

Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile during World War II

Bruce Nelson

During the era of World War II, the Pinto Island yard of the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company (ADDSCO) was transformed from a struggling ship repair operation with about 1,000 irregularly employed workers to one of the nation's major war production facilities, with 30,000 employees—white and black, male and female—repairing and producing ships for the United States Maritime Commission. The company's trajectory paralleled that of the metropolitan area in whose harbor it was located. The city of Mobile, Alabama, went through the painful transition from a "mouldering old Gulf seaport [of] ancient dusty elegance" to the classic wartime example of a "congested production area." When the novelist John Dos Passos visited Mobile in March 1943, he found that it looked "trampled and battered like a city that's been taken by storm."¹

On May 24, 1943, Alabama Dry Dock employed nearly 7,000 black workers, none of them in skilled occupations. Suddenly, in compliance with a six-month-old directive from the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice (FEPC), the once-recalcitrant company upgraded 12 blacks to welding jobs. The next morning, after the twelve men had gone home, the yard erupted. Responding to cries to "get every one of them Niggers off this island," enraged whites assaulted their black co-workers with pipes, clubs, and other weapons from their workaday world. Some blacks sustained serious injuries in the melee, and virtually all of them experienced hours of terror, which ended only when United States Army troops from nearby Brookley Field arrived on Pinto Island to restore order.²

Bruce Nelson is associate professor of history at Dartmouth College. He would like to thank the Carter G. Woodson Institute for Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Virginia for a fellowship that facilitated much of the research and writing of this article; Kate Stone for research assistance; Susan Armeny for lessons in copy-editing; Alex Bontemps for reading and discussing numerous revisions; and Eric Arnesen, David Brody, Gary Gerstle, Robin Kelley, Earl Lewis, Nelson Lichtenstein, August Meier, Robert J. Norrell, Gail O'Brien, Tom Sugrue, David Thelen, and Joe Trotter for criticism of earlier drafts.

¹ John Dos Passos, *State of the Nation* (Boston, 1944), 92. On the process engulfing Mobile (and the entire South), see Pete Daniel, "Going among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II," *Journal of American History*, 77 (Dec. 1990), 886–911.

² President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, "Field Investigation Report," June 8, 1943, box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, Records of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, RG 228 (Na-

The ADDSCO riot of May 1943 provides an opportunity to examine the volatile convergence of black and white workers in major—and badly congested—defense production centers such as Mobile during World War II and to understand how organized labor sought to shape that convergence. This essay will focus mainly on unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), especially the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America (IUMSWA), the collective bargaining agent for workers at the ADDSCO yard. Above all, it will explore the relationship between organized labor and the emerging civil rights movement, which took a giant leap forward during the war, both nationally and in Mobile, where a remarkable individual, John LeFlore, led a chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) that mobilized black Mobilians in unprecedented numbers and broadened their fight for freedom.

Some contemporaries believed that the CIO could unite blacks and whites around a common program of economic advancement and racial justice. In 1941, writing in the NAACP's journal, the *Crisis*, Harold Preece called the CIO a "lamp of democracy" in the South and declared that the region had "not known such a force since the historic Union Leagues in the great days of the Reconstruction era." In 1943, Executive Secretary Walter White of the NAACP characterized organized labor as "our natural ally" and stated that "the CIO has proved . . . it stands for Negro advancement. It has fought for our people within the unions and outside the unions." This view has been reaffirmed recently by the historians Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, who argued that conditions generated by the war sparked the emergence of "a very different sort of civil rights movement," with roots among black workers, a focus on issues of economic equality, and a **dynamic alliance between CIO unions and the black community**. Korstad and Lichtenstein concluded that the **postwar demise of this vital phenomenon constituted an "opportunity lost" for the movement that succeeded it.**³

Other scholars, however, have portrayed organized labor, including the CIO, as a vehicle for defending the relatively privileged position of white workers vis-à-vis their minority competitors in the labor market. In a study of Birmingham, Alabama, the historian Robert J. Norrell has argued that the CIO-affiliated Steel Workers Organizing Committee and its successor, the United Steelworkers of America, "gave white workers new power to enforce job discrimination, thus severely curtailing black opportunities. The gains made at blacks' expense gave whites a clear *economic* stake in preserving racial discrimination." Herbert Hill, who came to know the trade union movement intimately through his many years of service as NAACP

tional Archives, Washington, D.C.); Victor H. Bernstein, "The Story of a Race Riot: Women Joined Men in Clubbing and Stoning Negro Ship Workers," *PM*, May 31, 1943, p. 4; National Urban League, "Summary of a Report on the Race Riots in the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company Yards in Mobile, Alabama," June 25, 1943, box A331, group II, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).

³ Harold Preece, "The South Stirs," *Crisis*, 48 (Oct. 1941), 318; White quoted in *Cleveland Call and Post*, Feb. 27, 1943, sec. A, p. 3; Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History*, 75 (Dec. 1988), 811.

labor secretary, also maintained that “the great promise of the CIO, the promise of an interracial labor movement, was never realized.” More broadly, Hill argued, the historical record makes it clear that, with certain limited exceptions, “labor unions . . . [have] functioned to **advance the interests of white workers**, to guarantee for them privileges in the labor market.”⁴

Clearly, these two perspectives are not easily reconcilable, but the historical reality is not reducible to one or the other. In the formative years of the CIO, the new unions were contested terrain, subject to internal struggle over their character and direction. Left-led organizations whose membership was mainly African-American were often in the vanguard of the struggle for black equality, but other unions were far more cautious, and most white rank-and-filers saw no contradiction between a commitment to industrial unionism and the maintenance of white supremacy. The study of Mobile during World War II reveals that the vast majority of white shipyard workers were unwilling to make concessions to their black co-workers’ demands for greater equality, but whites were not a monolith. Veteran shipyard craftsmen accepted black laborers and helpers as necessary—but subordinate—participants in the workplace regime, while newcomers from rural areas of the Deep South were more likely to see the very presence of black workers as a threat to their social status and economic leverage.

African Americans were active participants in this debate, and, increasingly, they saw the CIO as a vehicle that could help propel them from the margins to the mainstream of the industrial economy. “All of the Negro workers are 100% CIO,” a shipyard organizer in Pascagoula, Mississippi, reported. His counterpart in Jacksonville, Florida, warned that the shipyard local there was so popular among blacks, it was in danger of becoming “a strictly Negro organization.”⁵ Scholars who see the CIO only as a guarantor of white privilege must—implicitly at least—declare such black workers the victims of their own “false consciousness.” It would be far truer to the historical record to acknowledge that the CIO represented something positive for them—at a minimum, the right to vote and participate in the internal affairs of unions, the hope of upgrading to skilled and higher-paying positions within the occupational hierarchy, and an entirely unprecedented level of representation and of protection against the boss’s arbitrary authority in the workplace. Thus, the report of a shipyard unionist in Mobile: “The company fired one of our Negro members,” he wrote in August 1938. “We gave them 24 hours to put the man back to work—and they did.” This small incident was but one sign of a larger dynamic that quick-

⁴ Robert J. Norrell, “Caste in Steel: Jim Crow Careers in Birmingham, Alabama,” *Journal of American History*, 73 (Dec. 1986), 670; Herbert Hill, “Race, Ethnicity, and Organized Labor: The Opposition to Affirmative Action,” *New Politics*, 2 (Winter 1987), 33; Herbert Hill, “Black Workers, Organized Labor, and Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act: Legislative History and Litigation Record,” in *Race in America: The Struggle for Equality*, ed. Herbert Hill and James E. Jones, Jr. (Madison, 1993), 263–341.

⁵ W. T. Crist to Philip H. Van Gelder, Nov. 8, 1938, box 55, series V, Records of the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America (Historical Manuscripts and Archives Department, McKeldin Library, University of Maryland, College Park); [Charles N. Smolnikoff] to [Thomas J.] Gallagher, Dec. 27, 1943, box 11, subseries 4, series II, *ibid.*

ened the commitment of black workers to the CIO. At the very least, it should remind us of the new federation's contradictory character—as both an institutional reflection of the larger patterns of racial domination and subordination in American society *and* an egalitarian social movement that challenged the boundaries of those patterns.⁶

In the final analysis, however, CIO unions with white majorities were caught in a paralyzing dilemma. With some trepidation, their leaders reached out to black workers. Formally, they adhered to the CIO's commitment to racial equality. Cautiously, and as much as possible in conjunction with employers and the federal government, some of them sought to implement antidiscrimination policies in the workplace. But they would not allow these issues to jeopardize the institutional survival of their organizations, which depended on the allegiance of white workers and generally reflected their consciousness.⁷ Ultimately, they faced the contradiction between a narrow democracy that privileged the interests of the white majority and a more inclusive vision that sought equal rights for white and black alike. While CIO representatives often voiced the latter ideal, their unions' practice far more often reflected the former.

World War II magnified the CIO's dilemma a thousandfold, in part because it made enormous institutional growth possible, in part because it vastly accelerated the pace of the black freedom struggle and confronted trade unionists with the question of "which side are you on?" in relation to the emerging civil rights movement. An examination of the struggle for black equality and the development of CIO unionism in Mobile suggests that in the teeth of the contradictions they faced, the white leaders of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers were unwilling to bring their union into the widening stream of the black freedom struggle or to participate actively in it themselves. Indeed, IUMSWA leaders came to see the civil rights movement as a grave danger to the always tenuous equilibrium they had labored hard to build between white and black workers at Alabama Dry Dock.

The Wartime Transformation of Mobile

As the United States moved toward direct military involvement in World War II, Mobile was destined to become a major center of defense production. Already an

⁶ Crist to Van Gelder, Aug. 1, 1938, box 55, series V, *ibid.* Historians of the black working class are compelling us to recognize that even a segregated and discriminatory labor movement was never "the property of whites alone"; nor would it be during the era of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). See Eric Arnesen, "Following the Color Line of Labor: Black Workers and the Labor Movement before 1930," *Radical History Review*, 55 (Winter 1993), 55; Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (New York, 1991); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, 1991); Joe William Trotter, Jr., "Class and Racial Inequality: The Southern West Virginia Black Coal Miners' Response, 1915–1932," in *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South*, ed. Robert H. Zieger (Knoxville, 1991), 60–83; and Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915–32* (Urbana, 1990).

⁷ The leading exception was the United Automobile Workers (UAW) in the Detroit area during World War II. Despite resistance from the union's white rank and file, the UAW leadership "emerged as black Detroit's most helpful and outspoken ally." See August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York, 1979), 174.

important railroad hub and port city, it was close to Birmingham's iron and steel mills and had a tradition of building and repairing ships. But in spite of these advantages, few contemporaries could have imagined that Mobile would grow as rapidly, and as chaotically, as it did. The Census Bureau estimated that 89,000 people came to Mobile County between April 1940 and March 1943. The city's population increased from 78,720 to over 125,000, while that of the metropolitan area (Mobile and Baldwin counties) grew from some 174,000 to approximately 260,000. In January 1943, a War Manpower Commission report called Mobile "the most congested shipyard center in the country." To Agnes E. Meyer of the *Washington Post*, it was "the extreme example of what happens in a large but poorly organized community when it is overrun by warworkers." And many other observers and investigators fed the seemingly unending stream of reports documenting the inadequate housing and health care, the food shortages, the traffic congestion, the overcrowded schools, the near complete lack of recreational facilities, and — on top of everything else — the highest rate of increase in the cost of living in the nation.⁸

Housing was generally regarded as the most serious problem. Although federal agencies built thousands of accommodations for the in-migrants, it was not until mid-1943 that they kept up with the demand. The result, for several critical years, was appalling overcrowding, skyrocketing rents, and the rapid deterioration of the existing housing stock. In March 1942, an official of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers complained that "our members are being evicted from their homes because they refuse to pay double the rent they were paying a few months ago." "Houses here," he said, "some of them . . . unfit for human habitation, are bursting open with men." Six months later *Fortune* reported that "single men who can't afford, or stubbornly refuse, to pay the prevailing rent for a private room, patronize 'hot beds,' herd together in nightmarish 'boardinghouses,' or are just on their own"—sleeping in automobiles, juke joints, and park benches. Often the only accommodations couples with children could find were "tents, trailers, and shacks," many with "no sewage, no water system, no toilets except an occasional wooden structure put over a hole." The Gulf Shipbuilding Corporation reported losing 4,500 workers, equivalent to nearly half its work force, in a twelve-week period. They left, said a company official, in some cases after only one day's employment, "simply because they cannot get shelter."⁹

⁸ Melton McLaurin and Michael Thomason, *Mobile: The Life and Times of a Great Southern City* (Woodland Hills, 1981), 124, 126; James Albert Burran III, "Racial Violence in the South during World War II" (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1977), 105; J. Clark Johnstone to Corrington Gill, memo: "Subject: Report on Mobile Alabama," July 26, 1943, box 33, Records of the Committee for Congested Production Areas, RG 212 (National Archives); "Labor Market Problems in the Ship and Boatbuilding and Repair Industry," Feb. 24, 1943, box 1, Records of the War Manpower Commission, RG 211 (National Archives); Agnes E. Meyer, *Journey through Chaos* (New York, 1944), 202. From August 1939 to December 1941, the cost of living in Mobile grew by 18.1%, compared to 14.4% in Detroit, 12.1% in San Francisco, and 9.8% in New York City. "Analysis of Increases in Living Costs, August 1939 to December 1941," *Monthly Labor Review*, 54 (April 1942), 834.

⁹ E. M. Williams to Philip Murray, March 21, 1942, series V, box 57, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; Williams to Leon Henderson, May 12, 1942, *ibid.*; "Housing for War," *Fortune*, 26 (Oct. 1942), 190, 193; *Mobile Press Register*, Feb. 8, 1942, p. 12; "Labor Market Developments Report for Mobile, Alabama," Oct. 7, 1943, box 3, Records of the Bureau of Employment Security, RG 183 (National Archives).

Virtually all observers agreed that even as more workers became available, the shipyards continued to operate at a fraction of their capacity. Management and union spokesmen estimated that the labor force was “working at 40 percent of efficiency,” and the latter in particular blamed the problem on “cumulative worker fatigue.” As the president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) Central Trades Council put it, “You work 10 hours a day, seven days a week. Then you fight your way through Mobile’s jammed streets to a boardinghouse and sleep in a ‘hot’ bed that someone on the night shift just got out of. Or you drive, in the dark, 50 miles to Pascagoula or 78 miles to Brewton, and reverse the process in the morning. . . . Just ask a shipyard manager what [this] does to his production records.”¹⁰

In these circumstances, the United States Employment Service lamented that even the shipyards’ high wages could not entirely offset “all the inconveniences and impossibilities” that characterized life in wartime Mobile. According to longtime residents of the city, however, much of the problem lay with the migrants themselves, whom they characterized as “the lowest type of poor whites . . . [who] prefer to live in shacks and go barefoot.” This class and cultural prejudice was so widespread that it became part of the folklore of the home front. “It must be said in Mobile’s defense,” Meyer wrote in the *Washington Post*, “that the city has an overwhelming influx of the worst type of warworkers to be found anywhere.” Not only in Mobile but throughout the Gulf area, “there is a type of warworker from the country districts of Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Alabama, the like of which I have never seen anywhere else.” Meyer found “the wild specimens of sixteen and seventeen years . . . from the mountain areas” particularly “ferocious” and “unreliable.” “Either we pull these people up,” she warned, “or they will pull the rest of the Nation down.”¹¹

Although the rate of population increase was much greater among whites than among blacks, the number of African Americans in Mobile grew from just over 29,000 in 1940 to about 45,000 in 1950, with much of the growth coming during the war years.¹² But many of the government reports and journalistic portraits either ignored or gave short shrift to black Mobilians, whether they were natives of the city or wartime migrants from the rural South. In the common parlance of the times, “warworkers” were white and usually male, while “the negroes,” when they were recognized at all, were a special and exogenous phenomenon. But given the harsh and enduring realities of a separate but unequal society, all of the problems

¹⁰ “Developing Situation—War Production Area, Mobile, Alabama,” Oct. 21, 1942, box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice; *Mobile Press Register*, Feb. 8, 1942, p. 12.

¹¹ United States Employment Service for Alabama, “Resurvey of the Employment Situation in the Mobile Area of Alabama,” Sept. 29, 1942, box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice; Selden Menefee, *Assignment: U.S.A.* (New York, 1943), 53, quoting a “Mobile teacher”; Meyer, *Journey through Chaos*, 197, 199, 210.

¹² McLaurin and Thomason, *Mobile*, 128. According to a government report, “although there is an absolute increase in the Negro population for [the] Mobile [area,] the non-whites decreased from 36.4% of the population in 1940 to 27.6% in 1944. In other words, there was an increase [of] 87.7% in the white population as compared with 26.7% in the non-white population.” “Employment [in Mobile],” n.d., box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice.

encountered by whites were also felt by blacks, only much more so. In the realm of health care, for example, a federal report in February 1942 observed that there were “few accommodations for Negroes”—perhaps 55 hospital beds for a population that, in the city of Mobile alone, must have exceeded 30,000 and was perhaps much larger. In the realm of housing, where the rate of increase of rental prices in Mobile was more than seven times the national average, black Mobilians were doubly victimized—by the general increase in rents and the more acute shortage of housing in the black community. The National Housing Agency allotted 14,098 units for whites in Mobile, but only 934 for blacks. According to the journalist Selden Menefee, the whites’ housing projects, as unattractive as they were, offered “far better living conditions than [the] ancient slums” in which blacks remained confined. Leaders of the African-American community complained that their constituents were forced to live in two-room houses that were “not fit for animals”—one investigator found twenty-seven people using “one toilet and one hydrant”—and that rents were so high “they can’t go any higher.” When Menefee asked white Mobilians about the best way to eliminate these “ancient slums,” some suggested “a good rousing fire.”¹³

The problem of greatest concern to black Mobilians was employment opportunity, and here the key to their fate was the shipyards. The two largest yards employed more than 40,000 workers during the war. Alabama Dry Dock expanded its labor force from about 1,000 in the late 1930s to nearly 30,000 in May 1943. The Gulf Shipbuilding Corporation began production in 1940 and had more than 10,000 employees by the end of 1942. Forty-five miles from Mobile, but still within commuting distance of the city for those with automobiles, the Ingalls Shipbuilding Corporation commenced operations in Pascagoula, Mississippi, in 1938 and employed more than 9,000 workers by the end of the war.¹⁴

For blacks, each of the three yards presented a somewhat different pattern of opportunity and discrimination. In Pascagoula, Ingalls eventually hired more than 1,000 black workers, who constituted more than 10 percent of the company’s work force. But there were persistent complaints that blacks were relegated to unskilled labor or paid at unskilled rates even in those rare instances when they were upgraded to skilled positions. Alabama Dry Dock, according to one knowledgeable observer, had “the best record [among yards] on the Gulf coast for giving employment to Negroes.” But although the company had traditionally maintained a labor force that was about 20 percent African-American and eventually employed nearly 7,000 black

¹³ Office of War Information, “Excerpts of Report of Field Representative for Alabama: Negro Situation,” Feb. 24, 1942, box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice; “Analysis of Increases in Living Costs, August 1939 to December 1941,” 838; Johnstone to Gill, memo: “Subject: Report on Mobile, Alabama”; Menefee, *Assignment: U.S.A.*, 52; Erma Appleby, “Y.W.C.A. Interpretation of ‘The Negro Housing Survey,’” [Aug.? 1942], box 4, Office Files of Commissioner Charles A. Baumhauer, Administrative Files of City Commissioners, RG 7 (Mobile Municipal Archives, Mobile, Ala.). See also *Mobile Weekly Advocate*, Aug. 8, 1942, p. 2.

¹⁴ “Pascagoula, Mississippi,” Aug. 20, 1941, box 473, Office Files of John Beecher, 1941–45, Division of Field Operations, Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice; Cy W. Record to Robert C. Weaver, memo: “Violence against Negro Workers in Ingalls Shipbuilding Company at Pascagoula,” April 18, 1942, *ibid.*



Employees of the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company stop work for five minutes in memory of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who died on April 12, 1945. Note the youth of some of the workers. Are they the “wild specimens . . . from the mountain areas” whom contemporaries identified as “ferocious” and “unreliable”? *Courtesy University of South Alabama Archives.*

men and women, all of these workers—even men with many years’ experience at “the Alabama”—were confined to unskilled and semiskilled positions. Off the record, ADDSCO spokesmen informed a federal official that “under no circumstances would [they] ever employ a Negro in a skilled capacity.”¹⁵

But the most intransigent obstacle to the employment and promotion of African Americans was the Gulf Shipbuilding Corporation. John Beecher of the FEPC interviewed a company vice-president who “professed to believe that work stoppages might develop from the employment of Negroes even in unskilled jobs at Gulf.”

¹⁵ Lucy Randolph Mason to Van Gelder, Jan. 16, 1943, box 57, series V, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; John Beecher, “Field Report on Mobile, Alabama, with special reference to employment of Negroes in shipyards,” Feb. 13, 1942, p. 2, box 471, Division of Field Operations, Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice; John Beecher, “Persons from whom information has been secured on present field trip and reports of interviews,” Feb. 15, 1942, p. 9, *ibid.*

The company spokesman pointed out that hiring black workers for unskilled jobs would soon result in the demand to upgrade them to semiskilled and skilled positions, "thus leading to additional difficulties." So, he concluded, "it was much simpler not to hire them in the first place." As late as September 1942, the United States Employment Service reported that "the percentage of negroes employed by this company is infinitesimal, the most recent report showing only 20 out of a total employment of 10,505." However, even Gulf was compelled to adjust to the realities of a tight wartime labor market. The company eventually employed about 700 "nonwhites," but it is unlikely that any of them worked in skilled jobs.¹⁶

Overall, then, Mobile serves as a vivid example of a pattern common throughout much of the urban South. Especially in the early stages of the war, Gulf Shipbuilding's near-absolute refusal to hire African Americans, and ADDSCO's decision to give preference to white in-migrants over the existing black labor supply, helped create the chaos that engulfed the city. While newly employed whites slept in "hot" beds, or in tents, automobiles, and even chicken houses, unemployed black residents of Mobile remained so, and experienced black shipyard workers were denied the upgrading that would have allowed them to provide more adequately for their families. In other words, at least some of Mobile's fabled labor shortage was artificial; some of its monumental overcrowding, unnecessary. Racism was—to a significant degree—responsible for the city's emergence as the quintessential "congested production area."¹⁷

The contribution of racism to Mobile's multifaceted crisis was also dramatically evident in relation to the employment of white women, who were first hired in the shipyards in July 1942. By September ADDSCO reported that nearly 100 women were working as welders. Soon they were also employed in other skilled occupations, ranging from burner to boilermaker to machinist. Their numbers increased dramatically over the next two years. By December 1944, women constituted 11.6 percent of the ADDSCO labor force, more than 3,000 workers. Although they achieved their greatest fame in welding, a rapidly expanding occupation that required relatively little training, nearly half of the women actually held traditionally female jobs such as clerical work, which—in the shipyards—had been closed to them before the war. Wherever they worked, whether in offices or on the "ways" building ships, the increase in their pay was extraordinary. One woman, an in-migrant from northern Al-

¹⁶ Beecher, "Persons from whom information has been secured on present field trip," 11–12; United States Employment Service for Alabama, "Resurvey of the Employment Situation in the Mobile Area of Alabama"; "ES-270 Employment Figures: Yards Showing No Change in Run-out Schedules. . . ." [1945], box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, Records of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice. The economist Herbert Northrup, the most knowledgeable authority on employment in shipbuilding, pointed out that as of March 1943 minority workers were employed in only "19 of the 191 skilled and semiskilled occupations considered typical of the industry." See War Manpower Commission, Bureau of Manpower Utilization, "Industry Manning Table for Ship Repair and Conversion Yards," July 1944, box 384, *ibid.* The pattern in Mobile was even worse than in the nation as a whole.

¹⁷ Herbert R. Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York, 1944), 216; Dos Passos, *State of the Nation*, 93; Merl E. Reed, "The FEPC, the Black Worker, and the Southern Shipyards," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 74 (Autumn 1975), 464–65.



Women welders at Alabama Dry Dock. The company praised their work and their femininity.
Courtesy University of South Alabama Archives.

abama, first got a job as a salesclerk in a Mobile department store, where she was paid \$12.50 for a forty-eight hour week. “That seemed mighty poor pay in comparison with the shipyards,” she recalled. “So I went to Alabama [Dry Dock] and got a job.” There, as a chief timekeeper, she often worked a seventy-hour week and brought home as much as \$61.20 a week.¹⁸

John LeFlore charged that Alabama Dry Dock and other wartime employers hired white women because they were unwilling to put trained black men in skilled occupations. Although the constantly expanding need for skilled workers and the persistently high turnover rates in defense production eventually compelled employers to hire both white women and blacks by the thousands, LeFlore’s accusation was largely

¹⁸ Mary Martha Thomas, *Riveting and Rationing in Dixie: Alabama Women and the Second World War* (Tuscaloosa, 1987), 41–43, 77; *Mobile Register*, Sept. 13, 1942, p. 1; Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver during World War II and Reconversion* (Albany, 1990), 14–15; Morris Markey, “What Will Become of the Dispossessed?” *McCall’s*, 73 (Jan. 1946), 70, 72.

correct. In September 1942, when the Mobile Chamber of Commerce and various government agencies launched their high-profile campaign to entice women into the labor market, one of the campaign's spokesmen declared, "We have scraped the bottom of the barrel as far as men are concerned, and women are going to have to take over." At the same time, a representative of the War Manpower Commission called for the employment of the young, the old, the physically handicapped, and others who in peacetime were at the margins of the work force. But in the code language of the time, all of these categories meant "white." Black men and women, who were very much in the labor market, were largely excluded from the drive to train and employ skilled workers. Black women outnumbered their white counterparts in the work force by a margin of two to one, but not a single black woman achieved skilled or even semiskilled status in any of Mobile's war industries.¹⁹

Clearly, in the eyes of employers and other members of Mobile's power elite, the hiring of white women could be rationalized as a temporary phenomenon that would not undermine the system of social relations in the Jim Crow South. Although they no doubt faced discrimination and hostility when they entered traditionally male occupations, white women were nonetheless praised for doing a "swell job"; the public was assured again and again, by means ranging from photo essays to beauty contests, that "a woman may become a welder and retain her feminine beauty"; and everyone—except the majority of the women workers—assumed that these "Rosies" were only pinch-hitting for the duration. Just as clearly, however, whites all along the social spectrum regarded the employment of African Americans in skilled wartime occupations as subversive of the existing social order. Indeed, the hiring of white women imported the sexual taboos of segregation into the workplace and thus made it much more difficult to hire and upgrade black men. Even when FEPC directives and practical necessity forced Alabama Dry Dock and other employers to upgrade blacks to skilled jobs, they did it with as little publicity as possible, never publicly praising African Americans for their substantial contribution to the war effort on the home front. In fact, when black workers completed the construction of a tanker in record time in 1944, the very rumor of this affront to the canons of white supremacy nearly provoked a second major race riot at the Alabama.²⁰

John LeFlore and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile

At a level beyond their full comprehension, the people of the South were caught up in an irreversible process of economic and demographic change. As the engine of the southern economy shifted from cotton agriculture to the production of ships and planes, iron and steel, oil and chemicals, labor surplus gave way to labor scarcity, and rural blacks and whites migrated to the burgeoning centers of industrial

¹⁹ J. L. LeFlore to Roy Wilkins, Oct. 10, 1942, box C3, group II, NAACP Papers; *Mobile Register*, Sept. 13, 1942, p. 1; Thomas, *Riveting and Rationing in Dixie*, 29–30, 45, 53.

²⁰ Thomas, *Riveting and Rationing in Dixie*, 30, 54–55, 58, 77; George L. Cleere, "Report of Anticipated Racial Trouble at Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company, Mobile, Alabama, May 31, 1944," June 8, 1944, box SG12501, Governor Sparks Papers (Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery); *Chicago De-*

production. The earthquake at the base of the South's racialized labor system inevitably shook the elaborate superstructure of Jim Crow, and African Americans began to push all the harder against the boundaries of racial containment.²¹

The principal force in the escalating struggle for black equality in Mobile was the local branch of the NAACP. As the organization aggressively expanded its efforts to register voters, widen employment opportunity, and obtain adequate public services for the city's black community, it grew from a few hundred members at the end of the thirties to more than fifteen hundred in 1944. A letter from John LeFlore, the local executive secretary, to the NAACP national office provides a vivid sense of the range of the branch's activities, and of the volatile climate in which it operated. In August 1942, LeFlore reported that "a Negro soldier was killed here just last night by a white city bus operator, . . . shipyards continue to discriminate against us, a woman was beaten by local police officers, a Negro man had an eye knocked out by the local police, two white youths attempted to rape two Negro girls, . . . two Negro men who have protracted injuries complain against compensation cut-off, a colored girl arrested on bus because she refused to get up and give a white woman only available seat." These, said LeFlore, "are a few of the many problems that I am presently looking into."²²

Although few whites were prepared to acknowledge it at the time, John LeFlore was already one of Mobile's most dynamic and gifted leaders; he eventually became one of the city's great success stories. He was born in Mobile in 1903, the fifth and youngest child of Doctor ("Dock") and Clara LeFlore. His father, a worker at the Louisville & Nashville Railroad freight depot, died when John was only nine months old. In spite of the loss of the family's principal breadwinner, John LeFlore graduated from high school, attended extension classes at the Mobile branch of the state teachers' college, and aspired to become a lawyer. But lack of money and soon the need to support his own family cut short his formal education. He became a letter carrier at the local post office, a position he held for "some thirty-five years." After five decades of leadership in the struggle for black equality in Mobile, he was elected to the Alabama legislature in 1975. He died in office in 1976.²³

LeFlore cofounded the Mobile branch of the NAACP in 1925 and thereafter distinguished himself as a man of great commitment, energy, and intelligence, combined with an ironclad sense of his own rectitude. His detractors called him everything from "a rank, active, Republican agitator" to a "leading proponent of radical action" and even a "Communist." At the post office, where the Ku Klux Klan reportedly had more than a few members, postal inspectors kept him under constant surveillance and issued frequent reprimands for alleged violations of the organization's

²¹ Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (New York, 1986), 236–49; Daniel, "Going among Strangers"; George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913–1945* (Baton Rouge, 1967), 699–703, 731.

²² Lucille Black to LeFlore, Nov. 6, 1944, box C3, group II, NAACP Papers; LeFlore to Prentice Thomas, Aug. 16, 1942, *ibid.*

²³ Walker B. LeFlore interview by Bruce Nelson, Oct. 5, 1991, tape (in Bruce Nelson's possession); *Mobile City Directory, 1903* (Atlanta, 1903), 587.



John LeFlore, c. 1942. *Courtesy University of South Alabama Archives.*

rules. More ominously, in 1939, "certain leading whites" allegedly threatened to have him "taken for a ride." But such opposition seemed only to galvanize him to greater activism. He bombarded the NAACP national headquarters with reports, requests, and demands, until Thurgood Marshall complained that "he has just about worried me to death" and Roy Wilkins declared that "the letters from the Mobile branch are unique in the whole country in their . . . constant criticism and reprimanding of the national office." Undeterred, LeFlore warned, "I am afraid that many loyal NAACP members may be driven to . . . cooperate with other militant Negro advancement movements and drop the NAACP, unless the Association manifests its interest in the welfare of those who are enduring hell for the cause in a more tangible way."²⁴

²⁴ McLaurin and Thomason, *Mobile*, 120; Walter White to James A. Farley, Sept. 19, 1935, box G4, group I, NAACP Papers; LeFlore to White, July 13, 1935, *ibid.*; Wilkins to LeFlore, Dec. 6, 1937, *ibid.*; Thurgood Marshall

During the war LeFlore reported that “the brave men and women of the NAACP here . . . continue to render unselfish service for the common cause . . . despite little or no appreciation from the majority of Negroes”; and he told a government investigator that black Mobilians were “not well educated and were by nature more interested in the frivolous and lighter side of life.”²⁵ In a system that offered unrelenting toil in the labor market and manifold indignities in the public sphere, many black Mobilians may well have taken refuge in “the frivolous and lighter side of life.” But it is also true that during the depression decade, even though LeFlore himself headed the Mobile division of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the NAACP was largely isolated from the significant struggles that developed among black industrial workers, especially on the city’s vitally important waterfront. When Mobile’s longshoremen, virtually all of whom were black, went on strike in 1935, they suffered a reign of terror at the hands of city policemen. One worker, who was locked up just for walking a picket line, testified, “I was sick at the time and they kept me in jail 25 days without a doctor. Nearly every day while I was in the Guard House they would take Gray Page [a veteran of more than twenty years on the docks], question and beat him.” But the NAACP did not intervene in such “labor disputes,” which pitted workers against employers but also sections of the black labor force against each other. For more than four years, longshoremen were embroiled in internal and interunion quarrels that kept the waterfront in turmoil. They eventually voted, in a closely contested election, to remain in the AFL rather than affiliate with the CIO. Thereafter, they made significant progress toward transforming Local 1410 of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) from a “semi-company union” to an important focal point of the black community’s economic and social life. Meanwhile, black shipyard workers chose to join the CIO, and they became a major force within the new local of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers at Alabama Dry Dock. In his relative isolation from these and other, less formal centers of black working-class life, LeFlore tended to see a black Mobile characterized by a heroic vanguard of “educated” and self-disciplined activists; a passive, even “frivolous,” majority; and a dangerous subculture of “Negro ‘bad men’” whose violent way of life was not only a tragic reflection of the larger system of segregation and inequality but a threat to the physical well-being of respectable members of the community.²⁶

to White, “Memorandum, Re: Letter from LeFlore,” Dec. 22, 1938, box G5, *ibid.*; M. J. Jackson to Thomas, Aug. 8, 1942, box C3, group II, *ibid.*; LeFlore to Wilkins, Oct. 10, 1942, *ibid.*

²⁵ “History of the Mobile Branch of the N.A.A.C.P.” [1942], box C3, group II, NAACP Papers; George L. Davis to the Executive Officer, memo: “Subject: Racial Relations,” March 11, 1942, box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice. On a black working-class subculture unashamedly inclined toward pleasure, see Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History*, 80 (June 1993), 75–112.

²⁶ “Local Officials of Mobile Division Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters,” [1939], box 1, John L. LeFlore Papers (University of South Alabama Archives, Mobile, Ala.); reports of Eli Ray and Gray Page, n.d., International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union, Organizing Files, box 14, Records of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (Anne Rand Research Library, International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union, San Francisco, Calif.); Bruce Nelson, “Class and Race in the Crescent City: The ILWU, from San Francisco

With the coming of World War II, LeFlore concerned himself much more with the lives of black workers and the affairs of their unions, and he was relentless in demanding employment opportunities for black Mobilians in the rapidly expanding war production facilities. Overall, his views were strikingly in accord with those expressed by other blacks around the nation who were outraged at the contradiction between wartime rhetoric and reality, and who complained that while “we’re expected to give our blood to fight Hitlerism . . . we’re faced with old man Jim Crow everywhere we turn.” When a government representative interviewed him in March 1942, LeFlore declared that “the Negro is the real American, he is patriotic, he wants Democracy but has none of it, and he does not feel like fighting for Democracy until Democracy becomes more of a reality to him.” He said, moreover, that “three-fifths of the Negroes with whom he had talked felt they had no part or interest in the war.” As he spoke, he was surrounded by officials of the International Longshoremen’s Association who, according to the interviewer, “nodded their heads as an endorsement” of his views.²⁷

While Mobile’s black citizens demanded equality in politics, housing, health care, and, above all, employment opportunity, they also began—in less programmatic but no less significant ways—to contest their exclusion and subordination in the crowded, increasingly chaotic, realm of public space. In so doing, they continually encountered not only the old intransigence of white Mobilians who equated acquiescence in the status quo with racial “harmony” but also the volatile insecurities of white migrants from the rural South, for whom the fixed reality of black subordination was often the only sure sign of their own claim to a measure of social status. Katherine Archibald, a close observer of race relations in the shipbuilding industry, noted that “white workers in the shipyards . . . did not need to look far to discover Negro encroachments upon what they had known as secure privilege. . . . They could feel the stirrings of the Negro and his discontent beneath the very ground they walked on.” Archibald’s comment was based upon her experience at the Moore Dry Dock in Oakland, California. But it applies with uncanny accuracy to the sensibilities of whites in Mobile, some of whom responded with acts of random violence against blacks whose very presence—on the job, the streets, and the buses—now seemed to symbolize a threat to the norms of America’s apartheid.²⁸

The most common focal point of racial tension was the public transportation system, where, according to one white patron, “you have paid your fare to be transported to work, only to have some negro hanging over you” with “his body touching you from time to time”—or worse, “hanging over the white women and girls.” In

to New Orleans,” in *The CIO’s Left-Led Unions*, ed. Steve Rosswurm (New Brunswick, 1992), 27–28, 36, 41–42; LeFlore to Wilkins, April 6, 1935, box G4, group I, NAACP Papers; LeFlore to White, April 8, 1935, *ibid.*

²⁷ Charles S. Johnson and Associates, *To Stem This Tide: A Survey of Racial Tension Areas in the United States* (Boston, 1943), 34; Davis to the Executive Officer, March 11, 1942, box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice.

²⁸ Katherine Archibald, *Wartime Shipyard: A Study in Social Disunity* (Berkeley, 1947), 69; John LeFlore, “White Fined \$100 for Slapping Negro,” *Chicago Defender*, clipping, [1944], box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice.

these unfamiliar circumstances, LeFlore charged, blacks were frequently the victims of “insult, humiliation and even bodily harm.” While LeFlore’s statement is no doubt true, it is unlikely that the interaction between blacks and whites was always as one sided as he implied. For in Mobile, as in other cities throughout the South and much of the nation, buses and other forms of public conveyance became an important arena for testing the boundaries of racial separation and forging a new and less deferential etiquette of race relations. In New York City, Seldon Menefee found “a new inclination [among blacks] to stand their ground in the crowded subways.” In Norfolk, Virginia, an official of the Virginia Electric and Power Company lamented that because “the Negro . . . is making good money now and feels that he is as good as the white man. . . . There are fights on the street cars and busses almost every day.” In Birmingham, Alabama, a white streetcar conductor watching blacks crowd onto his trolley warned, “Right there . . . is where our next war will break out, and it may start before this one is over!”²⁹

The public transportation system provided the context for one of the most notorious acts of racial violence in wartime Mobile. On August 15, 1942, a white bus driver shot and killed a black soldier who was stationed at Mobile’s Brookley Field as the soldier was getting off the bus. Numerous racial incidents on buses preceded the killing of Private Henry Williams by twenty-nine-year-old Grover Chandler. Occasionally, blacks openly refused to abide by the city’s segregated seating ordinances and were arrested. But more commonly black riders, even those who had no intention of violating the complex and often capriciously enforced bus regulations, were the targets of verbal abuse by white drivers, many of whom—according to a government report—had “only recently migrated into Mobile from upper state Mississippi and Alabama” and were “extremely anti-Negro.” By special arrangement with the police department, bus drivers routinely carried firearms, and whether they were “fresh from the rural areas” or longtime residents of Mobile, they seem to have regarded themselves as frontline defenders of segregation.³⁰

The fatal encounter between Private Williams and the white bus driver was a vivid and tragic symbol of the larger confrontation between African Americans who were determined to compel recognition of their humanity and white Americans who insisted on the maintenance of long-standing patterns of deference and subordina-

²⁹ Walton H. Craft to Chauncey Sparks, Sept. 6, 1944, box SG12491, Governor Sparks Papers; LeFlore to Wilkins, Sept. 1, 1942, box C3, group II, NAACP Papers; Menefee, *Assignment: U.S.A.*, 25; Office of Government Reports, “Excerpts from Special Report of State Director for Virginia: Racial Discrimination,” April 29, 1942, box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice; Robert J. Norrell, “Labor at the Ballot Box: Alabama Politics from the New Deal to the Dixiecrat Movement,” *Journal of Southern History*, 57 (May 1991), 227. On the conflict generated by the indignities of bus segregation in wartime Birmingham, Alabama, see Robin D. G. Kelley, “The Black Poor and the Politics of Opposition in a New South City, 1929–1970,” in *The “Underclass” Debate: Views from History*, ed. Michael B. Katz (Princeton, 1993), 305–9. On Norfolk, Virginia, where blacks mounted one of the first successful legal challenges to the discriminatory manner in which bus segregation was implemented, see Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 189–92.

³⁰ *Mobile Press Register*, Jan. 11, 1942, p. 9; *ibid.*, Aug. 16, 1942, p. 1; LeFlore to Thomas, Aug. 16, 1942, box C3, group II, NAACP Papers; “Some Problems of the Negro in Mobile,” Oct. 9, 1942, box 4, Project Files, 1940–1945, Division of Program Analysis and Development, Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, RG 83 (National Archives).

tion. Apparently, Williams greeted the driver when he boarded the bus, but the driver ignored him. Then, according to one report:

the bus met another city bus and the drivers stopped and engaged in a conversation. The Negro soldier interrupted the conversation and said that he was in a hurry to get to Brookley Field and wish[ed] that the driver would proceed. . . . This was resented by the bus driver and a controversy developed in which the soldier was heard to say, "You had better go on and drive your bus and leave me alone." The argument continued and later the driver got up and struck the soldier three times with his pistol.

Williams then grabbed his laundry bag and started to get off the bus, but he inadvertently dropped the bag as he was departing. When he turned to pick it up, the driver shot him three times—in the head, the neck, and the arm. He died "instantly."³¹

The murder of Henry Williams almost led to a "Mobile bus boycott" more than thirteen years before the events in Montgomery, Alabama, that brought Martin Luther King, Jr., to the fore and launched the direct-action phase of the postwar civil rights movement. Eight days after Williams's death the NAACP held a mass meeting in a local church to discuss possible means of alleviating, "in a lawful way, the bus problems affecting the races in Mobile." The gathering gave evidence of a new willingness to rely upon direct action, along with a quite traditional posture in addressing white Mobilians. The meeting considered a "walk-to-work, walk-to-church, and walk-to-shop campaign" but held any boycott plans in abeyance until representatives of the black community could negotiate with officials of the bus company. A statement issued by LeFlore and six other community leaders proposed that "an interracial meeting for white and colored people be arranged in the hope that the policy of the Golden Rule may be advanced. Those present promised that the negro race will adhere strictly to a policy of courtesy, politeness and fair play toward other people."³²

Although the NAACP's language was a model of courtesy and restraint, much of the black community was apparently "deeply aroused" over the killing of Private Williams, and planning for the boycott appears to have been serious and thorough. At least two leaflets were issued calling upon "The Public" to attend mass meetings to choose a course of action, and LeFlore informed Roy Wilkins that "we are registering truck[s] and automobiles for the purpose of using [them] to convey workers to and from their places of employment." In the aftermath of the shooting, the local NAACP took in more than a hundred new members, and a special committee of the organization prepared a list of seven demands for the bus company.

³¹ Ben L. Owens, "Mobile Housing Study: Interview with the secretary of the Mobile branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," [1942], box 11, Rensis Likert Collection (Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor); *Mobile Press Register*, Aug. 16, 1942, p. 1. I am grateful to Marshall Stevenson for bringing the Owens report to my attention. It is a draft of the document, "Some Problems of the Negro in Mobile," cited in note 30.

³² *Mobile Register*, Aug. 24, 1942, p. 8; *ibid.*, Sept. 2, 1942, p. 14.

They included the immediate disarming of all bus drivers; the impartial enforcement of the law mandating segregation on buses; the use of black drivers on lines where the patronage was overwhelmingly black, including the one on which Williams was killed; requirements that bus drivers display their names in a conspicuous place and not only be “courteous to and considerate of all patrons alike” but discontinue “the abuse and unprovoked insults to Colored patrons”; and, finally, the immediate dismissal of the bus driver charged with Williams’s murder.³³

The boycott never occurred, though, largely because the company promised to implement five of the seven demands. It agreed to disarm all bus drivers, to enforce the segregation laws equitably, and to mandate courteous treatment of black patrons by drivers. But it refused to hire black drivers or to fire Grover Chandler, who was defended in court by the company’s lawyer. At a mass meeting attended by about a thousand persons, those assembled decided by a “close vote” to defer a decision on the boycott until the NAACP had the opportunity to evaluate the company’s implementation of its promises. With the formal adoption of a wait-and-see attitude, talk of a mass mobilization apparently faded, even though, nine months later, a National Urban League report on Mobile identified racial tension in public transportation as a continuing “sore spot”; and more than a year later LeFlore was complaining that bus drivers were again carrying firearms, especially on lines where black passengers were in the majority.³⁴

The AFL and Race

The potential for change afforded by the war was greatest in the realm of employment, and here several major institutional forces could play a vital role in helping or hindering the struggle for black equality. The President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice was perhaps the most supportive voice.³⁵ In November 1942 the FEPC ordered Alabama Dry Dock, Gulf Shipbuilding, and other Mobile employers to hire black workers and upgrade them to skilled positions. They were slow to comply. Even when they professed good intentions, they were likely to point to their white employees, the unions that represented them, and the requirements imposed by collective bargaining agreements as major obstacles to more than token compliance with FEPC directives. Thus, when LeFlore and his allies in the black community confronted the issue of equal employment opportunity in Mobile, what could they expect from the AFL and the CIO?

³³ LeFlore to Wilkins, Sept. 1, 1942, box C3, group II, NAACP Papers; “Important Announcement to the Public!” [Aug. 1942], *ibid.*; “Special Announcement to the Public!” [Aug. 1942], *ibid.*; M. J. Jackson and LeFlore to Byron E. Pickering, Aug. 26, 1942, *ibid.*

³⁴ *Mobile Register*, Sept. 1, 1942, p. 5; National Urban League, “Summary of a Report on the Race Riots in the Alabama Dry Dock . . . Yards,” 10; LeFlore to Pickering, Oct. 16, 1943, box 1, LeFlore Papers.

³⁵ The best source is Merl E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941–1946* (Baton Rouge, 1991). The top personnel of other federal agencies in the South often shared the white supremacist views that pervaded the region, and thus they were—at best—reluctant to make an issue of racial discrimination in employment.

Over the years, many unions affiliated with the AFL had earned a reputation as aggressive and unashamed practitioners of racial exclusion and segregation. Some excluded blacks by constitutional provision; others achieved the same end by tacit consent. Most unions that organized black workers did so reluctantly, as a matter of practical necessity, and then segregated their black membership in separate—and subordinate—locals. To be sure, the federation leadership routinely expressed its opposition to racial discrimination. President William Green of the AFL declared it “a cardinal principle with us that there shall be no discrimination against any man because of race, creed, color or nationality.” But when confronted with manifold examples of blatant racism within AFL unions, Green and other spokesmen for the organization invariably pointed to the voluntary character of the federation, the autonomy of AFL affiliates, and the need to use education rather than coercion to bring about change on this volatile issue.³⁶

For some sectors of the black working class in the South, there was another, more positive side to the AFL. It was most apparent on the docks of Gulf Coast port cities such as Galveston, Houston, New Orleans, and Mobile, where blacks either dominated longshoring or had achieved an equitable share of the work after many years of conflict and accommodation with whites. Black longshoremen controlled their own “separate but equal” organizations, and they staunchly resisted calls for the merger of black and white ILA locals. And there were other AFL unions—the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, for example—where black workers found it possible to work toward improving their standard of living while exercising their “strong preference for autonomy.”³⁷

Shipyard workers, however, came under the jurisdiction of organizations affiliated with the AFL Metal Trades Council, which included some of the senior federation’s most notoriously racist unions. The International Association of Machinists, for example, continued to exclude blacks through its initiation ritual, as did the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders (IBB), which claimed by far the widest jurisdiction in the shipyards. But in the face of the CIO challenge, the IBB’s 1937 convention had authorized the union’s executive council to create Jim Crow auxiliary locals for black workers. According to the economist Herbert Northrup, “Members of Negro auxiliaries pay the same dues as do white members, but in every other conceivable manner they are discriminated against.” The black

³⁶ For William Green’s remark, see International Longshoremen’s Association, *Proceedings of the Thirty-Second Convention* (New York, 1939), 29. On the racial practices of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), see Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York, 1931); Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions* (Chapel Hill, 1939); Herbert Hill, “The Racial Practices of Organized Labor—The Age of Gompers and After,” in *Employment, Race, and Poverty*, ed. Arthur M. Ross and Herbert Hill (New York, 1967), 365–402; Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1971); and Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875–1920* (Ithaca, 1986).

³⁷ Arnesen, “Following the Color Line of Labor”; Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*; Nelson, “Class and Race in the Crescent City”; Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*; William H. Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925–1937* (Urbana, 1977); Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, 1989), 290.

auxiliaries existed at the sufferance of the executive council and were under the direct supervision of the nearest white local; they were not permitted their own business agents or their own grievance committees; they had no voice in union conventions or other policy-making bodies. "Worst of all," Northrup concluded, "*Negroes may not be employed as apprentices [the traditional avenue of entry to the skilled trades], and no Negro may be promoted to a higher classification unless he receives first, the approval of his auxiliary local, second, the approval of the supervising white local, and third, the approval of the international union president!* It is surely a serious question whether an auxiliary with such bylaws constitutes an improvement over complete exclusion." In testimony before the FEPC, Northrup called the IBB policies "the worst he had ever seen." More bluntly, black workers in San Francisco likened the IBB to "a Nazi 'labor front.'"³⁸

In the Mobile shipyards, the presence of the CIO Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers forced the AFL to consider the sensibilities of black workers, at least where it faced the possibility of National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) representation elections and where the votes of black workers might determine the outcome. Thus, in January 1942, the city's Central Trades Council passed a resolution declaring its opposition to racial discrimination and calling for the training and employment of black workers in the defense industries. When FEPC investigators voiced skepticism about the sincerity of the resolution, Patrick Ryan, an AFL organizer assigned to Mobile, angrily offered "to prove to you that the Mobile [Central Trades Council] meant what it said."³⁹

However, apart from Ryan and, significantly, LeFlore, virtually no one in Mobile seemed to give much credence to the AFL resolution. Among well-informed participants—including shipyard managers and local, state, and federal officials concerned with employment—there was a consensus that insofar as the resolution was meant to apply at all, it was only to Alabama Dry Dock, where there were substantial numbers of black workers and the AFL was hoping to dislodge the CIO through an NLRB election. A vice-president at Gulf Shipbuilding dismissed the resolution as "mere words," and the area director of the National Youth Administration saw it as "a purely political move designed to win Negro support away from the CIO at ADDSCO." Even an AFL representative, the black business agent of Negro Carpenters' Local 92, "expressed no great confidence in the Trades Council resolution, in view of his own experience" with white AFL carpenters who were attempting to deny members of his local access to construction work in the shipyards.⁴⁰

³⁸ Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro*, 214; Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 272, 279. On AFL racial policies in the shipbuilding industry, see Reed, "FEPC, the Black Worker, and the Southern Shipyards," 446–67. See also Herbert Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System: Race, Work, and the Law* (1977; Madison, 1985), 185–208; and William H. Harris, "Federal Intervention in Union Discrimination: FEPC and West Coast Shipyards during World War II," *Labor History*, 22 (Summer 1981), 325–47.

³⁹ "Resolution," Jan. 21, 1942, attached to Ida Lee Merchant to Mark Ethridge, Jan. 22, 1942, box 471, Division of Field Operations, Records of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice; Patrick Ryan to Frank P. Fenton, Feb. 13, 1942, *ibid.*; Beecher, "Field Report on Mobile, Alabama, with special reference to employment of Negroes in shipyards," 1.

⁴⁰ Beecher, "Persons from whom information has been secured on present field trip," 11, 14.



Black workers at Alabama Dry Dock. Until mid-1943, even the experienced shipyard workers among them were confined entirely to unskilled jobs.

Courtesy University of South Alabama Archives.

The real test of the AFL's stance on the employment and upgrading of black workers would come, not on paper, but in the organization's practice in shipyards where it had collective bargaining agreements—namely, Gulf Shipbuilding in Mobile and Ingalls in Pascagoula. When John Beecher of the FEPC investigated employment patterns in Mobile in February 1942, he found that among 5,000 workers at Gulf Shipbuilding there were virtually no blacks, except for a few men variously identified as “porters,” “janitors,” and “ditch diggers.” (Their share of the yard's labor force, said *Fortune*, was “exactly .0013.”) Beecher was well aware that Gulf had a contract with Mobile's Metal Trades Council, which had endorsed the recent AFL resolution opposing job discrimination. When he was invited to address a meeting of the council, he had the temerity to ask the assembled delegates if the resolution applied to Gulf. He was confronted with a “boiling over of indignation.” According to his report, several delegates stated emphatically that no blacks would go to work at Gulf until “*all* Negroes in Mobile renounced the CIO.” And Jasper N. Davis, international assistant president of the IBB from Kansas City and “generalissimo” of the AFL organizational campaign at ADDSCO, declared that he “‘smelled a nigger in the woodpile’ (his words) in [Beecher's] coming down and asking questions about Gulf,”

where, he asserted, “there could be no discrimination since there were no Negroes.” Davis complained that the “ungrateful ‘darkies’ of Mobile . . . were staying away in droves” from the auxiliary that the Boilermakers had established for them. Insofar as the Gulf example was representative of AFL race relations, it was clear that the self-proclaimed House of Labor would not expand the job opportunities of black workers. On the contrary, in the South and much of the rest of the nation, it would remain a formidable obstacle to the economic aspirations of black Americans.⁴¹

The IUMSWA in Mobile: “Labor on the March”?

But what about the CIO? Was it—indeed, could it have been—the tribune of black workers and a “lamp of democracy” in the South? In Mobile, the CIO’s membership was mainly white and overwhelmingly concentrated in the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America. The IUMSWA had been organized in 1933 by workers at the New York Shipbuilding Corporation in Camden, New Jersey, and had spread rapidly to other yards on the East Coast after a successful strike against New York Ship in 1934. From the very inception of the union, the IUMSWA’s legitimacy was contested by the eighteen craft unions that claimed jurisdiction in shipbuilding and repair yards. When the AFL Executive Council branded it a “dual” organization and denied its application for a charter, the union turned to the CIO, which welcomed it as an affiliate in November 1936.⁴²

The IUMSWA established a presence in Mobile in the winter of 1937 and had nearly 400 members by late April, when the union’s president, John Green, came to the city and issued a formal charter to Local 18. Soon, however, local organizer Ben Harper was reporting that his next task was to “make union members out of those already signed up.” In mid-July he informed Philip Van Gelder, secretary-treasurer of the IUMSWA, that of about 600 workers who had joined the union, nearly half had never paid a single month’s dues. This problem was compounded by the devastating impact of the Roosevelt recession. Over a period of several years, correspondence from Mobile indicated that employment at ADDSCO was at best irregular. In October 1937, the local reported “practically no work to speak of”; in May 1938, there was “one hell of a slump” and no one had “any money to do anything with”; three months later the men were making “just barely . . . enough to live on, much less pay dues.” Ironically, in the midst of this crisis, the union managed to win an NLRB representation election against the Mobile Metal Trades Council, and after much stalling the company signed a collective bargaining agreement with Local 18

⁴¹ Beecher, “Field Report on Mobile, Alabama, with special reference to employment of Negroes in shipyards,” 4–5; “The Deep South Looks Up,” *Fortune*, 28 (July 1943), 223.

⁴² Bernard Mergen, “A History of the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America, 1933–1951” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1968), 1–2; Philip H. Van Gelder, “The Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America,” typescript, [1935], in *The CIO Files of John L. Lewis*, ed. Randolph Boehm (microfilm, 45 reels, University Publications of America, 1988), part II, reel 16; John Green and Van Gelder to Executive Council, American Federation of Labor, Dec. 29, 1934, *ibid.*; Edward Levinson, *Labor on the March* (New York, 1938), 258; Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Boston, 1970), 384, 426.

in August 1938. But in April 1940, three years after his original visit to Mobile, President Green lamented the “disgraceful situation” at ADDSCO, where only about one-sixth of the work force was organized.⁴³

For much of its early existence, then, the record of Local 18 was the antithesis of the portrait of militant “labor on the march” painted by journalists such as Edward Levinson and Mary Heaton Vorse. In 1938, Levinson wrote that “around mammoth modern mills and at bleak old factories, on ships and on piers, at offices and in public gathering-places, men and women roared ‘C.I.O., C.I.O.!’ with the gathering velocity of a massed football cheer.” But for Local 18, while there was occasional volatility, there was little velocity. Its struggle to achieve a viable collective bargaining relationship with ADDSCO management and to maintain a critical mass of committed union members was almost always a tenuous venture. Often, the local teetered on the brink of collapse. Without the Wagner Act and the multifaceted government intervention that accompanied World War II, the IUMSWA probably never would have achieved even minimal recognition in Mobile.⁴⁴

As weak and fragmented as Local 18 appeared to be, it did survive another challenge from the AFL, winning a second NLRB representation election in April 1942 by a vote of 3,080 to 1,254. But in February 1943, with factionalism rampant and the number of paid-up members reduced to 800 in a work force of nearly 26,000, the General Executive Board suspended the local’s autonomy and placed it in receivership. Under the direction of national representative Charles W. Hansen, the local increased its membership to about 6,000 by the middle of the year. But even at its peak, the union never enrolled more than a third of the work force at the Pinto Island yard. An ADDSCO rigger who had migrated to Mobile from the Mississippi Delta may well have expressed the attitude of much of the wartime labor force when he was asked at the war’s end how he liked the CIO, and he replied, “I don’t know much about it.”⁴⁵

This phenomenon was by no means limited to Mobile. “The amount of antagonism and larger amount of indifference to unions astonished me,” Katherine Archibald concluded in summing up the sensibilities of shipyard workers in Oakland. But in the complex mosaic of wartime America, the indifference of some was more than matched by the intense conviction of others.⁴⁶

In many cities, the impact of unions—and of interunion rivalry—was extraordinary, and animosities that were centered in the workplace often spilled over into

⁴³ Ben Harper to Van Gelder, March 12, 1937, box 55, series V, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; “CIO Forms Union among Shipyard Workers in City,” unidentified newspaper clipping, [April 26, 1937], *ibid.*; Harper to Van Gelder, May 11, July 14, 1937, *ibid.*; Crist to Green, Oct. 26, 1937, *ibid.*; Crist to Van Gelder, May 10, Aug. 1, 1938, *ibid.*; Green to Crist, April 17, 1940, box 56, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Levinson, *Labor on the March*, 236; Mary Heaton Vorse, *Labor’s New Millions* (New York, 1938).

⁴⁵ Charles W. Hansen to Crist, June 14, 1944, box 13, subseries 4, series II, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; Van Gelder to Hansen, Feb. 8, 1943, box 57, series V, *ibid.*; Green to Local 18, IUMSWA, Feb. 8, 1943, *ibid.*; President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, “Field Investigation Report”; Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro*, 227; Markey, “What Will Become of the Dispossessed?,” 68.

⁴⁶ Archibald, *Wartime Shipyard*, 132.

the community. In Mobile, the festering quarrel between the AFL and the CIO had a profound effect on the internal life of the NAACP. The principal figure in this conflict was LeFlore, whose persona—in his own estimation and that of his many allies in the Mobile branch—had become synonymous with the best interests of the NAACP and the entire black community. In the wartime competition between the two labor federations for the allegiance of the area's shipyard workers, he initially sided not with the CIO, which the national NAACP hailed as a staunch ally of the cause of civil rights, but with the notoriously racist AFL Metal Trades Council. For LeFlore, an alliance with the few AFL unions that were rooted in the black community made sense. By 1942, moreover, he had begun to develop ties with white AFL officials who appreciated the necessity of organizing black workers and, in pursuit of that objective, offered him a paid position with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters while he was on a medical leave from the post office.⁴⁷

The factor that may have consolidated LeFlore's alliance with the AFL, however, was the aggressive bid of a small group of CIO members for a more active leadership role in the NAACP. These men, notably Frederick Bailey and Conrad Deane, had an independent base among black workers in the IUMSWA, and Deane, a veteran shipyard worker, was developing a communitywide reputation as a CIO activist. But Bailey must have been the more outspoken of the two, because—in what Walter White called “the first incident of its kind in the history of the NAACP”—he was expelled from the Mobile branch on the charge of “maliciously attempting to slander” LeFlore. Specifically, Bailey had charged that LeFlore was “a paid organizer for the A. F. of L.,” which, in 1942 at least, he clearly was. In that capacity, he attended the annual conventions of the Alabama State Federation of Labor in 1942 and 1943 as a delegate from a Teamsters' local in Mobile. Ultimately, Bailey's accusation was that LeFlore had “sold out to the AFL”; LeFlore predictably countered that Bailey had “sold out to the CIO.”⁴⁸

Of course, LeFlore had not literally “sold out” to anyone. He was, by almost all accounts, stubbornly independent and virtually incorruptible. But his quarrel with the CIO demonstrated the limits of his influence in a city where he served as the most visible symbol of the civil rights cause. Although he openly supported the AFL Metal Trades Council in the second representation election at Alabama Dry Dock, black workers there voted overwhelmingly for the CIO.⁴⁹

Black workers' enthusiasm for the CIO in Mobile was replicated throughout much of the South. Lucy Randolph Mason, the organization's roving ambassador in the region, reported that in Wilmington, North Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia,

⁴⁷ Owens, “Mobile Housing Study.”

⁴⁸ Arthur N. Angelo to Crist, Sept. 28, 1945, box 58, series V, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; Record to Weaver, April 18, 1942, box 473, Office Files of John Beecher, 1941–45, Division of Field Operations, Records of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice; Record to Weaver, [June? 1942], box 471, Division of Field Operations, *ibid.*; M. J. Jackson to White, July 2, 1942, box C3, group II, NAACP Papers; White to M. J. Jackson, July 10, 1942, *ibid.*; M. J. Jackson to Ella J. Baker, Jan. 15, 1943, *ibid.*; *Alabama Federationist*, 1 (May–June 1942), 16; *ibid.*, 3 (June 1943), 10.

⁴⁹ Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro*, 225.

blacks were “responding to the union in far larger proportion than the whites.” In Jacksonville, Florida, according to an IUMSWA organizer, “fully nine-tenths of the CIO vote in [a key shipyard] election came from the Negro workers who voted in one big solid bloc.” He acknowledged that four-fifths of the Jacksonville local’s members were black and worried that the union’s enemies, as well as some of its black friends, were “branding us as a strictly Negro organization.”⁵⁰

In a white supremacist society, union organizers viewed the greater responsiveness of blacks as a mixed blessing and feared that the IUMSWA’s survival in the South would be jeopardized by the inevitable accusation that it was a “nigger union.” During an organizing drive among Newport News, Virginia, shipyard workers in 1935, IUMSWA Secretary-Treasurer Van Gelder offered what he hoped would be a viable means to unite black and white workers across the chasm of race. “We are going to put [them] in the same Local,” he explained, “and try to arrange it so that there will be just enough separation in the meetings to satisfy the white men, and not enough to make the colored men feel that they are being discriminated against.” Although the Newport News campaign quickly foundered, Van Gelder’s proposal continued to guide the union’s practice. In 1937, when the General Executive Board sent a national representative to Mobile to assist Ben Harper’s organizing efforts, he reported optimistically that they had “solved the problem” in Local 18 “by dividing the meetings. The negroes on one side and the whites on the other. We referred to them as the House and the Senate. The thing developed into a friendly rivalry which contributed greatly to the solidarity of the whole.” Soon, however, Harper was informing Van Gelder that “the question of the colored ship yard men meeting with the white workers [had come] up in a rather sharp form,” and he predicted that because of “the traditional backwardness of the rank and file white workers on the color question,” this matter would give the union “much trouble.”⁵¹

The constraints imposed by the “color question” became painfully clear when the IUMSWA sought to organize the Ingalls shipyard in Pascagoula. While acknowledging the extreme reluctance of whites to join the CIO, organizer Buster Crist reported in November 1939 that the black workers were “100% CIO.” This presented Crist with a dilemma. He informed Van Gelder that “I could possibly sign up all the Negro workers in less than a week, but I don’t want to do this until I have at least gotten a group of the White men signed up. The State of Mississippi,” he said, “is an anti-negro State and for that reason I am of the opinion (being a Southerner myself) that the White should take the lead.” Although not a southerner, Van Gelder agreed. “You are following the right policy in your steps to organize Pascagoula,” he told Crist. “You must get the white men first, then the colored will come along.” In fact, the AFL got “the white men first” and thus easily won an NLRB representation

⁵⁰ Mason to Van Gelder, Jan. 16, 1943, box 57, series V, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; Smolnikoff to Gallagher, Dec. 27, 1943, box 11, subseries 4, series II, *ibid.*

⁵¹ Mergen, “History of the Industrial Union of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America,” 139–40; Charles Hansen, “Report: Mobile Situation, February 1, 1943 to September 15, 1943,” Sept. 14, 1943, p. 5, box 13, subseries 4, series II, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; Harper to Van Gelder, May 20, 1937, box 55, series V, *ibid.*

election. Ignored by the AFL and received warily by the CIO, black workers soon became the target of a campaign to limit, indeed, to roll back, their employment opportunities in the Ingalls yard.⁵²

If Pascagoula symbolized the IUMSWA's ambivalence and ineptitude in relation to black workers, Mobile represented not only the union's greatest success but also its seemingly insoluble dilemma. One moment, officials there would express "unequivocal" allegiance to the national union's stated policy of nondiscrimination in the employment and upgrading of black workers; the next, they would acknowledge that any attempt to force the upgrading of blacks would push "most of the white workers . . . [in]to the . . . AFL." Their dilemma became even more acute when the United Mine Workers, which had a large and active membership among black coal miners in Alabama, left the CIO and initiated an aggressive campaign to persuade black workers in many industries, including shipbuilding, to sign up with its catchall District 50. As the competition at ADDSCO became a three-way affair, IUMSWA national representative Bernard Levinson warned of the danger that Local 18 would get caught in a "squeeze play," with the AFL enticing white workers away on the basis of appeals to white supremacy and District 50 winning over black workers with the promise of a separate "Union for the negroes."⁵³

But as much as they feared the prospect of defeat via an NLRB election, the IUMSWA leaders were even more concerned about the possibility of violent racial conflict at Alabama Dry Dock over the increasingly volatile issue of skilled jobs for black workers. In the face of continuing labor shortages and growing pressure from the FEPC, civil rights organizations, and black workers themselves, the War Manpower Commission had been recommending that ADDSCO management create two separate shipways for African Americans; on these ways they would be assigned to all of the skilled jobs associated with bare-hull construction. By March 1943 the company was expressing at least a tentative willingness to comply with this proposal, which put the union in a bind. Could it endorse segregation? Levinson said he was "emphatically" opposed to any such thing. But he also acknowledged that "many of our members" resented any plan to change the racial status quo, and that the most active white unionists at the Alabama supported the proposal precisely because it was an alternative to integration. These unionists "will train [blacks], but

⁵² Crist to Van Gelder, Nov. 8, 1938, box 55, series V, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America, General Executive Board, "Organizers and Field Representatives Report" (report filled out by W. T. Crist, Mobile, Ala.), Nov. 18, 1939, *ibid.*; Van Gelder to Crist, Nov. 28, 1939, *ibid.*; Van Gelder to Crist, March 22, 1940, box 56, *ibid.*; Record to Weaver, April 18, 1942, box 473, Office Files of John Beecher, 1941-45, Division of Field Operations, Records of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice. The procedure followed by Crist and endorsed by Van Gelder was practically the norm in the CIO throughout the South. As an Alabama organizer put it, "If it looked to the whites like you had a black union and you wanted them to join it, you'd be dead. They wouldn't do it." See Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia, 1988), 79.

⁵³ Beecher, "Field Report on Mobile, Alabama, with special reference to employment of Negroes in shipyards," 2; Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro*, 225; Robert C. Weaver, *Negro Labor: A National Problem* (New York, 1946), 37; B. Levinson to Gallagher, April 17, 1943, box 9, subseries 4, series II, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; Hansen, "Report: Mobile Situation, . . . 1943," 5.

will not work with them," he reported. "While we oppose segregation, the only way of handling the negro problem down here is by giving them separate ways."⁵⁴

The ADDSCO Riot

Levinson added a warning that turned out to be prophetic. Any plan requiring "the negro to work side by side with the white workers," he said, "would at this time lead to disaster." The disaster occurred on Tuesday, May 25, 1943. The previous evening, with no advance notice to its employees or the union, the company had upgraded twelve blacks to welding jobs. ADDSCO urgently needed more skilled workers, including as many as twenty-five hundred additional welders. But the way it complied with the FEPC directive, after numerous warnings that there was "dynamite inherent in the situation," suggests that the company was attempting to embarrass the Roosevelt administration or the IUMSWA, perhaps both. In any case, the company got far more than it bargained for and received the lion's share of the blame for the consequences of its precipitous action.⁵⁵

On the night of the twenty-fourth, the twelve men worked an entire shift without incident, in a segregated gang where they attracted little attention. The next morning, however, rumors began to fly. With little resistance from their supervisors and the acquiescence or active participation of the company's uniformed guards, whites gathered in small groups and worked themselves into a frenzy of anger at their black co-workers. Soon, Charles Hansen recalled, violence "spread like wildfire, even on the Repair side [of the yard], where whites and colored had worked together for years." Like most other "race riots" in the Jim Crow South, it consisted almost exclusively of whites attacking blacks. There were virtually no reports of black workers initiating violence or even retaliating against those who assaulted them. "The Negroes," *Mobile Register* publisher R. B. Chandler acknowledged in a private meeting with FEPC representatives, "were entirely free from blame."⁵⁶

Since there were no black welders on the job at the time of the riot, whites directed their anger at black workers in general. In the heat of the moment even the least skilled blacks became targets of attack, and the demand for their removal

⁵⁴ Reed, "FEPC, the Black Worker, and the Southern Shipyards," 454-55; Levinson, John Bouche, and Elijah Jackson to Gallagher, March 9, 1943, box 9, subseries 4, series II, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers.

⁵⁵ Levinson, Bouche, and Elijah Jackson to Gallagher, March 9, 1943, box 9, subseries 4, series II, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; Hansen, "Report: Mobile Situation, . . . 1943," 5-6; Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 117; Reed, "FEPC, the Black Worker, and the Southern Shipyards," 455-56; National Urban League, "Summary of a Report on the Race Riots in the Alabama Dry Dock . . . Yards," 1; "Colonel Joerg's report to the Governor on the recent disturbance in Mobile. . . .," June 12, 1943, box SG12491, Governor Sparks Papers. The Negro press joined Marvin Cox, regional director of the Office of War Information, in charging that the Alabama Dry Dock management sought to embarrass the Roosevelt administration and hoped that blame for upgrading black workers and "the resultant trouble would be placed on the FEPC and federal efforts to give Negro labor something approaching a square deal." *Cleveland Call and Post*, June 26, 1943, sec. A, p. 6.

⁵⁶ *Mobile Register*, May 26, 1943, pp. 1, 4; *ibid.*, June 9, 1943, p. 7; Hansen, "Report: Mobile Situation, . . . 1943," 7; Bernstein, "Story of a Race Riot"; National Urban League, "Summary of a Report on the Race Riots in the Alabama Dry Dock . . . Yards," 2-3; President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, "Field Investigation Report."

from the yard became the mob's rallying cry. Black workers reported hearing shouts such as, "Put those God dam buckets and brooms down, Niggers." "Every Nigger on this boat get off." And, "Get going, Nigger. This is our shipyard." They were assaulted with bricks, pieces of iron and steel, and such tools as hammers, wrenches, and crowbars. According to black worker Jesse Aubrey, the swelling mob built to the point where it involved "approximately 4,000 persons with pipes, clubs, and everything that was 'killable.'" No one was killed, but FEPC investigators reported that "fifty would be a conservative estimate of the number of persons injured."⁵⁷

Who were the main perpetrators of the violence? There was much talk of a small band of "saboteurs," and of the alleged role of a Birmingham-based group called the League to Maintain White Supremacy. But the overwhelming consensus among company officials, military officers, the union leadership, and the press was that recent migrants from the rural areas of the Deep South were to blame. In reading the various reports on the riot, one is struck by the emphasis on the youth of the participants and, what is more surprising, by the apparently significant role of women. Eight months after the May riot there was another violent upheaval, caused by a delay in issuing paychecks to workers on the afternoon shift. Young males, "about ninety percent" of them seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds, went on a rampage and smashed every window in the ADDSCO pay office before they were dispersed by tear gas. Although there is no necessary connection between these young men and the earlier riot, it is reasonable to assume that they would have been the most volatile element in both situations. An ADDSCO vice-president stated that none of the highly skilled, and presumably older and longer-tenured, craftsmen who were essential to production had participated in the May riot. Rather, he said, it was the work of "'young bucks' and girls among the whites who thought that they had highly developed skills." Victor Bernstein of the liberal newspaper *PM* also emphasized that the rioters were "mostly young men and women."⁵⁸

Most reports on the riot emphasized whites' fear that blacks would be given skilled jobs at their expense, especially the welding jobs where many white women were employed. But the circumstances in Mobile also bring to mind Lillian Smith's insight that "whenever, wherever race relations are discussed, sex moves arm in arm with the concept of segregation." On this point, there was a remarkably broad consensus among observers of Jim Crow. Smith was a southern critic of segregation. But David Cohn, one of the system's genteel defenders, agreed that "it is the sexual factor . . . from which social and physical segregation grows." And Gunnar Myrdal, the famed Swedish economist who served as the South's most notable outside observer in the 1940s, concluded that "sex becomes . . . the principle around which the whole structure of segregation of the Negroes—down to disfranchisement and denial of equal opportunities [i]n the labor market—is organized." Given the

⁵⁷ President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, "Field Investigation Report."

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*; National Urban League, "Summary of a Report on the Race Riots in the Alabama Dry Dock . . . Yards" 2, 8; Hansen to Gallagher, Jan. 20, 1944, box 58, series V, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; Bernstein, "Story of a Race Riot."

weight of these observations, and the extraordinary—often deadly—power of the mythology of the “black beast rapist,” it is reasonable to conclude that the age-old taboo against the physical proximity of black men to white women was the most combustible ingredient in the riot. Hansen recalled that on the morning of the twenty-fifth “the yard abounded with the usual . . . rumors” of violence and sexual assault; a newspaper reporter heard a rumor that “a Negro welder had killed a white woman the night before”; the *Mobile Register* reported that the violence had been triggered by “indiscreet mingling of white and negro workers” and called for “Absolute Segregation of [the] Races” as the only means of avoiding such provocation in the future.⁵⁹

In fact, the day-to-day circumstances of work at ADDSCO made “Absolute Segregation” impossible, because thousands of blacks were and would necessarily continue to be dispersed throughout the yard as laborers and helpers. But the very idea that black men would now be placed on an equal plane with white women and might—or so it was rumored—work side by side with them as welders, inflamed the minds of men *and women* who defined their place in the social order by the norms of white supremacy. By spring 1943 women had been socialized into a work culture that routinely subjected them to dirt and noise and pain and physical exertion; and they may well have been ready to make the transition from passive objects to active subjects in the ritual of reaffirming taboos and maintaining boundaries. In any case, the number of references to the role of women in the violence is striking. One black man declared that “a white lady hit me over the head with a broom handle.” Bernstein of *PM* wrote that white women joined their male comrades in smashing “bricks and iron bars” against the “cringing bodies” of black workers. And Hansen implied that white women had initiated the melee when they “started to belabor colored women with sticks and stones and *then* white men began to beat colored male workers.”⁶⁰

Certainly, in other parts of the wartime South, the specter—and the reality—of black men working and socializing in close proximity to white women had inflamed racial tensions. In the Birmingham area, for example, at the Fairfield Sheet Mill of Tennessee Coal and Iron, the grievance committee of United Steelworkers Local 1131 reported that race relations had reached “the boiling point” by August 1944 because

⁵⁹ President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, “Field Investigation Report.” For Lillian Smith’s remark, see Nancy MacLean, “The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism,” *Journal of American History*, 78 (Dec. 1991), 948. David L. Cohn, *Where I Was Born and Raised* (Boston, 1948), 294; Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York, 1944), 587. See also George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (1971; Middletown, 1987), 273–82; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York, 1984); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “‘The Mind That Burns in Each Body’: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York, 1983), 328–49; Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York, 1991), 27; Hansen, “Report: Mobile Situation, . . . 1943,” 7; Bernstein, “Story of a Race Riot”; and *Mobile Register*, May 28, 1943, p. 8.

⁶⁰ President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, “Field Investigation Report”; Bernstein, “Story of a Race Riot”; Hansen, “Report: Mobile Situation, . . . 1943,” 7 (emphasis added).

the company required blacks and whites to punch out at the same time clocks at the end of the shift. After one racial skirmish, union officials unequivocally demanded that management “segregate the whites and the coloreds at the clock house.” According to these officials, a man referred to as “Negro Sam” had said that “if one [black man] stubbed his toe and happened to brush against a white woman [he] could not make her or anyone else believe it was not done on purpose.” The officials warned that not only were whites ready to take matters into their own hands but that fearful blacks were “carrying knives into the plants, in their work clothes.”⁶¹

After the ADDSCO riot, about 1,000 black workers approached the War Manpower Commission and asked for permission to transfer to other jobs in Mobile or to leave the city altogether. The shipyard’s continuing labor shortage made the denial of these requests a foregone conclusion, but at least a few black workers managed to escape from the area. Interviewed in Richmond, California, four years later, one shipyard worker recalled that “a lot of the colored workers got beat up [during the riot] and I was afraid to go back in the yard.” After a night of terror in which “white men rode around . . . [and] threw rocks at our houses,” he and his wife left for California. “I didn’t even wait for my check,” he remembered, “I just decided to leave.”⁶²

Among the overwhelming majority of black workers who remained in the city, few were in any hurry to return to ADDSCO, despite exhortations from the company and the press and the protection offered by federal troops, local and state policemen, and national guard units. Two hundred blacks, including four welders, did return on Wednesday night, about thirty-six hours after the violence had subsided. The next morning many whites walked out. Hansen suggested that some of the whites left because there were no black laborers and helpers to do the heavy work for them. But he also acknowledged that “interested parties” wanted whites to boycott the yard—in effect, to strike—until “the company promised never to employ any negroes in any capacity.” Given all the coming and going, production was reduced by as much as half, and calls to end the crisis grew more urgent.⁶³

On Friday, representatives of the company, the union, and federal agencies met for six hours in an effort to restore production and confront the dilemma arising from the promotion of the twelve black workers. According to the FEPC’s “Field Investigation Report,” some of the conferees were “opposed to going ahead with any plan for the use of Negro welders at this time.” But FEPC representatives insisted there could be no retreat on this issue, and military officials agreed that the urgent

⁶¹ “Minutes of Meeting with Grievance Committee of the United Steelworkers of America Affiliated with the USA Local 1131,” box SG12417, Governor Sparks Papers. For the broader context of race relations in Birmingham during World War II, see Norrell, “Labor at the Ballot Box.”

⁶² Burran, “Racial Violence in the South during World War II,” 116; *Mobile Press Register*, May 30, 1943, pp. 1, 13; Cy W. Record, “Characteristics of Some Unemployed Negro Shipyard Workers in Richmond, California” (unpublished monograph, Sept. 1947), quoted in Shirley Ann Moore, “Getting There, Being There: African-American Migration to Richmond, California, 1910–1945,” in *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Joe William Trotter, Jr. (Bloomington, 1991), 115.

⁶³ *Mobile Register*, May 28, 1943, pp. 1, 12; *ibid.*, May 29, 1943, p. 2; Hansen, “Report: Mobile Situation, . . . 1943,” 8.

need for skilled workers in the yard made it “absolutely necessary” that blacks fill many of the new positions. Eventually, an ADDSCO spokesman resurrected and expanded upon the War Manpower Commission’s original proposal, even though it would, he admitted, require the FEPC to “‘close its eyes’ to segregation for a time.” He suggested the creation of four separate shipways where blacks would engage in all of the crafts associated with bare-hull construction under the supervision of white foremen. In the rest of the yard, they would continue to work as laborers and helpers, but those who sought promotion to skilled jobs would have to transfer to the segregated ways. With some qualifications, and the subsequent insistence that the Mobile settlement applied to ADDSCO alone and could not serve as a precedent for other facilities, the FEPC accepted the proposal.⁶⁴

The announcement of the plan for separate shipways generated controversy in the black community. Walter White of the NAACP characterized it as “a step backward”; the National Urban League called it “unsound and unrealistic”; the *Pittsburgh Courier* declared it a surrender to “the Nazi racial theory and another defeat for the principle embodied in the Declaration of Independence.” “Here is proof,” said the *Courier*, “that segregation ALWAYS means discrimination.” John LeFlore denounced the plan as an “emasculatation” of the FEPC’s basic purposes, and he demanded the “equitable integration” of the black labor force as the only principled solution. But because promotion from laborer to welder meant an increase in pay from \$.63 to \$1.20 an hour, black workers welcomed the creation of separate shipways as the most practical means to achieve their goal of access to skilled jobs and the dramatically higher wages these positions entailed. Ten months later, a black IUMSWA official declared that progress had been “very good.” After a visit to the yard, Francis J. Haas, who as FEPC chairman had approved the plan, was inclined to agree. He observed that “on the Four Jim Crow Ways, Negroes are advanced without any restriction.” In the rest of the yard, blacks and whites were working together and a “considerable number” of blacks were doing skilled work alongside whites. “Please do not think I regard the situation as ideal,” he told Malcolm Ross, his successor as FEPC chairman. “On the other hand, I would be much less than honest if I did not say that tremendous progress has been made.”⁶⁵

The IUMSWA in Mobile: Race and Democracy

In the wake of the ADDSCO riot, IUMSWA leaders embraced the plan for separate shipways wholeheartedly and came to believe that its implementation improved their relations with black workers and undermined, once and for all, the threat from

⁶⁴ President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, “Field Investigation Report”; Francis J. Haas to J. M. Griser, June 2, 1943, *ibid.*; Haas to White, July 5, 1943, box A331, group II, NAACP Papers.

⁶⁵ White to Paul McNutt, June 9, 1943, box A331, group II, NAACP Papers; National Urban League, “Summary of a Report on the Race Riots in the Alabama Dry Dock . . . Yards,” 12; Burran, “Racial Violence in the South during World War II,” 124; *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 19, 1943, p. 8; Reed, “FEPC, the Black Worker, and the Southern Shipyards,” 457; Haas to Malcolm Ross, March 6, 1944, box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice.

the United Mine Workers catchall District 50. But as always in a racially polarized society, the common ground upon which to unite blacks and whites remained elusive. In fact, the very success of Local 18 in strengthening its ties with black workers further weakened its relationship with whites. According to Hansen, in the aftermath of the riot, propaganda “swept through the yard” to the effect that “the Union was more concerned with the problems of its colored members than with those of its white members.” As a result, many whites quit the union.⁶⁶

But then the pendulum shifted again, with significant consequences for race relations within the IUMSWA. In the summer of 1943, after years of conflict with the union that had continued unabated and even intensified following the May riot, the company revamped its labor relations staff and took a much more conciliatory tack in its relations with Local 18. For the union this was a dream come true. For years its spokesmen had declared their unqualified commitment to the war effort and the no-strike pledge; they had said that more than once only the union’s commitment to uninterrupted production had prevented a complete shutdown of the yard. Now the local might achieve its goal of becoming a junior partner in the production process, and, Hansen maintained, “the entire community” would realize that the union was “not only a responsible organization but that its leadership was intelligent and patriotic.”⁶⁷

In these circumstances, the local regained many of its lapsed white members and reached a membership of over 9,000 by the summer of 1944. In April of that year, regional director Michael Shapiro reported that relations between the company and the union had become “very good. We have the run of the yard,” he said, “and can get [in] . . . at any time of the day or night and spend as much time [there] as we desire.” But the union’s new role as junior partner in production required that it be more aggressive in demanding work discipline from its members. And this had an especially negative effect on its relationship with black workers. In his April report, Shapiro declared that “organization among the Negroes has fallen off to practically nothing,” and he described a revealing incident that goes a long way toward explaining why. When a group of black welders went on strike, apparently with the approval of some union staff members, they agreed to end their work stoppage only after they were promised that company officials and the IUMSWA’s national organizational director, Thomas Gallagher, would listen to their grievances. At the subsequent meeting, however, they were given no such hearing. Instead, Shapiro complained to Gallagher, “You spoke at this meeting, and you were not aware of the issues, and it seemed that the entire ten[or] of the meeting was devoted to giving management a pat on the back.” He proposed that a black union activist from Mobile “who has the confidence of the workers” be added to the staff; otherwise, “the colored workers will feel that in any fight between them and the management, the Union will take the side of the management.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Hansen, “Report: Mobile Situation, . . . 1943,” 14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Hansen to Van Gelder, July 29, 1943, box 57, series V, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers;

Shapiro wrote his report only two and a half weeks after the Supreme Court's *Smith v. Allwright* decision outlawing the white primary. He was deeply concerned about the decision's impact on race relations at ADDSCO, because in Mobile and throughout much of the South, *Smith v. Allwright* intensified white resistance to black demands for justice. As the Alabama Democratic primary election approached, Shapiro worried that the newspapers were "trying to agitate a race riot" in order to defeat United States Sen. Lister Hill, a New Dealer who was seeking reelection with the strong support of the CIO. Hill's opponent, Jim Simpson, a state senator, had blanketed Alabama with billboards calling for the defense of "States' Rights and White Supremacy," and a prominent theme of the Simpson campaign was the accusation that Hill was a "nigger lover" who sought to abolish segregation. But led by the NAACP and other, local civil rights organizations, blacks only intensified their voting rights activity. In Mobile, however, the white establishment dug in its heels, and the pace of change was almost glacial. In a city where LeFlore had claimed nearly 250 black voters in the mid-1930s, there would be only 275 African Americans registered to vote by January 1946.⁶⁹

What worried Shapiro, however, was not white resistance but black assertiveness, and—above all—the fact that black activism in the community threatened to spread to the shipyard and thereby to disrupt the fragile accommodation between black and white workers that the union leadership had labored so hard to build. "The Negroes, and some of them may be our membership," he declared, "are starting political action committees, and I have informed them that the best way to start a riot and . . . assure the defeat of Hill is by organizing Negro political action committees. I have asked our people to dissolve them if they can."⁷⁰

The growing gap between the perceptions and priorities of black union members and white IUMSWA officials in Mobile became even clearer in the case of Elijah Jackson, a staff member whom Gallagher described as "a southern Negro . . . with a very good appearance and a good education." Jackson had been sent by the national staff to organize among black workers at ADDSCO at the time District 50 was making its appeal for a separate black union. In April 1943 Hansen had praised Jackson's work, saying that he had "made a great deal of progress among the colored workers, restoring to this group confidence in the CIO and loyalty to Local 18." Six months later he was even more laudatory, declaring that Jackson was not only doing

Crist to Gallagher, Aug. 19, 1944, box 58, *ibid.*; Michael Shapiro to Gallagher, April 21, 1944, box 13, subseries 4, series II, *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Smith v. Allwright*, 321 U.S. 649; Shapiro to Gallagher, April 21, 1944, box 13, subseries 4, series II, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; "Voting in the South," *Life*, May 15, 1944, p. 33; Melton A. McLaurin, "Mobile Blacks and World War II: The Development of a Political Consciousness," in *Gulf Coast Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Ted Carageorge and Thomas J. Gilliam (Pensacola, 1973), 47–56. See also Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 196–97; Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944–1969* (New York, 1976), 37–48; and Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton, *Lister Hill: Statesman from the South* (Chapel Hill, 1987), 113–29. Although Simpson carried Mobile, with the strong support of the city's white establishment, Hill won 55.5% of the vote in the primary campaign and was reelected in November.

⁷⁰ Shapiro to Gallagher, April 21, 1944, box 13, subseries 4, series II, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers.

a “good job” among black workers but was “more and more accepted among the whites.” When Jackson gave a speech at a war bond rally in the Jim Crow shipways, many white workers came to listen, and Hansen saw the event as “a tremendous advance in race relations here.” By the spring of 1945, however, he was accusing Jackson of “functioning strictly as a fomenter of racial hatred,” and he asked the national office to remove him from Mobile.⁷¹

What had happened in less than two years time? In the aftermath of the ADDSCO riot, the relationship between black CIO activists and the NAACP had improved dramatically. When Haas visited Mobile in March 1944, he reported on a meeting with LeFlore and Jackson in which both agreed “enthusiastically” with his proposal that the NAACP should seek to promote unionism among black workers in the city, and at ADDSCO in particular. LeFlore’s shift away from the AFL and toward a statewide left-liberal network that included CIO unionists from Birmingham and Bessemer undoubtedly facilitated this turnaround. But at least some of the credit belonged to Jackson. He became the finance committee chairman of the local NAACP branch, and through him, said the branch’s recording secretary, the members of the organization had “come to know and love the CIO.” “We were once hostile to the CIO,” Irene R. Halloway reminded John Green, “but since the coming of Mr. Jackson to our Community we have learned how grossly wrong we were.”⁷²

When, in the wake of *Smith v. Allwright*, the local branch accelerated its voter registration efforts and other civil rights activity, Jackson was apparently a leader of this activity, not only in the community but also within the union. That leadership seems to have been the source of Hansen’s accusation that Jackson was “a fomenter of racial hatred”—because he was “under the [d]omination of the N. [A.] A. C. P.” There had been “quite a few unpleasant incidents” during the past several months, Hansen reported in May 1945; some must have involved white workers’ resentment of Jackson’s civil rights advocacy. But the root of the matter went even deeper. The complaints of Hansen and Walter Thompson, another white IUMSWA staff member, suggest that Jackson had become much more assertive in his relations with white unionists. In the crucible of union building and civil rights activism during a “war for democracy,” the old pattern of deference in race relations was giving way to what Thompson characterized as “an insubordinate and aggressive attitude” on Jackson’s part. Moreover, as blacks became comfortable in the union and saw it as their own, Thompson charged that they had become “boisterous” and that some white workers whom he was trying to organize were consequently refusing to enter the Local 18

⁷¹ Gallagher to Van A. Bittner, June 10, 1946; box 8, subseries 4, series II, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; Hansen to Crist, May 24, 1945, *ibid.*; Hansen to Gallagher, April 3, 1943, box 13, *ibid.*; Charles Hansen, “Organizational Report for Mobile Area,” [Nov. 1943], *ibid.*

⁷² Haas to Ross, March 6, 1944, box 386, Division of Review and Analysis, Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice. On LeFlore’s new allies, many of whom were close to the Communist party, see “Proceedings of October 10 [1943] Meeting,” box 952, Carey Haigler Papers (Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta); Boyte Austin Presnell, “The Impact of World War II on Race Relations in Mobile, Alabama, 1940–1948” (M.A. thesis, Atlanta University, 1972), 16, 18, 19, 30; and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 184–231. Irene R. Halloway to Green, July 4, 1945, box 8, subseries 4, series II, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers.

hall. Thompson went so far as to submit a letter of resignation, because "I find that I can no longer do my best for the working man in the south, [when] faced with racial hatred, brought about by [the] Bull-in-a-China Shop Tactics employed by our colored representative here in Mobile."⁷³

Not surprisingly, NAACP members saw the matter quite differently. They judged Jackson, not by his impact on whites, but by his role among blacks. When the IUMSWA national office assigned Jackson to another organizing job in Wilmington, North Carolina, the executive board of the local NAACP branch appealed to John Green to return him to Mobile because both "the CIO and our race have benefitted by his work here." Indeed, said Halloway, "Through his leadership the colored people have gained a height which they have never gained before in all [the] history of our city."⁷⁴

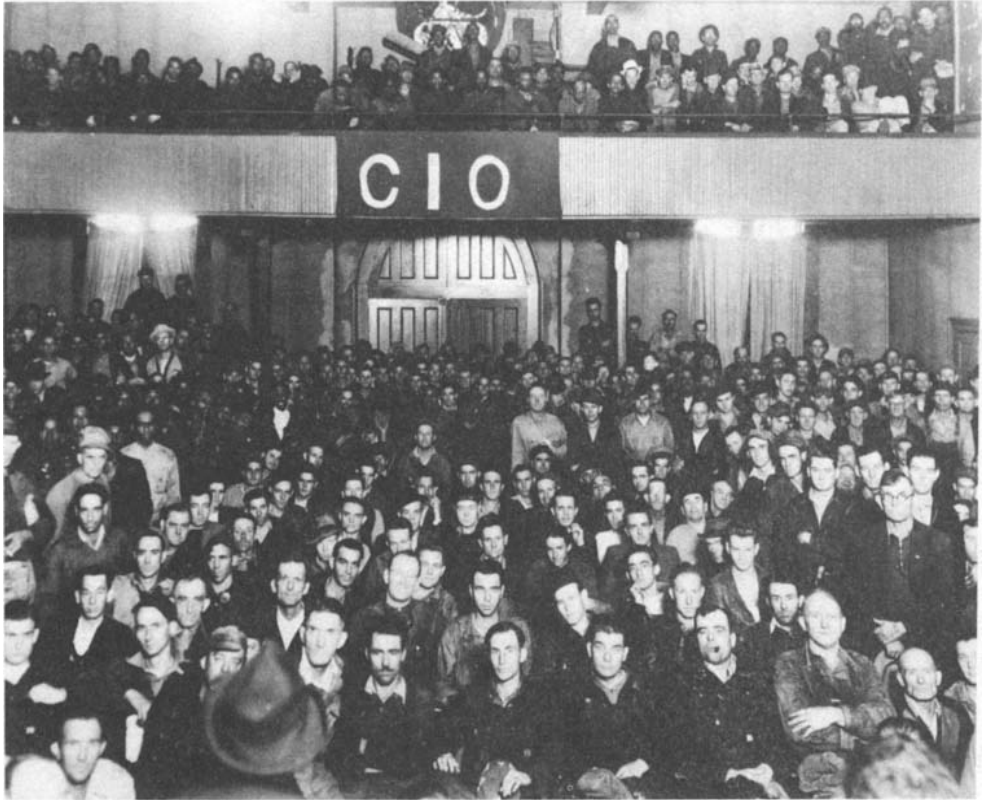
Given the constraints they faced, IUMSWA leaders could not—or would not—respond positively to the NAACP's appeal. With some justification, they pointed out that even in a rigidly segregated society, Local 18 continued to hold interracial union meetings, that blacks were routinely elected to leadership positions within the local, and that black workers remained the union's most loyal base of support. In 1948, IUMSWA national representative Marty Finn reported that "about 90% of the colored workers in the Yard are in the union, while less than half of the white workers are members." But this familiar reality only reinforced the union's enduring dilemma. "There's no getting around the fact that many white men will not come in simply because we have Negro members," Finn acknowledged. "It's a tough grind to keep anti-Negro feeling down."⁷⁵

Although they tried to "keep anti-Negro feeling down," IUMSWA leaders willingly acquiesced in several postwar developments that served to limit the job opportunities and citizenship rights of black workers. Increasingly, white activists in Mobile chafed at the alliance between national representatives and black workers and expressed their determination to take full control of Local 18. The local's charter was restored in 1946, following three years of administration by the national union, but whites continued to complain that regional director Hansen had "built a political machine on the Gulf Coast and . . . set himself up as a dictator." Even worse, from the whites' standpoint, Hansen's power was based on the support of black union members, who viewed him as a necessary buffer between themselves and their white fellow workers. "Charlie has developed a machine consisting largely of colored members," Finn reported, "and in doing so, he [has] alienated the great majority of the whites." "I am afraid if Hansen . . . [is] not moved," said another troubleshooter for the national union, "we will not only lose the local, but we may have serious trouble . . . between the white[s] and the negroes." So Hansen, who

⁷³ Hansen to Crist, May 24, 1945, box 8, subseries 4, series II, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; W. M. Thompson to Gallagher, [May 1945], box 1, *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Halloway to Green, July 4, 1945, box 8, *ibid.*

⁷⁵ Hansen to Ross Blood, Oct. 30, 1945, box 58, series V, *ibid.*; Marty Finn to [Gallagher], July 24, 1948, box 6, subseries 4, series II, *ibid.*; Joseph N. Langan interview by Nelson, Oct. 8, 1991, tape (in Nelson's possession).



A meeting of Local 18 of the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America, c. 1940s. *Courtesy University of South Alabama Archives.*

had demanded the removal of Elijah Jackson and—ironically—replaced him as a tribune of black workers, followed Jackson into exile.⁷⁶

The removal of Jackson had signified the union's determination to distance itself from the emerging civil rights movement; Hansen's departure was a sign that the era of "Negro domination" of the union's internal affairs was at an end. To be sure, the continued presence of black workers necessitated some concessions to their interests, even as whites supplanted them as the local's active majority. But in the always contentious realm of employment opportunity and, in particular, access to skilled jobs, blacks would find few white allies in Local 18 or amid a beleaguered national leadership clinging to its tenuous base in a shrinking industry. The coming of peace had meant a dramatic reduction in shipyard employment, from 30,000 to

⁷⁶ R. A. Thorsby to "Gentlemen," [March 1948], box 58, series V, Records of the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers; Finn to Green, memo: "Re: Local #18 Investigation," March 17, 1948, *ibid.*; "Report of Maurice R. Allen on Conditions in Local 18, IUMSWA, Mobile, Ala.," [March 1948], *ibid.*

about 3,000 at ADDSCO alone. In these circumstances, black workers were again relegated to unskilled jobs, where they “got locked in.” The consolidation of this rigidly structured racial inequality meant that after more than a decade of contention and vacillation, Local 18 became an instrument to guarantee the privileges of white workers in the labor market, as the CIO’s critics have charged. But given the character of the democracy practiced by the Marine and Shipbuilding Workers, the union’s leadership in Mobile accepted this situation as natural, even inevitable. After all, said one official, the union “is run by the membership, [and] the whites outnumber the blacks.”⁷⁷

Of course, there were CIO unions in the South—notably, the United Packinghouse Workers of America, the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, and the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers (FTA)—that aggressively supported and often led the struggle for black equality, on the job and in the community. But in Mine Mill and FTA, a large and often overwhelming majority of the southern membership was black. And because these unions were also led or influenced by Communists, they would soon be driven from the CIO and, in the case of FTA, destroyed.⁷⁸ Faced with the hurricane force of the red scare, on the one hand, and the reticence of organizations such as Local 18, on the other, the emerging civil rights movement could not look to organized labor for frontline support. Something would be lost in the process; the movement that emerged lacked the organic ties to a black working-class constituency that had characterized some progressive CIO unions and therefore could not address economic issues or mobilize a vital sector of the community as effectively as organizations rooted in the “economic field.” But something was gained, too—namely, the freedom to organize around broader political and social issues and the recognition that if African Americans were to achieve full citizenship, they could not allow whites to dictate the movement’s program, strategy, and timetable.

⁷⁷ Finn to [Gallagher], Aug. 8, 1948, box 6, subseries 4, series II, *ibid.*; Hill, “Race, Ethnicity, and Organized Labor,” 33; Hill, “Black Workers, Organized Labor, and Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act,” 309–12; Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*, 207–8; Stanley B. Greenberg, *Race and State in Capitalist Development: Comparative Perspectives* (New Haven, 1980), 348–49.

⁷⁸ See Rick Halpern, “Interracial Unionism in the Southwest: Fort Worth’s Packinghouse Workers, 1937–1954,” in *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South*, ed. Zieger, 158–82; Horace Huntley, “The Red Scare and Black Workers in Alabama: The International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, 1945–53,” in *Labor Divided: Race and Ethnicity in United States Labor Struggles, 1835–1960*, ed. Robert Asher and Charles Stephenson (Albany, 1990), 29–45; William Regensburger, “The Emergence of Industrial Unionism in the South, 1930–1945: The Case of Coal and Metal Miners,” in *How Mighty a Force? Studies of Workers’ Consciousness and Organization in the United States*, ed. Maurice Zeitlin (Los Angeles, 1983), 65–127; Korstad and Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost,” 788–93, 801–6; and Karl Korstad, “Black and White Together: Organizing in the South with the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural & Allied Workers Union (FTA-CIO), 1946–52,” in *CIO’s Left-Led Unions*, ed. Rosswurm, 69–94. For a vivid portrayal of the difference between the racial policies of Communist-led (and majority-black) CIO unions and other CIO affiliates in one southern city, see Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana, 1993).