

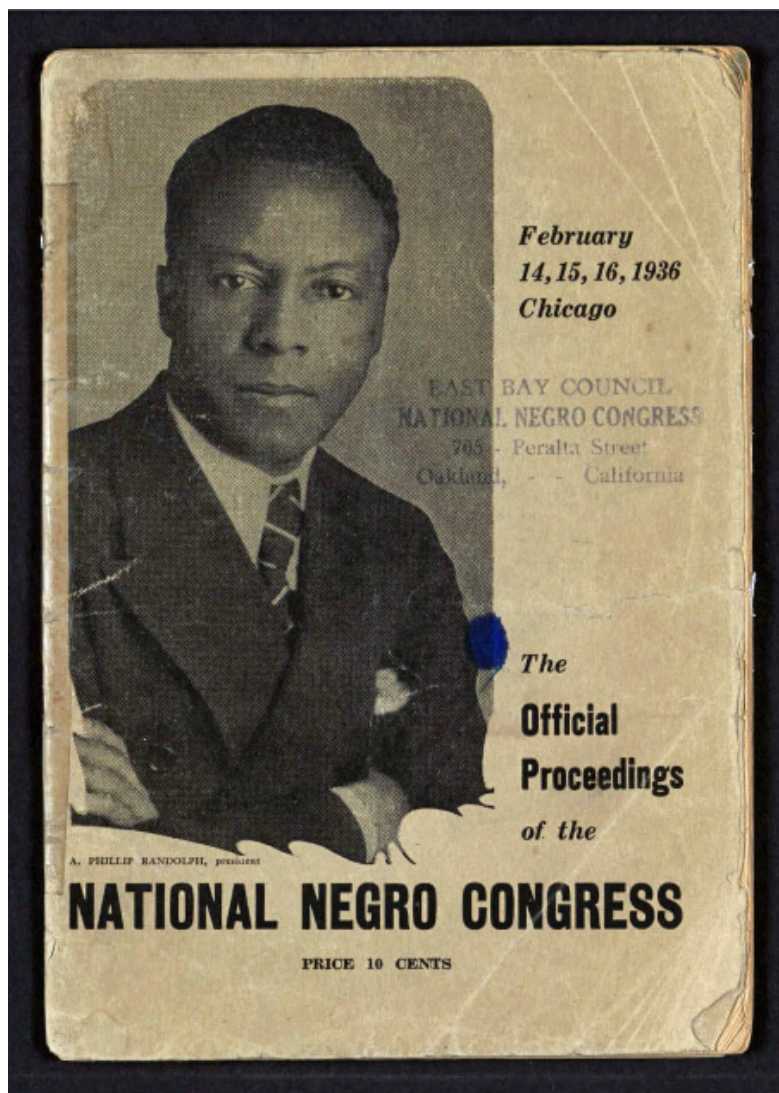
The Making and Breaking of a Popular Front: The Case of the National Negro Congress

Posted on July 2, 2023 by Eric Arnesen

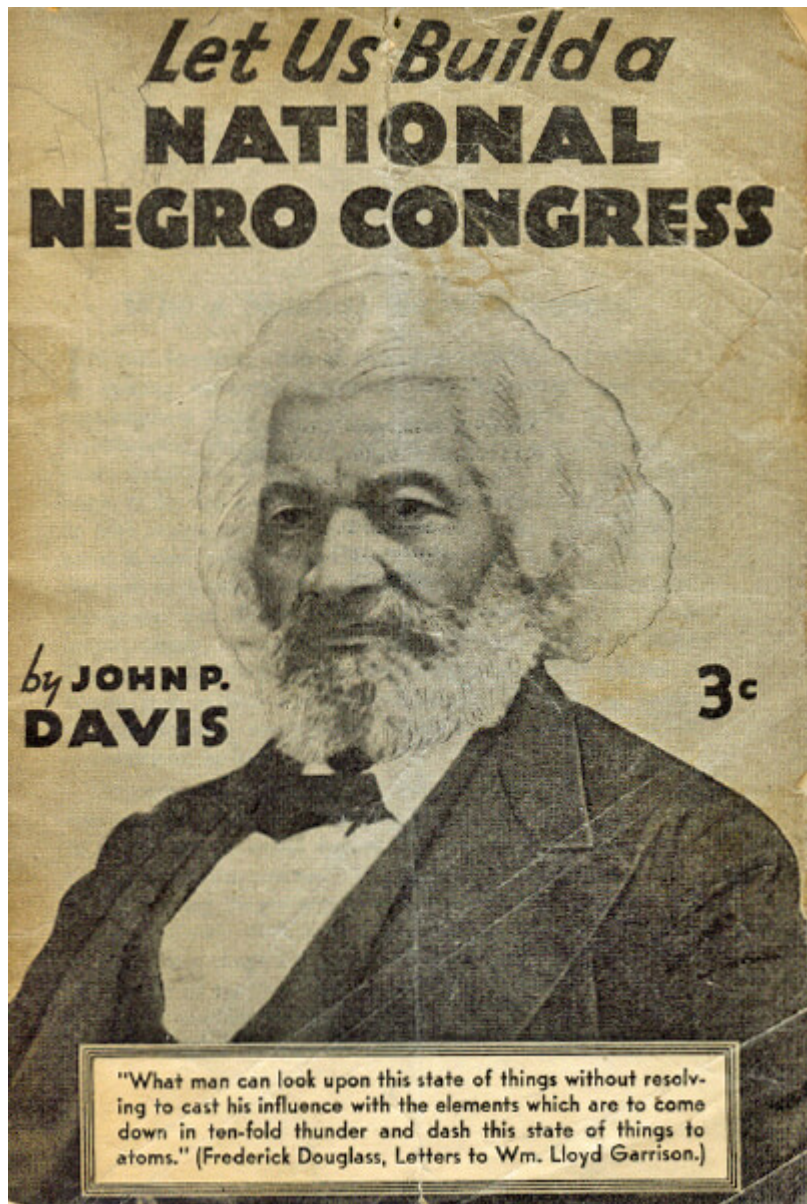
This is part of a series featuring authors of essays in the journal Labor: Studies in Working Class History. Eric Arnesen discusses the main arguments of his recently published essay on the National Negro Congress and shares some great images and documents from his research. The full essay appeared in the 20:1 (March 2023) issue of the journal.

[Subscriptions are part of LAWCHA membership.](#)

Two decades before Rosa Parks and the Black community of Montgomery, Alabama launched what is known as “the modern civil rights movement” in 1955, activists met at Howard University in Washington, D.C. to discuss “The Position of the Negro in our National Economic Crisis.” Most of those attending found the Roosevelt Administration’s New Deal to be inadequate to the task of addressing the Great Depression and injurious of Black workers’ interests. In the months that followed, they laid the groundwork for a new organization, the National Negro Congress (NNC), that promised to serve as a “weapon for Negro rights” by uniting a broad range of organizations, promoting grassroots protest, and advocating on behalf of interracial labor unity.



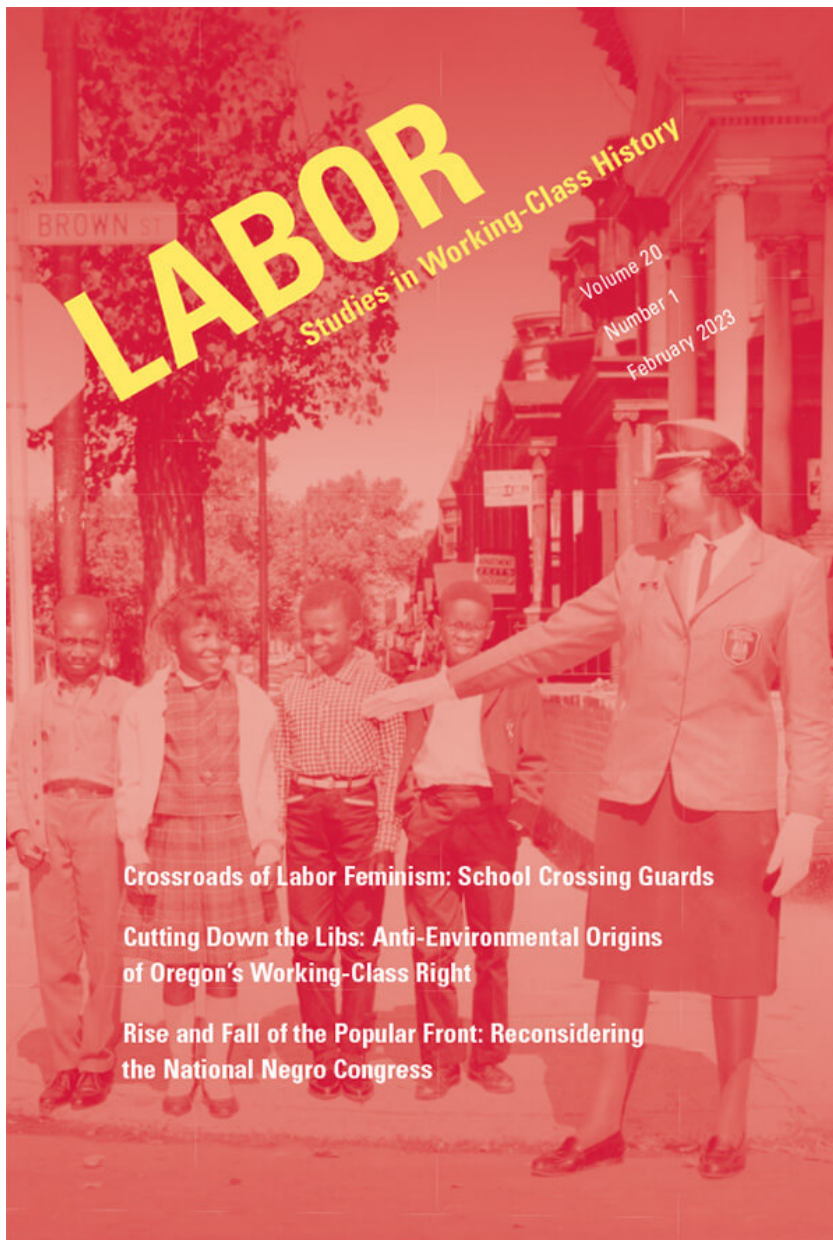
The National Negro Congress held its inaugural convention in Chicago in mid-February 1936, drawing hundreds of delegates and considerable media coverage in the African American press. Credit: Washington Area Spark Flickr Page and Papers of A. Philip Randolph, Reel 23.



Cover pamphlet authored by John P. Davis making the case for the formation of a National Negro Congress in 1935. Credit: Washington Area Spark Flickr page, Creative Commons License.

Its founding convention in Chicago in February 1936 won accolades from many Black journalists and editors. "No more significant event has been recorded in the post-Emancipation history of the Negro in America," the *Indianapolis Recorder* concluded with some degree of hyperbole. The 1936 gathering evinced "such enthusiasm, such sustained interest," the National Urban League's Lester Granger explained, that was "indicative of a deep rooted and nationwide dissatisfaction of Negroes that rapidly mounts into a flaming

resentment.” Departing delegates “took with them this new hope” and had “laid the basis for building unity, for augmenting their power and their strength,” the young Communist writer Richard Wright concluded. The new association represented the “popular front” in action, uniting liberals, Communists, and some socialists in a coalition that appeared ready to tackle aggressively the myriad crises afflicting Black America.



Eric Arnesen’s essay is included in Volume 20:1.

How this Popular Front coalition came into existence is one of the themes explored in my

article, ["The Making and Breaking of a Popular Front: The Case of the National Negro Congress,"](#) which appears in the 20:1 (March 2023) issue of the journal *Labor: Studies in Working Class History*. One part of the story is a familiar one to historians. Deeply worried about the rise of fascism, the Communist Party rethought its sectarianism and sought to build bridges to non-Communist progressives to better meet the challenges of depression-era America. They edged closer to this position even before the Comintern declared the Popular Front to be the new policy in August 1936. But non-Communists, for their part, also had to conclude that there were advantages to working with the Communists with whom they sharply disagreed on organizational and ideological matters and had bitterly fought with – sometimes literally – over the course of the depression's early years.



Button for the NNC's second national convention, held in Philadelphia in October 1937. It depicts abolitionists John Brown and Richard Allen.

A. Philip Randolph, a prominent Black socialist and leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), was one of those who was dismissive of Communists' beliefs and practices, which included regular Communist attacks on him and the leadership of his union. His attitude changed in the first half of 1935. Alarmed as well at the rise and spread of fascism, he came to respect CP members' role in challenging New York City officials in the aftermath of a riot in Harlem in March 1935 and concluded that the united front the Communists were pushing might be an effective political vehicle. Putting aside his history of antagonism with the CP, he agreed to be the NNC's first president and public face, while John P. Davis, a Harvard Law graduate close to the CP, served as its executive director. It was Davis, not Randolph, who ran the NNC's daily operations. The article reconstructs the

origins of the political rapprochement that brought the NNC into being.

Contemporaries and subsequent historians have offered a range of views about the NNC's accomplishments and character. Some have depicted the NNC as a vibrant grassroots organization, a vanguard in the anti-fascist fight that included but was not dominated by Communists; it helped to "launch the first successful industrial labor movement" in the United States, and "remade urban politics and culture in America," some contend. Others disagree with that picture. Social scientist and journalist Horace Cayton contended that the "Congress never became an organization supported by a membership but remained pretty much a paper front" whose policies were determined by the Communists and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, while Charlotta Bass, the editor of the *California Eagle* who would soon become a close ally of the Communist Party, noted the NNC's "failure to achieve any outstanding accomplishment to racial progress."

While my article doesn't fully explore the NNC's track record during the Popular Front years, it does argue that the organization was a genuine alliance of convenience that overcame past divisions and promised a new, militant political departure. Crucially, it also revisits the old question of the precise role the CP played in building and sustaining the NNC. It argues that while Communists did not control the NNC directly - at least initially — they were, in fact, *the* driving force in the organization during its early years. It suggests that historians who treat the NNC as something of an autonomous force in union and community campaigns downplay the Communists' genuine contributions, withhold credit that actually belongs to party members who worked tirelessly under its banner. Recognizing the real if sometimes concealed role of CPers also allows us to better understand the steady undercurrent of criticism from anticommunist Black leaders, criticism that cannot be dismissed simply as misguided or opportunistic redbaiting.

Finally, the article argues that it is impossible to disentangle the organization's transformation in 1940 from the issue of Communist influence. The Hitler-Stalin Pact (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of Non-Aggression) of August 1939 brought an abrupt end to the Popular Front. Domestically, the CP put aside its antifascism and devoted itself to keeping America out of what it now called the inter-imperialist conflict in Europe. For the NNC, the matter came to a head at its third convention in late April 1940. John P. Davis offered unqualified support of the CP foreign policy line that "the Yanks Are Not Coming" while Randolph, refusing to stand for re-election, denounced both Nazi Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union as totalitarian societies. Delegates fled the auditorium as he spoke. Non-Communists in attendance like Ralph Bunche, Layle Lane, and Pauli Murray had no doubt that the assembly was dominated by Communists, Black and white. To Murray, the Congress gathering was "a farce" that was "completely C.P. dominated" while Bunche predicted -

with some exaggeration, that the membership would “soon be reduced to devout party members, close fellow travelers, and representatives of the C.I.O. unions.” The NNC survived the departure of Randolph and many other non-Communists and, in the months that followed, it dedicated itself to the CP’s anti-war stance. But the united front/Popular Front was dead.

While the NNC’s history “cannot be understood solely by reference to Communism,” as historian David Witwer once argued, downplaying communism – as many scholars have done — makes it harder to understand the organization’s formation and, later, its abrupt and dramatic change in ideological direction and the subsequent defection of non-Communist Black activists from its ranks. Rather than constituting a “hand grenade in debates about the Communist Party’s role in the Black freedom movements,” as one historian has recently put it, Communists and their actual relationship to the NNC are necessary components of any understanding of the organization’s rise and fall – or at least its rise and transformation into an organization whose membership and ideological orientation were indistinguishable from that of the CP. The NNC’s history cannot be told without wrestling with the “hand grenade” of the Communist issue.

24 PAGES
IN THIS ISSUE
Ten Cents—and Worth It.

THE Chicago Defender

WORLD'S GREATEST WEEKLY

NATIONAL EDITION

OFFICE OF PUBLICATION: 243 INDIANA AVE., TELEPHONE CALUMET 3000
VOL. XXXI, No. 43

CHICAGO, ILL., SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 1936

COPYRIGHT, 1936, BY ROBERT S. ABBOTT PUBLISHING CO.
THIS PAPER CONSISTS OF TWO PARTS—PART ONE
PRICE TEN CENTS

UNIVERSAL UNREST AMONG BLACK PEOPLE REVEALED AT NATIONAL CONGRESS HERE

\$100,000 Reward On Selassie's Head

SAY DUCE HAS CASH ON HAND FOR PAYMENT

Report From Front Has
Soldiers In Desperate
Frame Of Mind

DJIBOUTI, Fr. Somaliland, Feb. 21.—Emperor Haile Selassie's head is now the objective of Italian flyers who have renewed their aerial bombardment of Dessye, dropping tons of incendiary projectiles on the Emperor's field headquarters. Caproni planes with glittering Fascist insignia are cruising at a daringly low altitude above the area at Makale and Dessye daily in an endeavor to ascertain the Emperor's whereabouts with the intention of bombing him. The aviator who gets him will be rewarded with a colonelship and \$100,000.

The last raid on Dessye had this as the real objective, a fact which the emperor himself was fully aware. With the belief current in Italian headquarters in Ethiopia

Miss. Torture Case Upset By U.S. Court

WASHINGTON, D. C., Feb. 21.—The Supreme court of the United States Monday in an unanimous decision reversed the state courts of Mississippi in the case of Brown, Rillingston and Shields, Race sharecroppers who were subjected to incredible brutality to obtain a confession.

In no decision in recent years has the highest tribunal been more vigorous in its denunciation of ill treatment to members of the Race. The decision in part read "It would be difficult to conceive of methods more revolting to the sense of justice than those taken to procure the confessions of these petitioners."

The Supreme court decision in no way guarantees the freedom of the oppressed defendant as the case must be returned to the Mississippi courts where feeling against the men is high for retrial.

SUSPENSION OF HOWARD U LAW STUDENT VALID

Frederick Weaver's Plea
Is Dismissed

Justice Jesse C. Adkins, of the District Supreme Court, last week upheld the right of Howard Uni-

As Congress Delegates Argued The Labor Question



Should Race labor organize? Are the opportunities of the Race greater outside the organized ranks? Should Race labor affiliate itself with the American Federation of Labor? Would not a separate union of all Race craftsmen be better? These were the questions being heatedly discussed by the Trade Union section of the National Negro Congress when this picture was taken. This was but one of several sessions into which the congress which held sessions in the Eighth Regiment Armory here, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, divided itself. The congress will be held in Philadelphia next year.

Delegates Make Cry For New Deal In America

Launch Program To Halt Evils Which Beset Race

The National Negro Congress which just closed here was called upon to attempt to meet the problem of Black America—the submerged tenth of the population—according to a statement contained in the speech of A. Phillip Randolph of the Congress, read by Dr. Charles W. Burton of the local committee.

Unable to attend personally, Mr. Randolph sent his message which was enthusiastically received by the 8000 persons who crowded the historic Eighth Regiment Armory for the first session last Friday night.

Shows National Carest Credit for providing the vehicle rightly belongs to the well-balanced national sponsoring committee, but the ultimate success of the Congress must be attributed to the national current among Black America and its determination to shake off the bonds which have made possible economic slavery, political disfranchisement and social inequalities.

While the excellent work of the Congress was made possible by the sincere and genuine efforts of the delegates, its future depends upon the sincerity and genuineness of the sponsoring groups from now on. It appears that the battle has just begun.

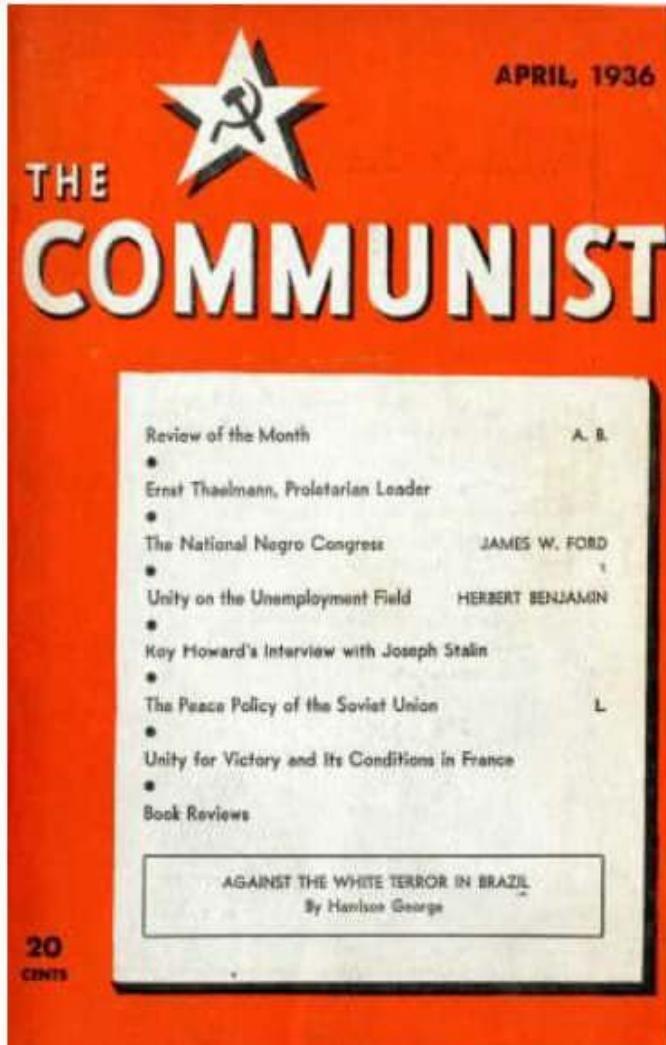
FUNERAL FOR BISHOP PARKS ON SATURDAY

Rites Of Prelate Will Be
Attended By Thousands

(Photos on Page Four)
By SARA ANITA MACKAY
(Staff Correspondent)
KANSAS CITY, Mo., Feb.

"Universal Unrest Among Black People Revealed at National Congress Here," read the headline in the February 22, 1936 issue of the *Chicago Defender*. Elsewhere in the paper the paper reprinted the various resolutions adopted by the Congress (below).

Credit: *Chicago Defender*



The National Negro Congress

By JAMES W. FORD

THROUGH the vigilance, energy and steadfastness of the Communist Party on the Negro question a powerful movement among the Negro people is taking solid root. The ruling class of this country has used every repressive measure to stifle the resistance of the Negro people. With the tactics used in Germany by the fascists against the Jewish people and in Russia by the old tsarist regime against the many nationalities, the ruling class in this country tries to prevent all the forces with common interests from joining against war and reaction.

However, despite all their efforts, a mass movement arises among the Negro people. Fundamentally, a mass movement of the Negro people in the United States can be a movement of a whole nation of people against American capitalism; divergent class and group interests can come together in it.

This fact was never before so clearly shown as by the National Negro Congress which closed at Chicago on February 16. It would be worthwhile for white workers, and all who are sincerely interested in the problems of the Negro people, to give this movement their careful attention and help to build it into a powerful instrument to fight for Negro rights and national liberation.

The National Negro Congress represents a broadly developing movement. It hardly matters how divergent the groups within it may be at the beginning. In all probability, economic and social divisions will emerge within it; no doubt, tendencies to the Left and Right will grow. This movement has been brought together around a minimum program of common interests. The Left forces, because of their experience and understanding, can render great help to it.

The movement is not yet made up of a large, clearly conscious progressive group; and there are, consequently, great dangers to be guarded against from reactionary political forces, such as the Republican and Democratic Parties, because of their traditional influence among the Negro people. Various social segments and groups within the Congress are not yet (in the full political sense) aware of unity pacts and the full meaning of united front alliances. Yet there are, within the life of the Negro people, elements that want and factors that tend toward common, unified action for Negro rights.

One of the most hopeful forces in the National Negro Congress

316

Black communist James W. Ford participated in the founding conference of the National Negro Congress. In the pages of a party journal, *The Communist*, he recounted his impressions about the new organization's formation and character.

The Communist's Way Out for the Negro

JAMES W. FORD

The world is caught in the midst of a great crisis. Masses of people live on the brink of starvation. Changes are taking place in society and in government. Movements towards war and fascism are developing rapidly. Old ideas, upon which generations of people have been raised, are crumbling because life no longer justifies them. People in all walks of life are seeking new solutions, new ways out of present conditions. Easy and simple proposals to solve the complicated difficulties of present day life are heard on every side.

What is the relation of the Negroes in the United States to this rapidly changing world? What is the way out? This question presents itself more sharply to the Negro masses than to any other section of the population.

We believe that we express the minimum desires of the Negro people when we say that they want at least a decent livelihood, the rights of human beings, and equal, honorable and respected status in public and social life.

Present day capitalism has not been able to satisfy these needs and is less and less able to do so. There are those who say that by reforming capitalism it can be made to fill the needs of the masses. We shall show that this is impossible.

Moreover, the Negro people want an equal national status in the

country. These things can only be obtained through hard struggle for immediate daily needs leading on to big economic and political struggles. This way out is not an easy one, but no basic change in society is easy. A radical change in present day society must be made before the needs of the Negro people can be satisfied.

The Civil War was a peculiar form of the further development of the American Revolution. The leadership of the Civil War was in the hands of the so-called left radical wing of the Republican Party, who acted, however, under pressure of the workers and farmers of the North and Northwest. The Civil War was fought to decide who shall become the masters of the United States—the rich planters of the South or the new rising industrial class. The new industrial class won and opened up the way for the rapid development of capitalism throughout the country.

Before the Civil War there were at least a score of rebellions of the Negro slaves; of particular significance was the uprising led by Nat Turner in Virginia in 1831 but because of lack of organization the slaves were defeated. These armed uprisings of the Negroes culminated in the attempted Negro uprising in the raid on Harper's Ferry led by John Brown. All of these rebellions were forebodings of the Civil War.

James W. Ford, one of the country's most prominent African American communists, was a strong supporter of both the united front/Popular Front and the National Negro Congress. This is a page from his speech at the 1935 Howard University conference that preceded the NNC's formation. Credit: *Journal of Negro Education*

new Masses

Vol. XVIII, No. 9

CONTENTS

FEBRUARY 25, 1936

FEBRUARY 25, 1936

15

Two Million Black Voices

RICHARD WRIGHT

Time: An era of lynching, Jim Crowism and an era of disfranchisement; a time when living standards of Negroes are sinking to lower and lower levels.

Place: Chicago—the Eighth Regiment Armory, a huge, bleak structure which houses the crack Illinois Negro “8th,” a regiment whose ranks were decimated in Flanders to make the world “safe for a democracy” the Negro people have never known.

SEVEN hundred sixty-three delegates and eight thousand visitors are jammed into the hall. They represent directly and indirectly ten million oppressed Negroes of America. Everywhere there is eagerness and tension.

All the talk takes the form of questions. “What do you think we can do?” “Will things be different?” These are the words of sharecroppers who hitch-hiked through zero cold to come to the National Negro Congress. These are the words of industrial workers, doctors, shop-girls, politicians, preachers, social workers, labor leaders, teachers, as they stand or sit, waiting.

They have come from every section of the country.

A church choir begins to sing and ten thousand voices swell:

Sing a song
Full of the faith that the dark past has taught us
Sing a song
Full of the hope that the present has brought us
Let us march on ‘till victory is won.

The hope of a new day for these ten million subjugated people is expressed in the fall of a gavel inlaid with wood taken from the hulk of the last slave ship that ever touched the shores of continental United States. And as the greetings pour in to the opening session from all over America and the world, the 763 delegates are confirmed in the knowledge that they are not alone. They are a vanguard of a huge rising people, a section of a world-wide army of toilers driving toward liberation.

The address of A. Phillip Randolph,¹ president of the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and President of the National Negro Congress, sounds this new day of victory. Pointing a means of action each sentence is a blow of logic breaking a new path.

No black workers can be free so long as a white worker is a slave, and by the same token, no white worker is certain of security while his black brother is bound. . . . Our contemporary history is a witness to the fact

¹ Owing to illness, Randolph could not attend. His speech was read.

Black America is a victim of both class- and race-oppression. Because Negroes are black, they are hated, lynched and murdered. Because Negroes are workers they are brow-beaten, intimidated and exploited. . . . The Negro people face a hard, deceptive and brutal capitalist order, despite its preachments of “Christian love and brotherhood.”

With this as his basic premise, he presented a list of partial demands, welding them finally into one general, ultimate demand—a new Bill of Rights for the Negro people. Coming closer home, he points out that the New Deal is no remedy. It does not place human rights above property rights, but gives the business interests the support of the state.

To those Negroes who look to a return of the old order, he says, “The restoration of the Republican rule is no solution. . . . Probably the greatest danger to American institutions today—the threat of a fascist dictatorship—is the Republican party, the American Liberty League and the Hearst publishing syndicate. . . .” He stresses the fact that under either of the old parties all workers—both black and white—are faced with more than the abrogation of civil rights. “War is the twin sister of fascism. . . . It is an immediate danger.”

BUT of the present-day confusion of social tendencies what road can the Negroes of America take in their struggle for national liberation? In what direction lies the richest opportunity for effective action? Where are the forces strong enough to bear the brunt of this offensive against war and fascism?

Surely not through the continuance of the present modes of separate actions! Although at times the work of single organizations is militant and courageous, this is not enough. Randolph demonstrates that the rapid march of imperialism and the trustification of monopoly capitalism require the immediate united effort of the broadest masses of the people. And this united effort must lead to the formation of new instrumentalities of political action. Discarding both the Republican and Democratic parties, the Negro people may look for the solution of their difficulties solely in an anti-capitalistic party—a Farmer-Labor Party. And this independent political action by workers’ groups is closely tied to the matter of industrial unionism. For “the craft union invariably has a color bar against the Negro workers, but the industrial union in structure renders race discrimination less possible.”

Randolph’s speech opens two broad perspectives before the Negro people: (1) it marks the broaching of the idea of a na-

tional solidified movement among Negroes of all classes and occupations; (2) and it demonstrates both the possibility and necessity of an alliance of the Negro with all the progressive and class-conscious elements in America and the entire world.

The remaining sessions of the Congress formulated in organizational terms a militant program for the good, not only of black America, but white America as well. John P. Davis, national secretary, in his concluding words asked: “Do we have the right to act? Is there a man so callous as to attempt to destroy the unity expressed here tonight? In meeting in this hall, we are expressing our right to place human rights above property rights.”

The proposed Negro Bill of Rights for which the Congress will seek endorsement, reads as follows:

The right of Negroes to decent wages and membership in labor unions.

Relief and security for every Negro family.

General social and employment insurance without discrimination.

Aid to Negro farmers and the right of Negro farmers, tenants and sharecroppers to organize and bargain collectively.

A national anti-lynching law.

The right of Negroes to vote, serve on juries and enjoy civil liberty and equality.

Equal opportunity for Negro youths in education and in the economic life of the community.

Equality for Negro women in the matter of wages, environment for themselves and children in housing, school and recreational facilities and the right to organize as consumers.

Opposition to war and fascism; the independence of Ethiopia; opposition of world colonial nations.

These demands can be won by a Farmer-Labor Party, James W. Ford, Communist leader, told the convention. Such a political party would unite all progressive forces to fight toward the realization of these ends. Significantly, the welcome given by the delegates to Ford was in direct contrast to their unwillingness to hear representatives of the old-line parties.

From the drive for unity among the Negro people and between the Negro and white workers and their allies, came the resolution calling for an International Congress of Negroes which would supplement the yearly meetings of the American Congress. The struggle for Negro rights and for the Negro to take his rightful place in the American scene gathered momentum at the First Congress. As the young organizer, John P. Davis said, “The Congress must create new unity, new hope, new power and strength for Black America.”

The delegates have left Chicago. They took with them this new hope. They had laid the basis for building unity, for augmenting their power and their strength.

In February 1936, the aspiring writer Richard Wright, then a member of the Communist Party, attended the founding convention of the National Negro Congress in the Eight Regiment Armory on Chicago's South Side. In his account of the gathering, he promoted the Popular Front line and urged the "immediate united effort of the broadest masses of the people," including the "drive for unity among the Negro people and between the Negro and white workers and their allies." He came away deeply impressed with what he heard and, in the pages of the *New Masses*, insisted that the delegates had "laid the basis for building unity, for augmenting their power and their strength." Credit: *The New Masses*

National Negro Congress News

October 7th, 1937

Philadelphia, Pa.

A Message from the National President

The Second National Negro Congress marks an historic and epoch making event in the life of the Negro people of America and the world. The whole program of the Congress has grown out of, and has been shaped in, the fires of struggle and oppression the sons and daughters of Africa have borne in the New World. Under the blistering whip of the Simon Legrees of the old slave regime, the spirit of revolt was enkindled in the hearts of the first black militant and revolutionary leaders that faced America, such as Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass. These noble spirits struck out of their tormented and tortured souls for the freedom they never knew: But their life was a challenge to

Negro people of little avail. Add to this the color bar in the constitutions and rituals of certain trade unions, discrimination in the assignment of jobs to Negro workmen, and the problem of Afro-America looms in menacing magnitude and pressing urgency for solution.

It is to this same end job, the Second National Negro Congress calls Negro Americans, in the mines and mill, factories and farms, on the railroads and docks, in merchandise markets and homes, in church and school rooms, in fraternal lodge and women's club, in trade unions, and college fraternities, as well as all lovers of freedom and democracy among the white people, to assemble, discuss and work and formulate programs and proclamations of appeal and action for the liberation of the Negro, in particular, and the preservation

of the Negro people. They won the big and courageous heart of that matchless champion of human liberty, John Brown, who gave his all for Negro liberation at Harper's Ferry.

Under the stress of ceaseless insurrection by the old rebels, and the nascent social forces for the creation of democratic institutions, culminating in the Civil War, chattel bondage passed away.

But the task of winning true freedom for Black Americans is still unfinished. Civil and political liberties for the Negro people, though guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Federal Constitution, whose One Hundredth and Fiftieth birthdate all America now celebrates, are not yet secure, especially in the land of the cotton plantation. Involuntary servitude, through peonage mocks the Thirteenth Amendment, and the Klu Klux Klan, the Black Legion and Southern judicial terror, render the Bill of Rights to the

Principles:

The method by which the National Negro Congress hopes to achieve this objective is unity of the varied and varying Negro movements with the progressive and liberal forces in the nation. It is that unity which has saved France from the prophets of a totalitarian state of the Hitler species. It is that unity of Republican Spain which has rescued it from the sinister hordes of Fascist Franco and the corporate state of Mussolini. It's the genius of unity alone which can save the race. YES, ONLY UNITY OF THE PEOPLE CAN SAVE DEMOCRACY!

Against war and fascism, against trade union discrimination and Jim-crowism, against lynching and the mob spirit, against exclusion from employment and equality of educational, political and economic opportunity, against inaction and reaction, the Second National Negro Congress lends its broadened voice and calls the Negro people to action.

A. PHILIP RANDOLPH

NNC President A. Philip Randolph laid out his endorsement of the Popular Front at the organization's second national gathering in Philadelphia in October 1937. Credit: *National Negro Congress News*

COMMUNISM CAUSES SPLIT IN CONGRESS

Randolph Resigns As The
President; Crowd
Boos Brown

WASHINGTON, May 3—(ANP)—A. Philip Randolph and the National Negro Congress came to the parting of the ways here Sunday night, when in the final meeting of the body Mr. Randolph clearly and concisely stated his difference of opinion with the trends indicated in the meeting and dispassionately refused to run for reelection to the post he had held continuously for the past three years.

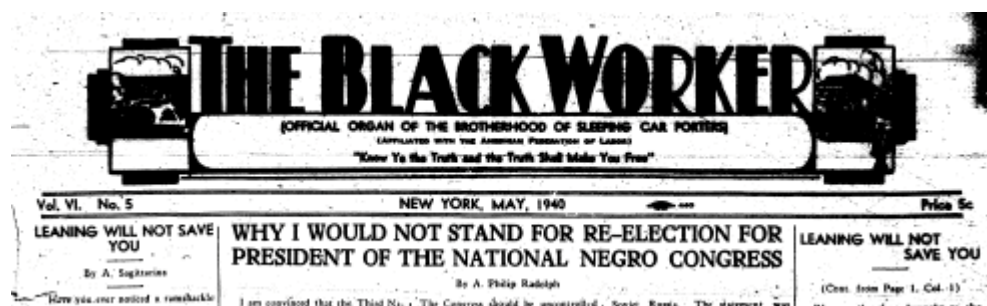
Mr. Randolph's speech was, as usual, classic in its logic and delivery.

"It was reluctantly that I consented to serve as president of this organization when it was first organized in Chicago, but I sent a wire notifying the organization that I was not in a position to serve. However, I accepted the presidency when elected.

"At the second congress in Philadelphia, I declared it was impossible for me to continue as president of the congress, as I was not in the best of health and could not accept the responsibility for the policies of such a national organization. However, I agreed to serve again.

"I have come to the point, so far as I can see, when a departure has been made from the original program. Policies have been adopted to which I agree, and some have been adopted to which I am opposed. I would not be true to myself and because I am opposed to certain of the policies, it is impossible for me to continue as president of the congress.

At the NNC's third national convention in late April 1940, its president A. Philip Randolph announced that he would not run for re-election because of the Communist party's influence and the new policies the NNC was adopting in the aftermath of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Credit: *Chicago Defender*, 1940



NEW YORK, MAY, 1940

WHY I WOULD NOT STAND FOR RE-ELECTION FOR PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL NEGRO CONGRESS

By A. Philip Randolph

I am convinced that the Third National Negro Congress has not succeeded in removing from the mind of the public the idea that the charge of the Dies Committee, that the National Negro Congress is a Communist Front, and a Transmission Belt for Communists propaganda, is no true. In fact, the Congress has brilliantly succeeded in giving the charge every appearance of truth and validity.

I am convinced, also, that until the stigma of the Communist Front is wiped from the Congress, it will never rally the masses of the Negro people.

The procedure, conduct and policies of the Negro Congress, as set up in this third national meeting, will make its influence in the affairs of the American Negroes, short lived. The American Negroes will not long follow any organization which accepts dictation and control from the Communist Party. The American Negro will not long follow any organization which accepts dictation and control from any white organization.

In the last national Executive Committee meeting in New York City, Brother John P. Davis was authorized to go out and borrow \$1,000 to help put the Third Congress over. He informed me that he had borrowed it and mentioned the name of a man. I was given no specific identity of the man. What was the source of this money? The Delegates to the Congress should know. Because whatever is the source of the money with which the Congress is run, will also be the source of its ideas, policies and control.

It is a well-known fact that most of the contributions to this Congress, expressed by the Secretary, Mr. Davis, are from CIO unions. Is this the reason why the Congress is taking the CIO line?

In an Executive Committee meeting in New York City, Mr. Davis informed it that the Communist Party contributed \$100 a month to the Congress. Is this the reason why the Congress refuses to attempt to make plain to the American people that it is not a Communist Front? These questions should be definitely and unequivocally answered.

When I was asked in a Committee meeting in New York to visit some unions, or sign a letter to be sent to certain unions for funds, I refused, because I am unalterably opposed to having a Negro organization, which is supposed to be fighting the battles of the race, depending for its main income upon a source outside of the Negro people themselves.

I am opposed to the National Negro Congress depending upon the Communists or CIO for its financial maintenance, because I am opposed to the Congress being dominated by either the Communists or the CIO.

The Congress should be uncontrolled and responsible to no one but the Negro people. But it will not be uncontrolled and responsible to no one but the Negro people unless the Negro people supply the money for its maintenance.

Now, there is nothing against the Congress receiving contributions from unions, but it is dangerous business where there is a split in the labor movement, for it to receive practically the major funds, upon which its existence depends, from unions on one side of the fence. It is bound to make the Congress biased toward one side, and thereby destroy the united front and mass character of the Congress, because it will no longer be able to rally the Negro workers in the A. F. of L.

When the National Negro Congress loses its independence, it loses its soul, and has no further reason for being. It also forfeits and betrays the faith and confidence of the Negro masses. It will shatter the hopes and aspirations of the Negro people who yearn and pray for the Negro Congress not to sell out either to labor or capital, Communists or Republicans or Democrats.

Since the trend of the National Negro Congress is obviously toward domination by the Communists and the CIO, I would not stand for re-election for President.

I do not oppose the domination of the Congress by the CIO because I am opposed to the CIO. I would be opposed to domination of the Congress by the A. F. of L., or any other white organization.

With respect to domination by the Communists, I am not only opposed to domination of the Congress by them, but I consider the Communists a definite menace and a danger to the Negro people and labor, because of rule or ruin and disruptive tactics in the interest of the Soviet Union.

It was apparent, immediately the Congress got under way, that the temper, flavor and viewpoint of the Congress were Communist, and that the resolutions adopted would reflect the Communist line. It was not long before my suspicions were confirmed, for the person who was selected for the Chairman of the Resolutions Committee is an acknowledged Communist. This was an unpardonable, colossal and childish blunder. I didn't protest against it because I knew it was useless, since the Congress was deliberately packed with Communists and CIO members who were either Communists or sympathizers with Communists.

The Third National Negro Congress was a miserable failure, so far as representing the sentiment of the American Negro people is concerned. Uproarious applause greeted every favorable reference in the Congress to

Soviet Russia. The statement was even made that the Negro people would not fight in an imperialist war against the Soviet Union. But this is far from the truth. If the United States declared war upon Communist Russia tomorrow, the Negro would fight Russia, with all the fervor and patriotism of any other 100 per cent American. Anyone who believes to the contrary is living in a fool's paradise.

Soviet Russia was hailed as a land without poverty or race prejudice. But the fact is, there are no Negroes in Soviet Russia that would occasion any manifestation of race discrimination. However, it is significant to note that Bolshevik Russia freely sold oil to Fascist Italy to assist the murderous war of invasion of the peace-loving and ancient kingdom of Ethiopia.

I quit the Congress because I was opposed to linking it up with Labor's Non-Partisan League, the political mouthpiece of the CIO, since this was a departure from the original minimum program upon which there could be general agreement and a sound basis for rallying the Negro masses. It seems axiomatic and as simple as one, two, three, that the Congress could not rally the Negroes in the A. F. of L., if it were tied up with the CIO, and it could not rally the Negroes in the CIO, if it were allied with the A. F. of L.

I quit the Congress because I was opposed to it, or its officials, expressing sympathy for the Soviet Union, which is the death prison where democracy and liberty have walked their "last mile" and where shocking "blood purges" wipe out any, and all persons who express any dissenting opinion from dictator Stalin.

I quit the Congress because I saw that the Communists were firmly in the saddle and the delegates were not subject to the influence of facts and reason. Their minds were already made up when they came there by Communists' manipulations, caucuses and propaganda. Nothing could shake them. Even poor old men and women from the deep South and from some parts up North, who didn't have the slightest idea of what it was all about, parrot fashion, went down the Communist line, like bleating sheep led to slaughter.

I quit the Congress because it is not truly a Negro Congress. Out of some 1200 or more delegates, over 300 were white, which made the Congress 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?

(Cont. on Page 4, Col. 5)

Above: In the pages of his union journal, *The Black Worker*, A. Philip Randolph, the president of both the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the National Negro Congress, explained in forceful terms why he had left the National Negro Congress. The organization, he argued, had lost its independence; it had come to depend on the CIO and the Communist party for its funding and had come under communist domination. "I consider the Communists a definite menace and a danger to the Negro people and labor," he made clear, "because of rule or ruin and disruptive tactics in the interest of the Soviet Union." He had quit the NNC, he explained, "because it is not truly a Negro Congress." Credit: *The Black Worker*



The Black weekly, *The California Eagle*, announced Randolph's departure from the National Negro Congress in a bold first-page headline in its May 2, 1940 issue.

Credit: *California Eagle*

Author



• [Eric Arnesen](#)

