. Those interests included the preservation of strong, independent, effective trade unions; higher living standards; more leisure time for workers; better education; social security and unemployment benefits; and the protection of democracy and of the civil rights that democracy was supposed to afford. The ALP said at the time that it endorsed Roosevelt that it existed to put pressure on the government to fight for these interests.\footnote{L. Oliver, “Issues of 1940,” and “Labor Party Names Roosevelt; Wallace,” \textit{American Labor Party News} 6, No. 29, September 21, 1940.} In 1940, most in the labor movement believed that the best way to insure that the government would protect the working class was to keep its top official in power.

The American Labor Party was still trying to secure greater support heading into the 1940 elections, including from the African American community. Frank Crosswaith wrote a letter to David Dubinsky inviting him to write an introduction for a new edition of “True Freedom,” a booklet Crosswaith had co-authored with Alfred Baker Lewis. It had originally been an overtly socialist publication, but he wanted to make it more relevant to the ALP and its members. He planned to begin distributing his revised booklet before the end of the presidential campaign and hoped that he could help attract more black workers to the ALP.\footnote{Frank R. Crosswaith to David Dubinsky, 10 October 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 141, Folder 1C.}

Crosswaith not only led the organization that was seen as the bulwark against communism in New York’s black community, but he also spoke at campaign events in
support of President Roosevelt, such as one held by the Workmen’s Circle on October 25th. He and many others would have much to say in response to a forthcoming bombshell that was about to rock the presidential campaign and the labor movement.

On October 26, just days before the 1940 elections, CIO President John L. Lewis announced his support of Republican Wendell Willkie over Roosevelt. Unlike Zimmerman, Dubinsky, and the majority of ILGWU members, and unlike most unionists in the labor movement, he felt that President Roosevelt had not done enough for workers, and that he was too closely aligned with capitalists and warmongers to truly fight for workers’ interests. Lewis singled out African American workers as being particularly victimized and as being particularly harmed by the neglect of the Roosevelt administration. Crosswaith wanted none of it. Though he certainly agreed that African Americans had suffered especial cruelty, he vehemently disagreed with Lewis’ conclusion that African Americans should vote for Willkie. He emphasized that, with the help of his Negro Labor Committee, the black workers of New York and the United States had been joining unions and ascending into leadership positions in them. Despite evidence of remaining race prejudice in the labor movement, Crosswaith argued that the movement still reflected African Americans’ best interests. Thus, since the great majority of the organized working class backed Roosevelt’s reelection, it was the duty of black workers to do so, as well. And despite Lewis’ appeal, Crosswaith argued that they vote for Roosevelt with their “white brothers and sisters” in the American Labor Party on Election Day.

Ultimately, African Americans benefited greatly from New Deal policies, and Crosswaith pointed out that Wendell Willkie’s supporters had sought to block those policies because they were opposed to tax raises and to government interference with business and the individual. African Americans were not so opposed to government interference, he explained, because such interference had been necessary to end slavery, and would be necessary to end lynching. In the end, though, much of the problems with Lewis’ speech came down to Lewis himself. Crosswaith said that the unity of the labor movement would be greatly advanced not only with the elimination of communists, but with the elimination of Lewis, who he saw as being completely under communist influence. As many others had said in the past, Crosswaith asserted that Lewis possessed “an insatiable ego and will stop at nothing in his effort to destroy whatever or whoever he cannot control.” 93 Many figures from across the American labor movement would echo these sentiments in response to Lewis’ endorsement of Willkie.

These included leaders of unions that were members of the CIO or that had formerly been CIO affiliates. Even among those who agreed that Roosevelt had not done enough and was deserving of criticism, there was great anger that Lewis would go so far as to endorse Willkie’s candidacy. Representatives of unions across the country thus referred to Lewis as a “Benedict Arnold,” who betrayed the labor movement. David Dubinsky said the ILGWU was more grateful than ever to have disassociated itself from Lewis when it left the CIO. His endorsement of Willkie was proof of his uncontrolled personal ambition and his intention to destroy anyone who challenged his authority:

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93 Frank R. Crosswaith, “A Statement,” ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 141, Folder 1E.
“Today he stands exposed before the entire labor movement as a person who would cast labor’s interests to the wind to satisfy his own swollen egotism.”\textsuperscript{94} Some believed that, as a result of Lewis’ shocking endorsement, many in the CIO would rebel. For instance, Frank Rosenbloom, Vice President of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America said that Lewis’ actions would only serve to anger the CIO rank and file, driving them to increase their efforts toward getting President Roosevelt reelected.\textsuperscript{95}

The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America had perhaps the strongest reaction to Lewis’ backing of Willkie, imparting it with broader political and international significance. Firstly, in an official statement following Lewis’ announcement of his endorsement, the union said that only a communist fragment within the CIO under the direct control of the Soviet government could possibly support Lewis’ attacks on President Roosevelt. Associating Lewis not only with communism, but also with the Soviet government was the ultimate way for the Amalgamated to disassociate itself from Lewis. At the same time, the union also argued that Roosevelt took the right stance regarding the war in Europe. Its statement said that people universally opposed American involvement in the war in Europe, certainly an exaggerated sentiment. Yet, the point of that assertion was to make the case that everyone was invested in having a leader who could guarantee peace for America while not groveling to foreign dictators. The Amalgamated felt that President Roosevelt had demonstrated through his policies that he was that leader.\textsuperscript{96} Much like the ILGWU had argued earlier in the year, the Amalgamated

\textsuperscript{94} “C.I.O. Denunciation Pours on J.L. Lewis,” \textit{The New York Times}, October 27, 1940.


\textsuperscript{96} “Lewis is ‘Betrayer’ to Amalgamated,” \textit{The New York Times}, October 27, 1940.
claimed that the labor movement needed an Allied victory, and thus a vote for Roosevelt was necessary to insure maximum support for Allied forces without the involvement of American troops.

The American Labor Party also backed Roosevelt and assailed Lewis. The party held a mass gathering at Madison Square Garden on October 31st chaired by ILGWU President Dubinsky, which hosted Democratic Vice Presidential candidate Henry Wallace. Wallace insisted that Hitler wanted Wendell Willkie to defeat President Roosevelt and had spread propaganda toward that end: “He asserted that Hitler ‘has decided that if Roosevelt can be defeated, England would be discouraged, South America would turn away from the United States, and he would have an easier time with his somewhat delayed plans for world conquest.’” He further asserted that Nazi organizations had joined forces with the Republicans. Other speakers at the rally included Governor Herbert Lehman, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, editor of the Forward Abraham Cahan, Amalgamated Secretary-Treasurer Jacob Potofsky, ALP Secretary Alex Rose, ILGWU Vice President Luigi Antonini, and Dubinsky.

La Guardia, phoning in from St. Louis, spoke to the almost capacity crowd at Madison Square Garden, claiming that Lewis’ endorsement was the “kiss of death” to Willkie’s campaign because it energized Roosevelt’s supporters in the labor movement. Lewis had also promised to resign from the presidency of the CIO if Roosevelt won reelection. La Guardia said that promise was great news, as Lewis had been the greatest obstacle to peace in the labor movement. Thus, a Roosevelt victory would mean both the maintenance of the New Deal and labor peace. David Dubinsky claimed that those CIO leaders who backed Lewis and his endorsement were well-known communists or fellow
travelers. According to the account of the mass gathering in *The New York Times*, the audience enthusiastically cheered all mentions of Roosevelt and the New Deal, but even more fervently booed and jeered references to Lewis, Willkie, and Hitler. Because Dubinsky chaired the ALP rally, the ILGWU was a major participant. The event began with Dubinsky’s introduction, in which he declared the rally open, which was followed by the ILGWU Chorus performing the National Anthem and “God Bless America.” It ended with the Chorus singing “The Franklin D. Roosevelt Way,” a popular campaign song. During the song, white and black youths danced through the aisles of Madison Square Garden toward the main platform.97

Not surprisingly, the ILGWU pulled out all the stops for the Roosevelt campaign, devoting an entire supplement of *Justice* to supporting his reelection. The supplement was filled with pictures and quotes from President Roosevelt, as well as with facts and pictures that were relevant to the labor movement and the state of the world. For instance, the supplement included a photograph from the violence that broke out during the 1937 strike at Republic Steel in which 11 strikers were killed and 50 were injured. *Justice* said that such violence represented the “Old Deal,” while collective bargaining was the Roosevelt New Deal way, which gave workers economic as well as political citizenship. The supplement also touted New Deal policies such as Social Security, and ended with a full-page picture of an ILGWU parade, over which an excerpt from the pro-Roosevelt resolution passed earlier in the year at the union’s convention was laid. The excerpt said,

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97 Schedule, ALP Meeting, October 31, 1940, ILGWU records, #5780/002, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Box 141, Folder 1B; “Labor Rally Held,” *The New York Times*, November 1, 1940; “Antonini Calls Lewis Labor Czar,” *Daily Mirror*, November 1, 1940.
in part, “The country calls out for our great President to continue in office…because the people of this country love, admire, respect and trust him above all others.”

Of course, the election went the way the ILGWU had hoped. In New York City alone, Roosevelt received almost 2 million votes, while Willkie received only 1.25 million. Though Roosevelt’s votes were tallied for the Democratic and American Labor tickets collectively, voting results demonstrate that he received the vast majority of votes as the Democratic candidate. In New York City, for instance, while he received 1.66 million votes on the Democratic ticket, he received just over 300,000 as the American Labor Party candidate. Some of the most dramatic results were in Harlem, in the 19th and 21st districts, where Willkie received 14,000 votes and Roosevelt received 50,000. In Manhattan, almost 419,000 votes for Roosevelt were cast on the Democratic ballot, while only 68,500 were cast for the President on the American Labor Party ballot.

Despite the massive discrepancy in votes, the ALP executive director Eli P. Oliver claimed that Roosevelt’s victory in New York State was due to the votes he accumulated as an ALP candidate. He also viewed their electoral success as a sign that their current leadership had been validated, meaning the party could rid itself of any left-wing opposition from within. Oliver also used the socialists as an example of a political party that performed worse than the American Labor Party did. Norman Thomas, the Socialist presidential candidate polled barely over 12,000 votes in New York City, markedly down from the 36,000 votes he polled in 1936. The ALP presidential vote was up from 1936,

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98 The Amalgamated also used its newspaper to campaign for Roosevelt, producing its monthly *Advance* on a weekly basis for six weeks and upping its circulation to 1 million copies. Karl Bostrum, “Labor Press Almost All F.D.R,” *New York Post*, November 1, 1940; *Justice* XXII Supplement, No. 20, November 1, 1940.

when Roosevelt had received just under 300,000 votes in the city as a candidate for the labor party. Thus, even though the socialists were clearly on the decline, the American Labor Party was not facing a particularly promising future either. People voted for Roosevelt as a Democrat and looked to the Democratic Party as the one that would carry out Roosevelt’s policies.

As the left and progressive wings of the union battled anew, African American members had a choice to make. While a significant proportion would side with the left, believing that only communists or militant socialists truly fought for the African American interests, the majority would follow the progressives, backing the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt with allegiances to either the Democratic or American Labor Parties. These workers would therefore become part of a coalition that was greater than themselves, their union, and even the labor movement—a coalition that would change the course of American political history.

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CONCLUSION

By the late 1930s, the New York area dressmakers represented a motley collection of racial and ethnic backgrounds. While 51 percent were Italian, 32 percent were Jewish, 5 percent were African American, 2.5 percent were Spanish, 1.5 percent were “old-stock” American, and 8 percent were of miscellaneous backgrounds such as British, Irish, French, German, Austrian, Polish, Dutch, Belgian, Scandinavian, Hungarian, Turkish, Syrian, Russian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Armenian, Czech, Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, and Hindu.\(^1\) It was clearly an appropriate time for the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union and its dressmakers’ local, Local 22, to acknowledge and celebrate their diversity. Union members would not melt into some imagined crucible where being working class was the only aspect of their identities that mattered. Ethnic and racial identity could not be so easily subjugated by class-consciousness.

This was especially true for African Americans whose lives were circumscribed by race, and who wore their identities on their skin. There was no “melting away” the black experience, no denying the unique experience of discrimination. Thus, when the ILGWU courted African American membership and sought to encourage interracial unity amongst its members, it had to celebrate African American identity and integrate African American culture into union culture. While there had been precedents for educational and cultural activities before the 1933-34 Uprising of the 30,000, such activities greatly expanded in the wake of the uprising and the marked increase in African American

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\(^1\) Although blacks constituted a small percentage of the membership in clothing and textile unions, almost all of those who were unionized belonged to the ILGWU. Greenberg, “Or Does It Explode?” 111; Green, Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work, 288.
membership. Hence, the union began to embrace its ethnic and racial diversity at just the right time.

**Culture and Action**

In 1933, African American garment workers seized the opportunity to fight: to fight for shorter hours—so they could see the sun, so they could go out at night; to fight for better wages—so they could pay for a trip to the theater, for the type of leisure white visitors to Harlem could so easily afford; to fight for closed shops—so that they could continue to fight through unions; to fight for the abolition of homework and overtime—so that there would be divisions in time and space where work ended and one’s personal life began; to fight for equality—so that they could be treated the same as white workers. It is often thought that workers primarily fight for bread and butter. That may be true, but perhaps more so in the case of Harlem’s garment workers than with any other group, they fought for the stuff of life, of the soul. They fought for opportunities to dance, sing, play, and act, for the chance to learn, attend lectures, and travel to museums. Robin D.G. Kelley’s comments about Southern blacks apply well to the black population of Harlem during the Depression:

> I am not suggesting that parties, dances, and other leisure pursuits were merely guises for political events, or that these cultural practices were clear acts of resistance. Instead, much if not most of African American popular culture can be characterized as, to use Raymond Williams’s terminology, ‘alternative’ rather than oppositional. Most people attended those events to escape from the world of assembly lines, relief lines, and color lines, and to leave momentarily the individual and collective battles against racism, sexism, and material deprivation. But this is still only part of the story, for seeking the sonic, visceral pleasures of food, drink, and dancing, was not just about escaping the vicissitudes of Southern life. Black patrons went with people who had a shared knowledge of these cultural forms, people with whom they felt kinship,
people to whom they told stories about the day or the latest joke, people who shared a common vernacular filled with a grammar and vocabulary that struggled to articulate the beauty and burden of their racial, class, and gender experiences…

It was the mutual pursuit of escape, of relief from economic hardship that ultimately brought black and white members of the ILGWU together and in doing so helped to politicize them.

Yet it wasn’t just activities, but experiences as workers that they sought. They wanted to integrate activities that fed their minds, bodies, and souls into their working lives. For those who lived in Harlem, where cultural activities and social gatherings already provided a path to escape and a singular vehicle for free expression, educational, social, and recreational programs were necessary to attracting and maintaining African American union membership. Even so, blacks not only longed to experience culture as workers, but they also wanted to experience union culture as blacks. They wanted to bring their own melodies, stories, movements, and political and economic concerns to union culture, and they did. African American garment workers set out to shape the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union as much as they knew they would be shaped by the union upon joining. As Hadassa Kosak explains, “Cultural heritage…is not an end in itself but a ‘tool kit’ for action, offering a selection of strategies.”

In the case of Jewish immigrants to the Lower East Side, Kosak describes the resources for constructing action as being “socially shaped, culturally recognized, and

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2 Robin D.G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 47. Kelley goes on to describe the importance of “dressing up” for special events: “Seeing oneself and others ‘dressed up’ was enormously important in terms of constructing a collective identity based on something other than wage work…and reinforcing a sense of dignity that was perpetually being assaulted” (50). Special events thus helped the ILGWU encourage the creation of a collective identity between its members, and it didn’t rely purely on working-class identification to accomplish this. Such events also lent dignity to blacks, discriminated against and often humiliated in the workplace and in other realms of public life, as well.
familiar ways of evaluating reality.” Thus, one’s cultural beliefs and his or her perspective provide the foundation for him or her to assert power in public spaces. Cultural tools provide people with the know-how to mobilize and speak their minds, and influence what those people have to say. Perhaps even more critically, though, coming from a position rooted in culture gives people a built-in audience. By approaching labor issues from the perspective of being black, and by incorporating black culture into union culture, black members of the ILGWU helped to spur other black workers to join the labor movement and participate in union culture because those workers inherently understood certain language and symbols black ILGWU members used. According to Kosak’s interpretation of the theories of sociologist Ann Swidler, culture makes new strategies for action possible. Certainly, this proved to be true not only for African Americans, but for the ILGWU as a whole. The expansion of educational programming and the embrace of culture that expansion signified was a new strategy in itself, but by empowering groups within the union such as women and blacks, such programming helped the union adjust to its more diverse character and set an agenda that accorded with that character, as well.

Providing opportunities for union members to socialize helped promote unity, and showing those members a good time helped to deepen their commitment, especially during a period in history when a good time was so sorely needed. Ultimately, most African American garment workers, and most workers in general during the 1930s sought out not a Marxist utopia, but simply a better, happier life as much as was possible. Agency didn’t end at signing a union card. It continued through the dancing and singing,

through the attendance of classes and union sports events, and of course, through striking. One did not have to sacrifice one’s body on the picket lines to prove that he or she was an active, committed union member. Dancing and singing may not seem like political acts, and their ostensibly apolitical nature attracted many workers who tired of utopian visions and empty promises that ultimately seemed disconnected from the harsh reality of black working-class life during the Depression. However, in dancing and singing with fellow workers, African Americans claimed their own piece of union life and asserted their identity as workers. In doing so, they asserted their right to leisure, their right to equal treatment in the workplace, and their dignity. Unions could no longer ignore them, and their role in the New Deal coalition would make them vital players on the American political stage.

Independent black labor-related organizations established during the mid-late 1930s like the Negro Labor Committee and the National Negro Congress ultimately failed to achieve their agendas, or even to bring people together across racial and ideological backgrounds, because their platforms were overtly political, as were the means to achieve the goals stated in them. These groups weren’t grasping at utopia; their platforms were circumscribed by the realities of African American life, yet they left little room for ideological difference, and provided little fun, or for that matter inspiration, to their members or to the black community in general. ⁴ By 1940, the National Negro Congress had split and the Negro Labor Committee was on the wane, but Local 22 of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union was thriving, with more blacks and Hispanics joining on a daily basis. Soon such workers would outnumber Jews and Italians.

who had traditionally dominated union membership, and they would work their way into leadership positions in increasing numbers and at levels of increasing responsibility. While independent black labor-related organizations like the NNC and NLC faded out of existence, the 1930s was just the beginning of significant African American participation in the ILGWU. Blacks would gain greater political power through unions like the ILGWU, as unions pulled members into the New Deal coalition. With union backing, black workers would achieve greater parity in wages, conditions, and treatment than they ever had before.

**The Role of Pragmatism**

Why, though, did workers, black workers in particular, join this vast coalition? Melvyn Dubofsky argued that for many workers capitalism never collapsed, and therefore despite the view that labor hit its peak during the New Deal era, he believes that workers were swayed during that time toward passivity and political moderation. According to him, real wages actually rose as prices for goods fell throughout the 1930s, when the majority of people were steadily employed. When tentative economic recoveries in 1933-34 and 1937 rekindled faith in the American system, great waves of strikes occurred in those years because profits, employment, and wages rebounded, which led to a greater sense of hope and motivated action. When the Depression deepened after 1937, the number of strikes diminished markedly and the CIO and its affiliated unions suffered membership and financial losses. Thus, Dubofsky concludes, while economic
recovery promotes action, economic crisis induces apathy or lethargy.\textsuperscript{5} Yet, this seems a flawed argument. Economic crises do not paralyze people, and they certainly don’t make them apathetic in response to their circumstances. Instead, while people’s needs increase, their ability or perceived ability to fight to have their needs met decreases. The loss of one’s job due to rabble rousing, or the substantial loss of income due to time off the job and on the picket lines during a prolonged strike, were not risks many were willing to take during the depths of the Depression.

Dubofsky may have been correct that union activism spiked during economic recoveries in the 1930s, but that is because there was less perceived risk involved in putting one’s job security or financial stability on the line during those times. Also, as the economy seemed to improve, people could aim for more than the fulfillment of bread and butter needs. Instead of just putting food on the table, workers could strike for improvements when it seemed economically feasible that they might win them.\textsuperscript{6}

However, this doesn’t mean that workers did nothing or lacked effectiveness at times they were not striking. As Nancy Green so perspicaciously explains, choice is a matter of circumstances, “closely tied to need, itself a function of ‘skill’ and opportunity. Agency, then, is also a question of context.”\textsuperscript{7} There is a difference between pragmatism and

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    \item \textsuperscript{6} In fact, Dubofsky acknowledges pragmatism as a driving force behind the aspirations of workers. He discusses Bakke’s studies of unemployed workers in New Haven and the discovery that they lacked a militant or radical spirit. This was because they “regularly had to adjust their goals to actual possibilities, which almost always fell far below their aspirations.” Dubofsky, \textit{Hard Work}, 141-42; Oestreicher, \textit{Solidarity and Fragmentation}, 67.

    \item \textsuperscript{7} Green, \textit{Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work}, 185. Cheryl Lynn Greenberg makes a similar argument that more blacks became activists during the New Deal because “people struggle for improvements when they believe they can achieve them” in “\textit{Or Does It Explode?},” 97. Richard Oestreicher also makes a similar
\end{itemize}
apathy, and pragmatism was a central force that led black workers into the New Deal coalition.

Patrick Renshaw argues that workers ultimately rejected communists for being too divorced from the realities of American working class life and too committed to ideology, perceived them as exploiting working-class grievances for their own ends. I would argue that workers could see the same flaws in socialists, as well. The ideological intransigence of socialists like Frank Crosswaith and the resulting perception that his Negro Labor Committee had a socialist agenda kept many blacks in Harlem away from socialism and away from the NLC. This was similar to what happened inside the National Negro Congress. Many perceived the NNC as a communist organization from its establishment, and while it is not clear that that was the case, the Congress was certainly rife with political conflict until A. Philip Randolph resigned the presidency of the organization in 1940 due to what he claimed was undue communist influence. As a result of the rumors of communism and the constant ideological infighting in the NNC, most blacks stayed away. While communists and socialists often struck black workers as detached from reality, ideologically inflexible, and even manipulative, Democrats increasingly won black support as the New Deal affected real change in African American lives.  

argument that people are more class-conscious when they deem it more possible to be so. For this reason, he proposes a more existential approach, saying that even within the constraints of social reality, people must create the possibilities for consciousness. Solidarity and Fragmentation, 253.

Renshaw, American Labour and Consensus Capitalism, 39.

In fact, by 1940, socialists attempting to work with the black community were subject to ridicule. In his Harlem: Negro Metropolis (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1940), Claude McKay gave this scathing analysis of the Negro Labor Committee and the socialists who worked within it:
The New Deal certainly wasn’t perfect, as the NRA simply excluded a large portion of black workers from protection, as it did not apply to domestic or agricultural workers. What elements of the NRA did apply to blacks often were not enforced equally, particularly in the South, and finally, many felt New Deal legislation did not go far enough to combat discrimination or help the working class. However, particularly with legislation like Section 7A of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which outlawed employers from firing workers for joining unions, the New Deal affected positive changes for many African American workers and demonstrated the Roosevelt administration’s interest in helping labor. As Patrick Renshaw asserts: “…the ambitions of the American working class were essentially pragmatic and mundane, unconcerned with millenial[sic] promises or the restructuring of society.”

Hence, black voters in the 1930s didn’t just reject communism and socialism, but they embraced the Democratic Party, becoming part of the New Deal coalition that would be a major force in American politics for the ensuing three decades.

This focus on pragmatism doesn’t invalidate the radicalism that informed the ILGWU, but it is true that when a number of workers’ practical needs were met, the yearning for radical social change waned, generally undermining radical political movements. In Labor and the Left, John Laslett points out that increased wages, improved working conditions, and the abolition of sweatshop labor could only be

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The Socialists too were represented in Harlem by Frank Crosswaith and the symbol of a black-and-white hand clasped in fellowship. But while they all insisted on the misery of Harlem, and fraternized and frolicked with their Negro comrades, they did nothing to better economic conditions. Did they really want to do anything? (188)

10 Renshaw, American Labour and Consensus Capitalism, 189.
maintained through mass unionization, effective national legislation, or both. In fact, both came to pass in the ladies’ garment industry during the New Deal era, so there was a diminishing feeling of need for radical change from that point on.\textsuperscript{11}

More troubling, though, Kevin Boyle argues that affiliation with the Democratic Party undermined radicalism, and eventually labor’s own political agenda, in postwar America. First, when organized labor got behind the Democrats, it abdicated its ability to “articulate an alternative vision of the American political economy.” Hence, not only did labor lose a great deal of power and divest power from workers by stripping them of an alternative to the two major parties, but it allowed its radical voice to be silenced, and class issues generally faded from national politics. Class politics was instead replaced by race and gender politics that, along with the rise of the New Left and the Conservative movement, helped tear the New Deal coalition apart and undermine the dominance of the Democratic Party. The Republican Party “chipped away at the liberal state, attacking welfare, globalizing industrial labor, redistributing wealth upward, and fatally undermining the New Deal collective bargaining system,” while organized labor was reduced to a fringe movement.\textsuperscript{12} Given that labor unions are now vilified as greedy, immoral cabals of thugs, Boyle’s analysis seems illuminating. While his train of logic from labor joining the New Deal coalition to the impotence of the labor movement today is largely correct, it begs the question of what labor should have done in the 1930s. If it had not cast its lot with FDR, would it not have consigned itself to being a fringe movement long ago?

\textsuperscript{11} John Laslett. \textit{Labor and the Left}, 134.

\textsuperscript{12} Kevin Boyle, preface to \textit{Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994}, 3.
Also, while the New Deal coalition may have split apart somewhat, vestiges of it still exist. Blacks and labor remain two of the Democratic Party’s most reliable voting blocs. The words of Martin Luther King still largely ring true today:

Our needs are identical with labor’s needs: decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community. That is why Negroes support labor’s demands and fight laws which curb labor.13 blacks aren’t alone in sharing labor’s priorities. Next to African Americans, Jews remain the most reliably Democratic voting bloc in the United States, despite continuing prognostications of a turn to the right. They voted in higher numbers in 2008 for Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama than they had voted for a Democratic candidate in decades, and of course, Obama is half-black. The fabled black-Jewish alliance may have crumbled, but the fact remains that much of what brought blacks together with Jews in the ILGWU in the 1930s remains relevant and worth fighting for today. That fact is evident while, as Kevin Boyle has pointed out and as can currently be seen in states like Wisconsin, unions fight for their lives, but also while Jewish and black liberalism persist and thus offer the potential to reinvigorate support for the labor movement.

Subcultures and Political Coalitions

Eugene and Elizabeth Fox Genovese have argued for focusing on power dynamics in the study of history: “History…is primarily the story of who rides whom and

how.” Yet, their assertion led them to criticize social historians for focusing on subcultures, which they claimed removed the politics from history. In his introduction to *Perspectives on American Labor History*, J. Carroll Moody argues that historians should show how politics and social history buttress one another.\textsuperscript{14} I have described my work as one of social history, but as this dissertation comes to its conclusion, it should be clear that politics is essential to the subject at hand. I have sought to demonstrate that politics, when overt, can actually hinder political movements, while activities normally consigned to cultural and social history can in fact be remarkably effective political tools. Bringing people together to socialize, dance, sing, play, and learn prepares them to come together to protest, form voting blocs, and draw up political platforms. In other words, studying subcultures of opposition and the “hidden transcripts” nurtured within them doesn’t remove politics from history, but creates the link of mutuality between politics and social history that Moody advocates.

Some political consciousness is necessary to make the decision to join a union. A worker must be aware that a union can help him or her attain certain goals and must recognize that it has the political influence necessary to effectively advocate for its members. Also, a worker is more likely to join a union that he or she perceives as having a political viewpoint similar to his or her own. In some cases, this instinct also leads people to maintain distance from organizations they see as not being representative of their political point of view. The latter certainly occurred with respect to blacks and their disinclination toward the Negro Labor Committee and the National Negro Congress.

During the same period, though, politics and the subcultures of opposition represented in unions such as the ILGWU nurtured each other, acting as the necessary ingredients for fomenting an unprecedented political coalition that was defined as much by its diversity as by its uniformly pro-Democratic stance, as much by the cultural exchange it perpetuated as by the political agenda it pursued.

If America is ever to witness such a coalition again, historians must explore not only what went right in the 1930s, but also what inherent qualities of the coalition may have led to its eventual disintegration. Certainly, much in the way of both scholarship and opinion has been written about what factors in the 1960s in particular broke the New Deal coalition apart, but the coalition was vulnerable from the start. This was particularly true of the interracial relationships within the coalition, which while productive also engendered accusations by blacks toward whites of paternalism or led to condescending celebrations of black song and cheer that seemed to imply that black unionists were meant to serve as entertainment for their fellow union members as much as they were meant to be soldiers in a class struggle. Other weaknesses in the coalition existed, not the least of which was that it was an interracial alliance that cast its lot with a political party that relied on the support of a racist Southern voting bloc. Such weaknesses seem to pale in comparison to the mark the New Deal coalition left on 20th-century American politics, but they are pivotal to understanding how the coalition failed and how another such interracial, interethnic political force may rise again. In this respect, I echo the words of American Studies and English scholar George Hutchinson:

My partiality to intentionally egalitarian interracial efforts, intimacies, and commitments in the United States, my belief in their efficacy and necessity, will be obvious to all and will be shared, perhaps, by only a few.
That such relationships usually (and predictably) fall short of ideological purity, ‘true’ equality, and complete dialogue seems to me less significant than that they work at all in a culture so patently hostile to their existence. I do not, in any case, see any viable alternative to nourishing them. We must go beyond abstract judgment to validate and critique those active crossings that, however imperfect, open a path and create new conditions for principled action.¹⁵

Coalitions are important not only to the labor movement, or to particular ethnic or racial groups, but also to the nation as a whole.

I believe the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union from 1933 to 1940 demonstrated the best of what can happen when Americans of different racial and ethnic backgrounds find common cause. The subculture black and white ILGWU members created was one of those “intentionally egalitarian efforts” Hutchinson refers to, and I too am partial to them. Like Hutchinson, I will not discount the importance of the alliance these garment unionists forged simply because that egalitarianism was not fully realized, much in the same way that I will not trivialize the importance of the Negro Labor Committee and National Negro Congress because of their relative weakness and instability. Attention must be paid to examples of African American agency in historical scholarship, just as such agency must be nurtured in relation to participation in American politics. Scholars must “validate and critique” interracial coalitions so that they may be created again in a stronger, more enduring form than that which was created in the 1930s. Our country is made better by such coalitions because they create unity by celebrating diversity, something Americans must do if we are to work together to achieve political progress.

¹⁵ George Hutchinson, The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White, 27. Hutchinson believes that the most important figures of the Renaissance were those people both most prone to interracial intimacy, but most secure in their convictions about the cultural wealth of black America. This would have perfectly defined black members of the ILGWU after 1933. The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White, 25.
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