An Unmistakably Working-Class Vision: Birmingham’s Foot Soldiers and Their Civil Rights Movement

By Max Krochmal

That evening I got off work at three o’clock. I got on the bus, and it was a seat vacant beside this white fellow. It was so crowded that people were standing on the bus. All the rest of the black folk was sitting in the back or standing up. . . . And at this particular stop this white lady got off the bus. Where she had been sitting beside this white gentleman, I sat down beside him. . . . He grabbed me and said no nigger was going to sit by him. . . . He tried to push me out of the seat, and I held on . . . . [The driver] stopped the bus, got off, and made a phone call, right there on Twenty-sixth Street and about Twentieth Avenue in North Birmingham. He stopped at a telephone booth and called the police. . . . So the police came . . . [and] arrested me, taking me in, and locked me up. I could see the faces of some of them [black passengers], how happy they were. . . . Nobody else had the nerve to sit beside a white person on the bus.

Jimmie Louis Warren

This remarkable story sounds a lot like the familiar tale of Rosa Parks, the tired woman who ignited the civil rights movement when she refused to give her bus seat to a white passenger. But this was Birmingham, not Montgomery, and the year was around 1960, not 1955. Jimmie Louis Warren, an African American man who worked in paper and pipe manufacturing, seamlessly melded his civil rights activism in the community with campaigns for justice on the job. ¹ Like Rosa

¹Jimmie Louis Warren interview, in Horace Huntley and David Montgomery, eds., Black Workers’ Struggle for Equality in Birmingham (Urbana, 2004), 199–200. Also see Transcript of Jimmie Louis Warren, interview by Horace Huntley, May 17, 1996, pp. 14–15, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Oral History Project (hereinafter BCRIOHP) (Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Archives, Birmingham, Ala.; hereinafter BCRI). Throughout this article I cite oral history interviews in which subjects use unconventional forms of English grammar. I have left these “errors” intact, making corrections only to ensure clarity. To make the text more readable, I have refrained from marking “[sic]” on each occasion. The author thanks Horace Huntley and Laura Caldwell

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Parks, Warren represented only the tip of a much larger iceberg. Outside the view of Birmingham’s white authorities—and beyond the gaze of most historical accounts—countless working-class black activists quietly engaged in a decades-long battle for access to good jobs, desegregation of social spaces, and the right to vote.

In fact, African American trade unionists and other workers developed and sustained an expansive vision of social change that placed economic justice issues at the center of Birmingham’s larger black freedom struggle. Informal networks of black workers rooted in daily fights for equality on the job formed critical hubs around which the more familiar civil rights organizations often pivoted. Similarly, the most visible black leaders such as Fred L. Shuttlesworth, Arthur D. Shores, and Emory O. Jackson all based their own advocacy in the militant organizing tradition of African American labor activists. Black workers swelled the ranks of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), playing key roles both behind the scenes and in public demonstrations. The flowering movement throughout the city in turn reinvigorated the struggle of black workers on the job and within their white-dominated unions. From the 1930s through the 1960s, community- and workplace-based civil rights activism consistently dovetailed. Often orchestrated by the same individuals, struggles in one arena gained strength from and simultaneously emboldened the other.

At the core of all of it was the belief that human rights included not only the desegregation of public space but also the right to improve one’s economic condition. Surprisingly, this principle survived the onslaught of the early cold war and persisted during even the darkest days of Jim Crow Alabama. The idea remained muted in the official pronouncements of civil rights leaders, and it proved anathema to most white officers of Birmingham’s biracial unions. But it dominated the worldview of most black workers, and for that reason it became the linchpin of the entire black freedom struggle.

Jimmie Louis Warren’s one-man bus sit-in was not a singular occurrence, nor did it come out of thin air. Rather, it represented just another manifestation of a well-documented African American protest tradition. If its ancestral roots are to be found in resistance to slavery, this tradition’s
modern lineage in the Birmingham area began with the formation of interracial unions in the mining industry. Both Brian Kelly and Daniel Letwin have shown that black workers before 1921 seized the opportunity to join the United Mine Workers (UMW), but their white counterparts often proved unsteady allies, causing the incipient union movement to founder. In Alabama, as around the country, organized labor achieved renewed strength during the Great Depression. Under the leadership of William Mitch, the UMW finally united thousands of black and white coal miners and brought them under union contracts. The newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) extended into industries related to its UMW origins, which in Alabama included ore mining, steel mills, and other heavy metal manufacturing. World War II and expanding industrial operations accelerated the unionization process, and black workers shared, albeit unevenly, in the spoils of the growing movement. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the railroad brotherhoods also expanded so that by the end of the war, high union density in Birmingham’s heavy industries made the Magic City more closely resemble Pittsburgh than Atlanta, its nearest New South rival.

The Great Depression and World War II also provided new opportunities for civil rights organizing in Alabama and across the country. Robin D. G. Kelley has shown that some African American sharecroppers, farmers, and industrial workers joined the Communist Party and many more participated in party activities throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Communist Party’s advocacy in behalf of the Scottsboro defendants positioned the party as a radical alternative to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and, Kelley suggests in his epilogue, helped lay the foundation for black

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working-class civil rights activism in the postwar period. For its part the NAACP experienced little growth until the beginning of the war, when the message of its “Double V” campaign—for democracy’s dual victories over fascism both abroad and at home—contributed to a nationwide explosion of the group’s membership rolls. Many black workers joined the association while serving in the military, and they returned home ready to expand the fight for full citizenship in their own communities.

For a decade following the late 1930s, many of these disparate elements briefly coalesced into a loose coalition that scholars have termed “civil rights unionism.” African American workers formed the core of this broad movement, but they were joined by Communists of all colors as well as the left wing of the CIO. For these activists, writes Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “neither race nor class trumped the other, and both were expansively understood.” But the “decisive first phase” of the “long civil rights movement” reached its peak in the late 1940s, when organizers failed to respond effectively to the rise of the cold war paired with a powerful employer- and state-led offensive against both unions and civil rights. In Alabama, civil rights unionism found its fullest expression in the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers (often known as Mine-Mill). Horace Huntley has shown that Mine-Mill’s leadership actively fostered black activism within the union, and rank-and-file black workers consequently rose to positions of prominence in both the local and the international union leadership. Some of these leaders also came to be identified with the now-ostracized Communist Party, and the union’s controversial support of Henry A. Wallace’s left-wing presidential race against Harry S Truman in 1948 drew the ire of national CIO leaders. The United Steelworkers of America (USWA) began a series of raids against Mine-Mill, decimating

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the latter union and ultimately capturing nearly all of its remaining membership. Other histories document the rise and fall of civil rights unionism in cities across the South and nation, and all tell remarkably similar stories.

By the 1950s black workers played a diminished role in the labor movement, and in most scholarly accounts they seemingly disappear from the scene altogether. Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein aptly summarize the change in a now-classic article published in 1988: the unions that survived the early cold war grew increasingly bureaucratic and narrowly focused their efforts on winning improvements to wages and working conditions through collective bargaining. Organized labor turned its back on black workers, and African American civil rights activists charted an alternative course. The movement that emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s, Korstad and Lichtenstein write, possessed a “different social character and an alternative political agenda” that depended not on trade unions “but the black church and independent protest organizations.”

Yet while the institutional home of the civil rights movement may have shifted during the mid-1950s, the degree to which both the “social character” and the “political agenda” of the freedom struggle changed remains less clear. John Dittmer and Charles M. Payne argue that in Mississippi “local people” stood at the forefront of the movement, both dominating its rank-and-file constituency and determining, to a great extent, its overall vision and particular campaigns. In the Delta, sharecroppers like Fannie Lou Hamer drew on an indigenous “organizing tradition” to help the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) develop a statewide voter registration initiative. Emilye Crosby has shown that to the south, in Claiborne County, conflicts over land and labor dating to Reconstruction produced a continuous struggle that began with “a little taste of freedom” during the New Deal and climaxed in the form of mass boycotts against white merchants in

9 See, for example, Michael K. Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers (Urbana, 1993); Martha Biondi, To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); and Robert O. Self, American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland (Princeton, 2003).
11 John Dittmer, Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi (Urbana, 1994); Charles M. Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle (Berkeley, 1995).
the late 1960s. Similarly, Greta de Jong’s study of African American laborers in rural Louisiana over a seventy-year period demonstrates that ordinary blacks there preserved the teachings of the Communist Party and carried them directly into the postwar civil rights battles organized by the Congress of Racial Equality. Most recently, William P. Jones is uncovering the vibrant movement of black unionists in New York City that, under the banner of the Negro American Labor Congress, put forth a radical noncommunist vision that paralleled the earlier civil rights unionism at the most classic of classical phase moments: the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in the nation’s capital. In all these cases, black workers—defined here broadly to encompass all nonprofessional African American laborers in industrial, public sector, domestic, informal, and even agrarian contexts—advanced a political agenda that was often different from the one articulated in the official pronouncements of church-based national and local civil rights leaders.

In the case of Birmingham, scholars recognize that the Alabama Christian Movement’s “social character” necessarily reflected the city’s demographics: according to Glenn T. Eskew, the churches and parishioners who formed the basis of the ACMHR were predominately working class. But despite all the detailed evidence that historians have uncovered about Eugene “Bull” Connor’s police dogs and fire hoses, Shuttlesworth’s oratory, and the tensions between the local and national movements, historians still know relatively little about the “local people” who gave the Birmingham struggle its own unique flavor. We know still less about these people’s “political agenda”—about the expansive vision that underlay their commitment to racial equality.

And at a more basic level, we know virtually nothing about what happened to their once vibrant civil rights unionism or about their ongoing efforts to win economic inclusion.

The struggle in the Magic City looks different from the perspective of the black workers at the center of the civil rights storm. From their vantage point, some opportunities may have been lost in the late 1940s, but they nonetheless carried the fight for both social and economic justice from the New Deal and war years into the postwar period, infusing both the ACMHR and the larger struggle with a distinctly black working-class politics.

The experiences of African Americans at the work site shed some light on the nature of the organizing tradition in Birmingham. Soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II, black workers across the country intensified their fight for equal access to good jobs. In the South, they also challenged the segregation of company space and accommodations. The wartime Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) offered southern black workers a formal process to file complaints against their employers, but most companies ignored the committee’s directives, leaving skilled and supervisory positions all-white well into the 1960s.

After World War II, most black workers in Birmingham remained confined in the city’s worst, dirtiest, and lowest-paying jobs. Except for the few professionals who served black patrons and achieved status if not great wealth in the black community, most African Americans remained workers, broadly defined. Most of them lacked regular employment and frequently moved from one unskilled, often menial occupation to another. The Magic City’s steel mills, railroad yards, and coal and iron ore mines offered the best blue-collar employment available to black men, while teaching, nursing, and clerical work offered the best opportunities for black women who hoped to transcend kitchens and laundries. Racial segregation further shaped each of these already gendered areas of occupational advancement. In heavy industry, black men performed undesirable, often dirty, and at times physically dangerous tasks, ranging from shoveling coal and digging ditches to janitorial service and, at best, the position of “helper” to a white craftsman. Skilled positions continued to be the exclusive purview of white workers, despite the frequent presence of interracial labor unions. For their part, black women laboring as teachers taught in all-black schools;

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black nurses attended black patients; and most black clerks worked for black-owned businesses. With the exception of education and casual manual labor, public sector employment for both men and women at the municipal, county, state, and federal levels was restricted to white civil servants.\(^{17}\)

Despite these disparities, as Robert Korstad has shown, collective bargaining agreements at times entitled black workers to some degree of fair treatment and racial egalitarianism on the job—even as they were denied equality with whites in other areas of life. For example, the democratic processes of some interracial unions allowed African Americans, who were largely unable to participate in formal electoral politics outside the union, to vote in internal elections and to partake in creating organizational policy. In addition, unions in the South, as elsewhere in the nation, challenged the autocratic independence of white foremen who for decades had arbitrarily hired, fired, directed, and disciplined workers of all races without reference to any standards of fairness or guidance from a central human resources administration. Union contracts instead required foremen to follow specific procedures for promotions and transfers and only permitted disciplinary action in cases of “just cause.” Contracts further established grievance procedures that allowed black workers to demand a hearing with upper management. In the Jim Crow South, such provisions represented a deep symbolic challenge to white supremacy since they undermined the racial hierarchy that sanctioned white reprisals against black mobility both inside and outside the workplace. Most important, unions offered black workers unusual job security. Labor’s record on the racial front was checkered, to say the least, but participation in unions still afforded some African American workers an unprecedented degree of “shop floor democracy” that replaced the “racial etiquette, paternalism, [and] personalism” customary in the segregated South with “a new language of rights and obligations” understood by workers and managers alike.\(^{18}\)

More generally, civil rights unionism remained a powerful ideal among black workers even as their unions suffered the stinging defeats that quickly followed World War II.\(^{19}\) Black workers continued to


\(^{18}\) Korstad, Civil Rights Unionism, chap. 8 (first quotation on p. 217; second quotation on p. 211; third and fourth quotations on p. 214).

\(^{19}\) The passage of the antiunion Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 represented the most devastating of labor’s many well-known defeats after World War II. Labor also failed to limit inflation by extending
mobilize around both racial and economic justice from the late 1940s through the 1960s. They fought for access to lucrative “skilled” jobs, organized for dignity and respect at work, filed lawsuits to open new opportunities, demanded higher pay, and walked off the job in protest. These struggles at work primed Birmingham’s black workers for action by the time the classical phase of the movement picked up steam in the late 1950s.

At the Louisville & Nashville Railroad (L&N) yard in Birmingham, for example, black union leaders Colonel Stone Johnson and Reuben Davis contested the age-old segregation of jobs on the shop floor. Railroad workers had a long tradition of unionization, but black workers had been almost entirely excluded from the all-white railroad craft “brotherhoods.” African American laborers nonetheless saw the benefits of unionization, and they joined segregated auxiliaries that remained subordinate to the all-white unions in each trade. Johnson helped organize an all-black local of the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks at the L&N, while Davis helped lead the company’s black auxiliary of the Brotherhood of Firemen and Oilers.

Though their unions proved separate and unequal, black railroad laborers nonetheless worked through their auxiliaries for dignity on the job. Interviewed nearly fifty years after a series of incidents in the late 1940s, Johnson blurred together the details of several similar grievances that defined his experience as chairman of the union’s Protective Committee. White workers at the L&N “had a bad habit,” Johnson remembered; “I’ve seen them kick [black] fellows just like they kick a dog. They called [it] playing.” When a white foreman kicked a recently hired black laborer, “something in me just reared. . . . I couldn’t take it.” The company typically ignored black workers’ grievances against whites; the letters wound up in “file 13,” the trash can in the superintendent’s office. But Johnson’s persistence and reputation as a staunch unionist gained him a hearing with upper management on many occasions. In one instance, Johnson’s

warp time price controls, lost a wave of national strikes in most major industries, and gradually abandoned the demand for power over corporate management and on the shop floor, culminating in 1950 in the so-called Treaty of Detroit, an agreement between General Motors and the United Auto Workers. For a case study of the postwar situation, see ibid., chap. 12. For an overview, see Nelson Lichtenstein, Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World War II (Cambridge, Eng., 1982), 178–245.


Transcript of Colonel Stone Johnson, interview by Horace Huntley, January 6, 1995, p. 9, BCRIOHP.
supervisor pleaded with him to withdraw a grievance against a white worker who stood to lose his job for kicking a black worker. In a complete reversal of Jim Crow etiquette, Johnson demanded that the white worker apologize and promise to never kick another African American laborer. Moreover, the union leader refused to seek out the guilty party, demanding instead that the white worker come to him to make amends. Johnson recalled the following (probably reworded) exchange with his boss: "'He ever done anything to you?' And I said, 'No, but I'm my brothers' keeper. I'm head of the union. How can I represent a man and turn my head when [the white worker] is kicking a man . . . ?'" The supervisor agreed to the deal, the white worker apologized, and Johnson went to the personnel office and removed the grievance from the offender's file. "And I took it and threw it in the wastebasket," Johnson added, and "I never heard about another Black fellow being kicked . . . ."

The all-black auxiliary unions also helped Johnson and Reuben Davis, a leader of another all-black union auxiliary at the L&N, demand access to better-paying, safer, and cleaner jobs. Davis's father was an oiler at the L&N, and Reuben went to work at the yards as a laborer right out of high school. Looking back, he remembered that he wanted to be a locomotive engineer—despite the fact that no African Americans held that post. He left his job to serve in the U.S. Navy during World War II, but there too he encountered employment discrimination. Relegated to performing domestic service for white officers, Davis grew angry, but he also found the courage to protest. "I had decided that I was a person," he recalled. When he returned to Birmingham to work at the L&N, he asked for training as an apprentice machinist. His request was ignored, so he filed a federal suit demanding access to an apprenticeship program. In court his foreman admitted that Davis had the ability, merit, and seniority to begin training, but the foreman also told the judge that Davis was "hot headed." The case was dismissed. Still, Davis continued to apply pressure, this time pushing management to promote several black laborers to more lucrative posts working on the steel gang. "So Reuben was called a troublemaker," Johnson explained, "but all the men in Reuben's union were upgraded to helpers, and then from helpers to car repairmen or journeymen." Davis never became an apprentice

22 Ibid., 12–13.
23 Transcript of Reuben Davis, interview by Horace Huntley, March 20, 1996, pp. 7–13 (first quotation on 12; second quotation on 13), BCRIOHOP.
25 Colonel Stone Johnson interview, ibid., 39.
and was fired in 1950 because of his activism, but the L&N’s African American workers continued to labor in their new posts and move up the occupational ladder. For his part, Davis fought the capricious dismissal and was reinstated three years later with back pay.

Both Johnson and Davis owed a great debt to another black toiler on the L&N lines, a man who a decade earlier had served as the lead plaintiff in a pathbreaking court case that forced the all-white brotherhoods to provide fair representation to black workers in their respective crafts. Eric Arnesen has thoroughly narrated the story of Bester William Steele’s suit against the L&N and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Engineers (BLFE), but a few details of the action bear repeating. Steele v. Louisville & N. R. Co. (1944), like Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and other well-known civil rights cases, represented a single piece of a larger civil rights litigation strategy. Unlike Brown, however, Steele sprang not from the NAACP but from a small, independent industrial union of black railroad workers. The all-black International Association of Railway Employees (IARE) counted fewer African American members than did the white-dominated brotherhoods, but it played a critical role in the struggle for jobs. B. W. Steele, a Birminghamian who began working on the L&N lines in 1904, served on the executive board of the IARE in 1941, when the company and the BLFE reached an agreement that gave white workers the traditionally dirty and dangerous (and all-black) “fireman” job on new, cleaner, safer diesel engines. The IARE attempted in vain to resolve the dispute through negotiations with the railroad and union; Steele sat in these meetings along with the association’s president and its general counsel, Arthur Shores. A lifelong resident of the Magic City, Shores was at that time the only black attorney on the Alabama bar, and his clients included the city’s Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers Union locals, NAACP chapters, and various black community organizations. Charles H. Houston, who achieved national prominence litigating Brown ten years later, took over as lead counsel for Steele when the case reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 1944, but Shores remained intimately involved.

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26 Reuben Davis interview, ibid., 120–22.
27 Transcript of Reuben Davis interview, pp. 13–15, 20–21, BCRIOHP.
29 “Meeting of the Committee from the Personnel [sic] Board of the L&N Railroad Company ...,” July 31, 1941, pp. 1–2, Folder 2, Box 7, Arthur D. Shores Papers, 97-062 (BCRI). For more background, see Boxes 5–7 of the Shores Papers; Arnesen, Brotherhoods of Color, 205–9; and David Montgomery, “Introduction,” in Huntley and Montgomery, eds., Black Workers’ Struggle for Equality in Birmingham, 13–14. Steele was chairman of IARE’s General Committee for the L&N. See B. W. Steele to Emory O. Jackson, December 28, 1947, AR1102.1.1.2, Birmingham World
Thanks to Steele and Shores, the IARE found and won its test case and forced the BLFE and L&N back to the bargaining table. In 1951 they reached an agreement through which black firemen regained their posts on many of the longest diesel runs, though they continued to lose ground overall. The expansion of union auxiliaries such as those led by Johnson and Davis can be seen as yet another legacy of the Steele case. Propelled by this and other early victories, Shores became the pre-eminent civil rights attorney in Birmingham. B. W. Steele continued to advocate for black railroad workers until his death in 1955. But perhaps most significant, Steele again highlights the broad appeal of civil rights unionism to black workers in Birmingham over several decades. The case further illuminates the close connections between the shop-floor battles of trade unionists and the mass movement that emerged in the streets of the Magic City in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The struggle for access to the best jobs remained a central component of black activism in Birmingham even as the classical phase of the civil rights movement began to gain momentum. In 1956 Emory O. Jackson, former executive secretary of the Birmingham NAACP and editor of the city’s most important black newspaper, helped black members of the United Auto Workers at Hayes Aircraft Corporation file a complaint before the President’s Committee on Government Contracts that resulted in the upgrading of a small number of black workers into classifications formerly reserved for whites. Burford York, a worker at Hayes, again filed a complaint before the committee in 1962. In the early 1960s Jimmie Louis Warren—who got arrested in the bus incident recounted in the epigraph—and other black laborers at the U.S. Pipe Company began to bid on vacancies in previously all-white positions.

Office Files, Correspondence Series (Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham Public Library; hereinafter BPL). At the BPL, the final two segments of the identifier represent the box and folder number, respectively. On IARE, see Arnesen, Brotherhoods of Color, and Ernest Obadele-Starks, Black Unionism in the Industrial South (College Station, Tex., 2000), 63–67.

31 Arnesen, Brotherhoods of Color, 205.
In many cases they were unsuccessful, but on other occasions, when no white workers bid for the open positions, management awarded the posts to black workers. Even without the FEPC, black workers continued to fight to desegregate the clean, skilled, previously all-white departments of Birmingham’s major industries.

Struggles for upgrading to better jobs at times dovetailed with efforts to organize nonunion firms. When workers at the American Cast Iron Pipe Company (ACIPCO) attempted to join the UMW and unionize in 1958 and again in 1960, they faced employer reprisals, paternalism, and union busting. ACIPCO kept wages a few cents above those of its unionized competitors like U.S. Pipe, and the company offered sizable bonuses and sponsored recreational activities like baseball teams. Such policies convinced Charles Gratton, an African American worker, that ACIPCO offered blacks the best employment opportunity since they were never “really bothered with layoffs or strikes” and did not have to pay union dues. Other employees like Lloyd Harper saw the union as a potential vehicle for winning access to skilled positions. “Someone told us that if you got a union, a union will stop all of this [job discrimination],” Harper recalled. The organizing campaigns floundered, Harper added, because management held separate meetings with white workers where the company convinced them that the union would force the bosses to replace the whites with African Americans. One worker recounted a story in which management, faced with a union drive, pandered to black workers as well, offering them handfuls of silver dollars during an emotional meeting steeped in religiosity and overseen by a large portrait of black Jesus that had been mounted on the wall specially for the occasion. Both the 1958 and 1960 campaigns failed, as did a third effort in 1975.

35 Lloyd Harper interview, ibid., 56–58.
36 Charles Gratton, interview by Tywanna Whorley, Birmingham, Alabama, June 22, 1994, pp. 26–27, Box TR 3, Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South Records (Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.), hereinafter Behind the Veil. The page numbers for citations to the Behind the Veil Oral History Project interviews refer to the pagination of the unedited, restricted-use transcriptions in the collection’s Transcript Series. To confirm the exact quotations, listen to the tapes in the Use Tapes Series.
38 Harvey Lee Henley Jr. interview, ibid., 111–12.
39 Lloyd Harper interview, ibid., 57; Harvey Lee Henley Jr. interview, ibid., 111. Also see Montgomery, “Introduction,” 5.
The presence of labor unions and the nature of heavy industry may have contributed to black workers’ activism, but the battle for justice on the job was not confined to blue-collar men in Birmingham’s mines and mills. Black teachers also contested the terms of their employment by demanding parity with their white counterparts. Education played a critical role in African American society in the age of Jim Crow, and teaching represented a highly respectable occupation for the black women who dominated the profession. Still, black schools remained underfunded and marginalized by state and local authorities. African American community leaders struggled throughout the period of segregation to win more resources and supplies for their schools.40

For many black teachers, the issues of funding and community development became closely intertwined with a more bread-and-butter complaint: their own low pay in comparison with that of white teachers doing the same job in white schools. In April 1945 the United Public Workers of America (UPW), an affiliate of the CIO, won a decision in an Alabama federal court declaring that black and white teachers should receive “equal pay for equal work, regardless of race or color.” Seizing this ruling, local units of the union began negotiating with school boards across the state. The Birmingham local grew impatient with the school board’s inaction and sued for contempt of court in 1947. Two black women teachers who testified in this case were promptly removed from duty. The Birmingham school district fired Ruby Jackson Gainer, president of the UPW and the Jefferson County Negro Teachers Association, while the independent suburban Fairfield district forced Maenetta Steele, also a UPW local president, to resign.41

The women’s responses to their dismissals drew on family ties and the vibrant black labor movement surrounding them. Gainer’s brother was Emory Jackson, who in addition to his roles as an NAACP activist and local editor served as an officer of the National Negro Publishers Association. For her part, Steele came from “a family of members of the Steel Workers Union” (though it appears she was not related to B. W. Steele of the L&N suit). CIO locals and NAACP chapters across the country rallied behind the two educators, and the black press spread their story to Atlanta, New York, Chicago, and beyond.

41 Malcolm Cotton Dobbs to All CIO International Unions, October 20, 1947, AR1102.1.3.2, Birmingham World Office Files, Correspondence Series.
Jackson spearheaded a drive to raise money for the two women, who hired attorney Arthur Shores to file a new suit demanding their reinstatement. Gainer spoke at innumerable public engagements to promote her own cause, while her brother and union leaders directed a national publicity campaign. Gainer’s and Steele’s cases bounced around the court system until the Alabama Supreme Court finally forced the districts to reinstate both women in early 1949—eighteen months after their termination. Gainer had by then moved to Pensacola, Florida, to take another teaching job, so she resigned her post in Birmingham immediately after being reinstated. But the court gave Steele her job back in Fairfield retroactive to the fall of 1947, including a right to back pay.42

African American workers at the very bottom of the Jim Crow occupational hierarchy likewise contested the terms of their employment, demanding both higher wages and a degree of dignity on the job. In 1951 approximately 350 black garbage collectors, street cleaners, tree trimmers, and “sewer maintenance men” staged a brief sit-down strike to demand a pay increase. These dirtiest of municipal government jobs represented the only foothold other than education for African Americans in the public sector, but city leaders took great care to make sure that even such limited government work did not translate into black economic gains. The city classified the men as “day laborers” despite the fact that most had worked the same routes for years. Likewise, their status as casual employees denied the garbage men and other black workers in the Streets Department access to the civil service system and its accompanying guarantees of job security and retirement pensions.
Most critically, city law prohibited the municipality from engaging in collective bargaining with any of its workers.\textsuperscript{43}

The black sanitation workers, almost all of them garbage collectors, probably had all of this on their minds when they sat down instead of starting up their trucks. Still, they appointed a committee of leaders and demanded to be heard. Public Works Commissioner James Morgan surely also knew that collective bargaining was illegal when he went to the yards to meet with the workers and negotiate a tentative cease-fire. The laborers returned to their posts and resumed work while their committee, led by Manuel Hines, laid out their demands to the city commissioner. When a week passed without a raise, the sanitation workers staged a full-scale strike. Garbage trucks stood idle in Birmingham and surrounding suburbs. The few African American men who sought to replace the strikers faced verbal insults and physical assaults; both daily newspapers highlighted the violence directed toward strikebreakers, including one incident in which a striker threw a watermelon rind at a scab. Several days passed before the city achieved even reduced levels of service. As the stoppage wore on, the strikers joined a CIO public workers' union en masse. Morgan agreed to meet with CIO leaders even while he refused to recognize the union. A week later the commission quietly settled with the strike committee, and the garbage collectors resumed working with a greater than 10 percent pay increase and an unprecedented recognition of their permanent service: five and a half days of sick leave per year of work.\textsuperscript{44}

More than a decade before Bull Connor and Martin Luther King Jr. brought Birmingham into the national spotlight, three hundred black workers performing the least desirable of tasks had demanded and won a little respect from the Jim Crow town. A year later, in 1952, the workers again struck successfully, this time winning the reinstatement of workers fired for joining the CIO.\textsuperscript{45} But the city also passed a new ordinance requiring the immediate termination of any worker engaged in a work stoppage. By 1960 the city's black sanitation workers had formed Local 1184 of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal

\textsuperscript{43}"Garbage, Trash Men Ask Pay Hike after Brief Stoppage," Birmingham News, August 20, 1951 (quotations); "Garbage Collectors on Strike over Pay," \textit{ibid.}, August 27, 1951; both collected in AR1922.8.35, James L. Baggett Research Files on Eugene "Bull" Connor (BPL). The author thanks Mr. Baggett for drawing the author's attention to the sanitation worker strikes and for sharing these and subsequently cited files.

\textsuperscript{44}Birmingham News, August 20, 26–31, and September 1–3, 5, 8–9, 1951; Birmingham Post-Herald, August 21, 27–31, and September 1, 4, and 5, 1951; all collected in AR1922.8.35, Baggett Research Files.

Employees (AFSCME), an institution that must have given them some confidence when they again walked off the job to protest cuts to their weekly work hours. As student civil rights sit-ins raged across the South, the all-white city commission made good on its threat and fired all four hundred black so-called day laborers. The majority-white Birmingham Labor Council rallied behind the black workers, and representatives of the USWA and UMW sought to mediate the conflict. Yet the city held firm and successfully replaced the strikers, agreeing to rehire individuals only gradually and only at the reduced number of hours.46

The rise and fall of the sanitation workers’ unions may at first appear to represent little more than a run-of-the-mill labor conflict, but it in fact was far from routine. African American workers at the bottom of Jim Crow hierarchies of race and class served as the cornerstone of the white supremacist South. Expected by whites to remain invisible as well as docile, they nonetheless performed essential tasks without which the white side of the segregated order could not function. The garbage collectors’ strike forced white elites to bargain with the most despised of laborers, while ordinary whites had to cope with interrupted or reduced municipal services. The reports in daily mainstream newspapers underscored these tensions. The workers were always identified as “Negroes,” while the inconvenienced white “citizens” and “housewives” remained racially unmarked. Meanwhile the account of the watermelon incident served to reinforce white stereotypes of blacks’ innate recourse to violence and their inherent minstrel-like buffoonery. When strikers threw a Molotov cocktail into the home of a black scab in 1960, the Birmingham News ran a full-spread feature on the injured replacement worker and his family. Such a sympathetic response stood in stark contrast to the general indifference of the daily paper toward the house bombings of Fred Shuttlesworth, Arthur Shores, and other civil rights activists. The garbage collectors’ strikes brought central contradictions of Jim Crow society to the fore, even though they did not expand into a citywide movement on the scale of Memphis in 1968.47


47 On the house bombing, see the articles in the Birmingham News on April 26 and 27, 1960, especially the spread of photographs and the short article “Fire Bomb Tossed in Negro’s Home,” ibid., April 26, 1960. Also see the sources in the preceding three notes. On Memphis in 1968, see Michael K. Honey, Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign (New York, 2007).
African American economic justice organizing clearly attracted people from throughout the black working class, from unionized miners and railroad workers to teachers, garbage collectors, and street sweepers. Even domestic service workers fought for dignity on the job, though they could not look to unions for support and their experiences largely failed to enter the written record. Mattie C. Haywood was just one of the countless black women who worked in white households for wages that lagged well behind even those of the garbagemen. "You [were] always that Colored girl [who] got to go to the back," she remembered in an oral history interview in 1996. "And I don't care how much they grin in your face, you still a Colored person . . . . [But] That's all Black women could do. Even if they got to the 12th grade they still couldn't get nothing but a maid in a hospital or domestic work." Looking back at her experiences in the 1950s and 1960s, Haywood remained defiant but not bitter. "Well, now they treat you pretty good as long as folks just stay in your place," she recalled; "But, when they made me mad, I would walk off the job." Haywood protested with her feet many times. One employer refused to give her a day off on a single Sunday each month so she could go to church. Haywood said nothing but quietly quit. On another occasion, the man of the house scolded her for bringing food to the table but not serving it. "'You know how to serve the food, you supposed to serve on this side,' [he said]. And I just set the plate down on the table and walked out," Haywood added. The employer then talked to Haywood's husband to plead for her return; the latter took his wife's place for the rest of the day, but she "never did go back." Haywood had no union to protect her, no ability to draw on the strength of the solidarity of three hundred or more fellow workers. But she nonetheless struggled to assert her dignity on the job, and her experiences at work in the white homes of Birmingham soon led her—like so many other black workers—directly into the civil rights movement. "It was from my activism with the union that I really understood the way racism worked," recalled Colonel Stone Johnson, one of the leaders of the black brotherhoods at the L&N rail yards. "Then, in the 1950s, when the movement started, I was basically primed for it, because I had already been doing this kind of work." Johnson's story typifies the experiences of many black workers. African Americans organized
on the job, slowly gaining access to skilled positions and fighting for improvements in wages and working conditions. Yet many of these same activists also helped organize the civil rights movement in their community. Black workers contributed to the larger freedom struggle by joining and taking leadership positions in its most important local organization, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. They also engaged in direct action demonstrations to desegregate public accommodations and led the effort to register voters. This activism ultimately fueled another critical component of the struggle: forming shop floor and citywide caucuses to bring the fight back to work.

Seen from the perspective of the black workers at the movement’s core, many of its iconic participants, including both students and religious leaders, begin to look a little different. George Holloway, a black worker and union leader from Memphis, explained, “The CIO really contributed to the civil rights movement . . . . The CIO brought better wages, so parents got interested in schooling, and began to send kids to college.”51 Historian David Montgomery adds, “Many of the high school and college students arrested for demonstrating against segregation in Birmingham’s streets . . . were daughters and sons of these union members.”52 From this perspective, the labor movement contributed significantly, but indirectly, to the civil rights movement by creating a stable, upwardly mobile class of workers who could afford for the first time to educate large numbers of their children.

Of course, many of those young people were themselves workers. Local NAACP leader W. C. Patton recalled that Atherine Lucy, the black woman who famously confronted Governor George C. Wallace by enrolling in the University of Alabama, worked at a restaurant chain franchise until the radio picked up on her story, causing her white bosses to fire her the next day.53 Similarly, Lola Hendricks, who became a well-known local leader of the Birmingham movement, was the daughter of a “laborer at the coal yard” and a domestic servant. Although she experienced poverty in her youth, she nonetheless became the first person in her family to attend college, and she worked as an insurance clerk during the movement before becoming one of the first African Americans

51 George Holloway, interview by Michael Honey, Baltimore, Maryland, March 23, 1990, p. 50, Box TR 3, Behind the Veil.
employed by the federal government in Birmingham. Among those arrested at the landmark children’s march of 1963 were the children of UMW leader Leon Alexander, L&N union activist Nims Gay, and domestic worker Mattie Haywood.

Fred Shuttlesworth, the Birmingham movement’s most famous local religious leader, also came from the working class. In fact, when Colonel Stone Johnson helped organize the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks auxiliary at the L&N, he and other workers elected Shuttlesworth’s uncle, August U. Morris, to the local union’s presidency. According to Johnson, Morris and his wife raised their niece, Shuttlesworth’s wife, Ruby, as their own. The reverend and Johnson became so close that when the Shuttlesworths’ house was first bombed, Johnson recalled, “it was as if they had bombed my house.” Shuttlesworth’s working-class roots extended beyond his marriage and into his congregation. Reuben Davis, who led the fight for promotions at the L&N, also played a role in bringing the reverend to Birmingham. As a member of Bethel Baptist Church, Davis “could recommend various ministers to the chairman of the pulpit committee,” he recalled. Having heard at work that Morris’s nephew wanted to move from his current job in Selma, “I recommended that they invite Reverend Shuttlesworth” to come to Birmingham, Davis added.

Historian Glenn Eskew argues that Shuttlesworth’s ACMHR remained a distinctly working-class organization. Shuttlesworth organized the ACMHR in response to the state of Alabama’s decision to ban the NAACP by injunction on May 20, 1956. About two weeks later, on June 5, over one thousand largely working-class African Americans attended the ACMHR’s founding mass meeting at Sardis Baptist Church. Birmingham’s traditional black middle-class leadership, headed by the Reverend J. L. Ware, opposed both the meeting and the organization born from it. According to Eskew, such dissent resulted from both personal jealousy (Ware feared the emergence of

55 Leon Alexander, interview by Paul Ortiz, Tuskegee, Alabama, June 21 and 27, 1994, p. 60, Box TR 3, Behind the Veil; Transcript of Mattie C. Haywood interview, p. 9, BCROHP; Transcript of Nims Gay, interview by Horace Huntley, April 6, 1995, p. 14, BCROHP.
57 Reuben Davis interview, ibid., 129.
a new leader) and class politics. Instead of targeting the “professional people” who composed the Birmingham NAACP, the ACMHR sought to organize “respectable working class black people.” Eskew adds that 15 percent of the ACMHR’s employed members worked in highly skilled positions, while only a third filled completely unskilled positions “such as maids and janitors.” The remainder, who made up the majority, engaged in semiskilled industrial work constrained only by the “glass ceiling black people hit under segregation.” It was no coincidence that Reuben Davis, Colonel Stone Johnson, Lloyd Harper, Nims Gay, Mattie Haywood, and countless other black workers became active in the ACMHR. Rather, the Alabama Christian Movement itself—like its leader—was the product of working-class organizing.59

Black workers in Birmingham also contributed to the civil rights movement directly, as its “foot soldier[s],” an aphorism USWA lawyer Buddy Cooper attributed to Johnson.60 Indeed, such on-the-ground activism on the part of black workers occurred often before the founding of the ACMHR in 1956. Mine worker Earl B. Brown brought the message of the NAACP to the shop floor, spreading information about the organization to the black members of the UMW.61 At the risk of being fired from his nonunion job, ACIPCO worker Lloyd Harper raised money outside the plant first for the Montgomery Bus Boycott and later for the ACMHR, while Harvey Lee Henley Jr., another ACIPCO employee, clandestinely passed the hat to seek contributions on the shop floor. Though neither of them were fired, Henley remembered being the recipient of constant harassment from the plant superintendent: “If you attended the mass meetings, you would be reported to the company. I was reported, and the superintendent said, ‘Harvey, you involved in that mess going on down in Birmingham?’ I said, ‘I’m not directly involved, I’m an observer.’ He said, ‘Well, Harvey, we don’t need that kind of stuff. You too good a man to be tied up in that

59 Ibid., 36-38 (first quotation on 36; second and third quotations on 37; fourth quotation on 38). Eskew notes that Bethel Baptist’s four hundred members, including Reuben Davis, were also all part of the working class. The NAACP was not entirely middle class: several other working-class ministers who had, like Shuttlesworth, served on the NAACP board joined him in establishing the ACMHR. They saw themselves as a new leadership group answering the call of ordinary black Birminghamians who had grown frustrated with J. L. Ware’s cadre. Eskew also notes that, despite opposition from Ware, Shuttlesworth steadfastly advocated the hiring of black policemen both before and after the creation of the ACMHR. Ibid., 34, 39.
60 Jerome “Buddy” Cooper interview, in Huntley and Montgomery, eds., Black Workers’ Struggle for Equality in Birmingham, 144; Colonel Stone Johnson interview, ibid., 44–45.
61 Earl B. Brown, interview by Paul Ortiz, Mulga, Alabama, June 28, 1994, pp. 11–12, Box TR 3, Behind the Veil.
old communist stuff." While both the boss and the worker played their prescribed roles in this exchange, the threat lingered nonetheless. Harper likewise remembered that ACIPCO promised to automatically fire any worker jailed in civil rights demonstrations.

Such intimidation may help explain why few readily identifiable workers assumed formal leadership positions in the ACMHR. Like Henley and Harper, many industrial workers, domestic servants, and educators feared termination from their jobs or harassment at work as the possible price for visible participation in the movement. They nonetheless attended mass meetings and joined large demonstrations, but they often made known from the outset that they could not afford to be arrested and detained away from work for a protracted period.

Movement organizers recognized the obstacles faced by their working-class members, so they found other community members to take the most public of stands, including possible beatings or apprehension by police. In 1963 the movement called on workers' children to face down Bull Connor's police dogs and fire hoses. On other occasions, workers at businesses serving the black community, or sometimes the owners of these establishments, served as the struggle's shock troops. For example, Lincoln Hendricks had no need to fear economic reprisal since he worked at his family's delicatessen, which served black customers in one of Birmingham's industrial suburbs. Scholars have long observed that black reverends took on leadership roles in the civil rights movement, but less commonly noted is the fact that when they did so, they drew strength from the support of the working-class congregations who paid their salaries. In contrast, as Charles Payne has shown, black preachers at churches without independence from surrounding economic elites tended to shy away from the struggle.

Defying this general trend of workers' avoiding formal leadership posts, George Price took on extraordinary and revealing roles. After growing up in Birmingham, Price attended college for a year before


63 Lloyd Harper interview, ibid., 60; Harvey Lee Henley Jr. interview, ibid., 110.

64 For another striking example of workers' reluctance to be publicly named as part of the ACMHR, see Transcript of Colonel Stone Johnson interview, p. 20, BCRIOH.

65 Transcript of Lincoln Hendricks, interview by Horace Huntley, June 9, 1995, p. 7, BCRIOH. His older brother Elias Hendricks Sr. worked at Armour Packing and served as an officer of his local and district units of the United Packinghouse Workers of America. Elias avoided the civil rights demonstrations, not out of fear but because of his temper and aversion to nonviolence. Elias Hendricks Sr. interview, in Huntley and Montgomery, eds., Black Workers' Struggle for Equality in Birmingham, 63–67.

66 Payne, I've Got the Light of Freedom, 191–201.
entering the service during World War II. A black officer told Price's battery that the enlisted men were earning too much money, so the officer urged them to join the NAACP and contribute their surplus wages to the association. Price returned to Alabama and graduated from the Tuskegee Institute, and he got a job as an iron inspector at Connors Steel. It was there that he first joined a union and served as a shop steward. At his next job he became a committeeeman for the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers Union. "I've always, wherever I worked, if there was a labor union available, I always joined," he recalled. Price's participation in the labor movement dovetailed with his ongoing membership in a Birmingham-area NAACP chapter. "Blacks would always be underpaid, but the union made it so where blacks received what whites received [for] doing the same type of work," Price remembered. "The union made all the difference in the world. Without the union, they would run off anybody they want to and do what they wanted to do." Mine-Mill's radical civil rights unionism included a requirement that African Americans fill some of its top leadership posts, and Price soon rose to the post of vice president of Local 836. He managed to survive the USWA's takeover of Mine-Mill relatively unscathed, continuing as vice president of USWA Local 6612. Such a transition required strong support among rank-and-file black workers, but he also must have steered clear of the Communist Party. He thus served as a bridge between the radical organizing traditions of Mine-Mill and the liberal, anticommunist USWA. When the state of Alabama banned the NAACP in 1956, Price was uniquely positioned to serve as the de facto labor representative of the ACMHHR. He became a board member of the Alabama Christian Movement, charged with directing its voter registration initiatives—a task that blended seamlessly with his role in the USWA.67

Yet most of the movement's working-class members stayed out of visible roles and served as foot soldiers, sometimes in the literal sense. In addition to attending mass meetings and direct action demonstrations, many worked as guards to protect movement leaders from violent attacks. Colonel Stone Johnson, chair of the grievance committee at the L&N railroad yard, remembered,

[Shuttlesworth's uncle August] Morris said, "Johnson, you know Shuttlesworth can't get anybody to watch his house and the church? . . . You've got a lot of influence with the men out here in the union, and during the meeting nights,

67 George Price interview, in Huntley and Montgomery, eds., Black Workers' Struggle for Equality in Birmingham, 161–70 (quotations on 162). Also see Transcript of George Price interview, pp. 2, 4, BCRIOHP.
ask some of the fellows to volunteer." . . . I had a good friend that was president of a mine local; his name was Will Hall. They called him John L. Lewis because he represented the miners union, and he was real tough. . . . The Lord fixed it for us to get together. We organized a watchmen group, and in those days you wouldn't have survived calling yourself a "watchmen group" or a "security group," so we were labeled "ushers" for the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights.68

Johnson helped create a rotating schedule where different men took responsibility for weekly shifts guarding Bethel Baptist Church, the attached parsonage where Shuttlesworth lived, and other potential targets. Another movement participant, Robert Revis, lived across the street from Bethel Baptist and donated the use of his enclosed porch as an ad hoc guard station. One evening in June 1958 someone slipped by the "ushers" on foot and planted a bomb next to the church. Johnson remembered,

That was the bomb. It was in a fresh paint can, and the fuse was lit, which made the paint smoke. . . . We rushed out when we saw the smoke, Will Hall and myself. We got up close to it, and I said, "John L., that's some dynamite." . . . He was experienced with fuses that are in mines. He says, "Yeah, it's some dynamite." "Let's get it," he said, and both of us reached for it about the same time, and we caught the [handle] of the five-gallon paint can and walked it about eight to ten feet and set it in the gutter. . . . We backed off another eight to ten feet, and it went off. . . . BOOM! . . . The bomb blew all the glass out of the church, and for five to six blocks around, dishes broke . . . and windows broke . . . but the church still stood.69

As this story suggests, working as an "usher" for the ACMHR could be dangerous business, but such labor represented the movement's core defense against white supremacist violence.

Civil rights historians often note that crude dynamite attacks like this one became so frequent that the city earned the nickname "Bombingham." But the black workers who sat armed with shotguns on porches like Robert Revis's all over town have all but disappeared from popular memories and histories of the Birmingham movement. The near miss that evening at Bethel Baptist nonetheless won recognition among contemporaries in the ACMHR. Fearing further harassment, Johnson asked that his name be left out of the official account, so the

68 Colonel Stone Johnson interview, in Huntley and Montgomery, eds., Black Workers' Struggle for Equality in Birmingham, 42. Originally a leader of the UMl, Lewis was the first president of the CIO and one of the country's most famous union leaders at the time. Will Hall's nickname invoked Lewis's fierce brand of militant unionism.

69 Ibid., 43-44. For a slightly different telling of this incident, see LaVerne Revis Martin interview, in Horace Huntley and John W. McKerley, eds., Foot Soldiers for Democracy: The Men, Women, and Children of the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement (Urbana, 2009), 89-90.
miner alone received credit for removing the dynamite. Beneath a photograph labeled “Mr. John L. Lewis (Mr. Will Hall),” the commemorative program for the ACMHR’s second anniversary notes that his “daring courage saved the church from destruction.”

Like Johnson and Hall, most of the “ushers” were industrial workers recruited through the networks established over decades by black union activists. Reuben Davis took his turn doing guard duty for the movement, as did ACIPCO activist Lloyd Harper. The informal network connecting these men represented a critical foundation on which the ACMHR was built. Religious leaders and students played important roles in the Birmingham civil rights movement, but black workers like Johnson and Hall did much of the nitty-gritty work that sustained it. L&N unionist Nims Gay even served as the first director of the ACMHR choir!

In turn, Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR leadership acknowledged the importance of jobs and other working-class concerns through their actions. Battles for spatial desegregation often went hand in hand with the economic issues at the heart of black Birminghamians’ decades-long fight against discrimination.

The fight over segregated buses offers one example. As Robin Kelley has pointed out, buses had long been a frequent site of black resistance and white violence. General unrest became mass defiance after the ACMHR demanded that the Birmingham Transit Company

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70 Transcript of Colonel Stone Johnson interview, p. 20, BCRIOHP.
71 “Two Years of Progress of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights” (second anniversary commemorative program), 1958, p. 11, AR1102.2.4, Birmingham World Office Files (BPL). Note that the “Office Files” collection, AR1102, is distinct from what I call the “Office Files, Correspondence Series,” which is cataloged as AR1102.1; both are followed by box and folder numbers per the archive’s citation and retrieval guidelines.
72 Not all of the “ushers” were union men, but most if not all were workers. Charles Gratton—who opposed unionization at ACIPCO—worked as a guard on a weekly basis. The “ushers” protected other potential targets, including the home of Arthur Shores. Charles Gratton interview, pp. 34–35, Behind the Veil; Reuben Davis interview, in Huntley and Montgomery, eds., Black Workers’ Struggle for Equality in Birmingham, 129–30; Transcript of Lloyd Harper, interview by Horace Huntley, June 12, 1996, p. 15, BCRIOHP. Nims Gay was also part of this network, though he did not mention in his interview whether he served as a guard. Transcript of Nims Gay interview, p. 20, BCRIOHP.
73 Transcript of Nims Gay interview, p. 11, BCRIOHP. Gay, who watched his son get assaulted by Bull Connor’s fire hoses during the 1963 march, grew up in the milieu of Birmingham’s Communist Party. He recalled the Scottsboro case and his uncle’s close relationship to the party. Gus Hall, who later ran for president on the Communist Party of the United States of America ticket, stayed at Gay’s uncle’s home whenever Hall visited the Magic City. See ibid., 8–9, 14. Gay thus served as an intergenerational link between the Old Left and the civil rights movement in its classical phase.
follow the example of Montgomery and integrate its coaches. In July 1956 Shuttlesworth wrote to the city commission asking for the body's views on "the two basic issues involved (the hiring by the Bus Company of Negro Operators, and the Federal Court Injunction against Bus Segregation) . . . ." Of course, the two demands were intertwined; black bus drivers would presumably be less likely than whites to violently confront black passengers, as had been the case far too often since at least World War II. But the movement's demand went deeper than that: "Know, Sirs, that we are deeply concerned about receiving a more just and equitable share of this city's economy, both in better jobs and better opportunities," Shuttlesworth continued.75

These issues pointed to another, related question: "We would appreciate also if you would take some position on the much needed matter of [hiring] Negro Policemen."76 Immediately after its founding in 1956, the ACMHR approached the city to request this change. As one pamphlet published in 1959 put it, "The new organization's first effort was directed toward getting the city of Birmingham to hire Negroes on its police force. When petitions and delegations to officials failed, a suit was filed in October, 1956, against the Personnel Board demanding the right of Negroes to take examinations for all civil service jobs—police, clerical, etc. The Personnel Board later removed the 'white only' designation from all jobs, and Negroes were allowed to take examinations. None, however, have ever been hired, and new court action is now being prepared."77 In his annual ACMHR report in June 1959, Shuttlesworth called on movement members to continue the fight by testing the new system: "Negroes must now take all examinations—and should do so in large numbers. This is necessary to the second step of proving discrimination in hiring."78

Both the demand to hire bus drivers and the campaign for black police officers proved to be protracted fights. The Alabama Christian Movement had not yet engaged in direct action when terrorists first bombed Bethel Baptist on Christmas night in 1956. The very next day Shuttlesworth led a mass action in which twenty-two black protesters

75 Copy of letter from F. L. Shuttlesworth and N. H. Smith Jr. to Birmingham City Commission, July 26, 1956, pp. 1-2, AR1102.1.1.1, Birmingham World Office Files, Correspondence Series.
76 Ibid., 2.
77 "They Challenge Segregation at Its Core," brochure published by Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, in cooperation with the Southern Conference Educational Fund, n.d. [1959], AR1102.2.4, Birmingham World Office Files.
78 Copy of "President's Annual Report," June 5, 1959, p. 2, AR1102.2.3, Birmingham World Office Files; emphasis in original. See also "Two Years of Progress of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights" (second anniversary commemorative program), 6, 28.
were jailed for defying segregation on the bus. The civil rights organization filed suit soon after but lost the case when the city and the private transit company changed the laws to comply with federal statutes but nonetheless gave the drivers the power to seat passengers and maintain the practice of segregation. At an October 1958 mass meeting, ACMHR members approved a series of resolutions opposing this legal end around, demanding "courtesy" from white drivers, and renewing the call for "company employment of some Negroes as Drivers by December 15, 1958 to demonstrate appreciation for patronage and continued cooperation." Thirteen movement members again defied the new law and company rules, leading to their arrest.79

Despite a justifiable fear of reprisal, black workers joined the bus fight as it raged on into the early 1960s. The ACMHR produced a series of pamphlets giving riders instructions on how to conduct themselves as they challenged the segregated buses, and the foot soldiers took these lessons to heart.80 As recounted above, paper and iron worker Jimmie Louis Warren got arrested when he sat in the white section of a Birmingham bus in 1960. That same year Lloyd Harper, who twice tried to unionize ACIPCO, participated in an ACMHR-sponsored test of Birmingham's segregated bus system. With his two children in tow, he boarded a bus and sat in the white section. The bus driver overlooked the infraction, Harper remembered, but a white passenger demanded that the driver kick the black family off the bus. Harper requested and received a refund of his fare despite the fact that drivers typically claimed that they were unable to make change. Harper and his children stepped off the bus and caught the next one, again sitting in the white section. This time the whites merely grumbled, but a black friend asked him to "come back here where you belong."81 On another
occasion local union vice president and ACMHR board member George Price boarded a bus downtown and sat near the front. The driver skipped Price's stop and then "was kind of nasty" when Price wrote down the identification numbers of both the bus and its operator. The demand for black drivers remained tied to the push to desegregate seating as late as the famed confrontation beginning in April 1963. Days before the children's march, three African Americans applied for jobs as drivers, and movement leaders planned yet another meeting with company officials. Price remembered that it took constant tests, a delegation of white students willing to challenge the color line, and endless negotiations with the bus company before Birmingham finally desegregated its public transit system.

Black workers served on the front lines as the ACMHR gradually extended the direct action campaign from the buses to other public spaces. Soon after his arrest on the bus, Jimmie Louis Warren and his friend Wilson Brown attended a University of Alabama football game at Legion Field in Birmingham. The two black men were the only African Americans in the stadium except for "those that had on white coats [concessions workers]." Throughout the game white spectators jeered at Warren and Brown, and when it ended, a mob of white fans chased them from the stadium, throwing punches at Warren as he fled—straight into a police car. The police took him downtown for questioning but never charged him, but neither did they investigate his white assailants. The incident was reported on the radio and in local papers, and Warren's employer, the Birmingham Paper Company, later fired him as a result.

When the Alabama Christian Movement turned to the desegregation of lunch counters during the climactic civil rights campaign code-named "Project C" in April and May 1963, economic justice issues remained paramount. Historians frequently include the movement's

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82 George Price interview, ibid., 167.
85 Jimmie Louis Warren interview, ibid., 197–99 (quotation on 199). According to one report, these events took place on September 22, 1962, at a game against the University of Georgia. Warren remembered it taking place at a game against Georgia Tech in 1961, which according to Alabama football records was played on November 18 of that year. See "Ala. Fan Beaten after Grid Game," Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition), September 25, 1962, p. 2. The date of the 1961 game can be found by downloading the 1961 season recaps from the archives page of the University of Alabama Official Athletic Site, http://www.rolltide.com/sports/m-footbl/archive/alab-m-footbl-archive.html.
appeal for jobs at downtown department stores on a long laundry list of ACMHR demands, but few scholars add further comment. Yet viewed within the context of a decades-long struggle for the best jobs in town, the appeal for employment probably played a central role in helping the ACMHR win the support of the black community. On April 9, just six days into the unprecedented wave of demonstrations, Wyatt Tee Walker sent out a press release boasting that the city’s Baptist Ministers Union had endorsed the ACMHR’s actions. “Chief among the Negro requests are the immediate desegregation of lunch counter facilities and the establishment of fair hiring practice and job upgrading on a non-discriminatory basis,” the statement read. The push for equal employment opportunity clearly helped the Alabama Christian Movement gain legitimacy with a politically diverse group of black ministers, and it aided the mobilization of black workers and their families. The demonstrations and boycott did not cease until early May, when downtown merchants agreed to desegregate and hire at least one black clerk within ninety days. The following year the ACMHR again took to the streets with a selective buying campaign aimed at forcing the hand of retailers who had ignored the 1963 agreement, and for the next several years movement leaders repeatedly extended their call to move away from token hiring of black workers toward fully nondiscriminatory employment practices.

Meanwhile, black workers also continued to engage in direct action in the years after Project C. Jimmie Louis Warren joined with several black coworkers from his new job at U.S. Pipe to test the newly integrated Dobbs House restaurant at the Birmingham airport. Shuttlesworth had first requested service there in 1960, and a court ruling in 1962 ordered that the restaurant serve all customers since it was involved in interstate commerce. The Civil Rights Act of 1964
extended racial integration to all private establishments. Although the exact date of their action remains unclear, Warren and his coworkers certainly had the law on their side when they went to the airport one Sunday afternoon. They were also armed with instructions from the ACMHR and joined by Jim Hendricks, Lola’s brother-in-law, whom Warren had met at the Hendricks family deli, a popular gathering place for movement participants. When the four men arrived at Dobbs House, Warren recalled, the wait staff initially refused to serve them, claiming that the restaurant had closed. The activists pointed out that the white customers were getting service, so management reluctantly agreed to feed the black men as well. “We all got a ham sandwich and a Coke, and they charged us ten dollars apiece for a ham sandwich,” Warren remembered. “So we sat there and ate and paid for it. Jim [Hendricks] said he wasn’t going to eat his—he was going to take it home, keep it, and put it in the freezer, and he did.” But as the other black men ate, the restaurant turned away new incoming customers and then closed for the day.90

Black workers also took the lead in the decades-long voter registration campaign, a key component of Birmingham’s “long civil rights movement.” As early as the 1930s Earl Brown and other UMW leaders began helping union miners, both black and white, register to vote. Leon Alexander remembered that Walter Jones, the black UMW organizer who rebuilt the union during the Great Depression, had a saying that “when the company’s kicking ass they don’t look to see whether the ass is black or white they just started kicking ass and if it happen to be a white ass he get kicked just like the black one.”91 Motivated by this ethos of interracial solidarity, Alexander and Brown encouraged white miners to pay their poll taxes while simultaneously encouraging black workers to register to vote. Up until the NAACP was banned in 1956, Brown helped the organization by canvassing the mine and asking black miners whether they were registered. He invited those who were not to attend educational

90 Jimmie Louis Warren interview, in Huntley and Montgomery, eds., Black Workers’ Struggle for Equality in Birmingham, 201–2. Surprisingly, Warren was unaware of the prior history at the Dobbs House; he believed that his was the first sit-in at the airport. On Shuttlesworth’s earlier attempt, see copy of “Brief in Support of Defendant’s Motion to Dismiss,” Shuttlesworth et al. v Dobbs Houses, Inc., Civil Action No. 9765, United States District Court, Northern District of Alabama, Southern Division, in Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights Collection; and “Dobbs House Must Serve Everybody,” Baltimore Afro-American, July 28, 1962, p. 18.

91 Leon Alexander interview, p. 15, Behind the Veil.
meetings at church after work. Likewise, Alexander worked with NAACP chief W. C. Patton to organize similar seminars at his church and in people’s homes, and steelworker Roosevelt Williams taught some of the classes. Union leader George Price became the ACMHR’s director of voter registration after the injunction against the NAACP. Between 1956 and 1964, when the NAACP returned to Alabama, Price’s campaign was credited with registering over seventeen thousand voters.

While the NAACP and the ACMHR both contributed to the registration of black voters in the Birmingham area, the most durable institution was the Bessemer Voters’ League (BVL), another working-class organization, located in an industrial suburb. Black leaders of the left-leaning Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers Union helped found the BVL and served as officers of the Bessemer branch of the NAACP. Asbury Howard Sr. led both groups in addition to fulfilling his duties as the international vice president and southeastern regional director of Mine-Mill. Organized in the late 1940s, the BVL offered voter education classes and helped African Americans go to the county courthouse to register to vote. Asbury Howard and Mine-Mill came under attack for having Communist sympathies, but the BVL survived the half decade of devastating USWA raids on the union. As the BVL continued its work of registering black voters, the charges of Communist infiltration gradually subsided. In 1953 NAACP labor secretary Herbert Hill, a staunch anticommunist, recommended that the national office remove Howard and the rest of the Bessemer leadership. But NAACP regional secretary Ruby Hurley expressed a different view that emphasized the nuts and bolts of the struggle. She contended that the Mine-Mill workers had led the association’s activities in the area and had done nothing to violate NAACP policy. The USWA-CIO people, in contrast, were “doing the griping without going to the Branch to work...” Helped by Hurley’s intervention, the

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93 Leon Alexander interview, pp. 24–26, Behind the Veil; Roosevelt Williams, interview by Paul Ortiz, Birmingham, Alabama, June 24, 1994, pp. 21–23, Box TR 3, Behind the Veil.
94 George Price interview, in Huntley and Montgomery, eds., Black Workers’ Struggle for Equality in Birmingham, 165. He also remembered that some forty thousand people were turned down by voter registrars in a three-year span.
96 “Memorandum to Mr. Gloster B. Current from Mrs. Ruby Hurley, Regional Secretary,” July 17, 1953, Box A-9, Part II, NAACP Papers.
Bessemer branch continued to function under the same BVL leadership into the 1960s. Their voter registration work formed an integral part of the larger civil rights movement, and their contributions did not go unrecognized. The Birmingham World took note of a ceremony in which the Bessemer Baptist Ministers Conference and the West Jefferson County Coordinating Council honored the BVL’s leader by declaring February 12, 1960, “Asbury Howard Day.” Howard’s work earned another kind of recognition from white supremacist terrorists, who in 1957 firebombed his house and in 1959 severely beat him as he left a Bessemer courtroom.

Howard, Johnson, Warren, and untold others served as the foot soldiers of the civil rights movement, making an invaluable contribution to the struggle. Black workers led the battle for access to skilled jobs, joined the ACMHR, formed the unit of “ushers” who protected the movement against violent attack, conducted direct action demonstrations in cafeterias and on buses, and registered voters. They also gave the larger movement its esprit de corps, its gestalt, or, for lack of better words, its vision, mission, and even its meaning. And as the great civil rights organizations began to fizzle and search for new directions in the mid-1960s, black workers continued to carry their organizing tradition back to the shop floor.

By 1964 the Alabama Christian Movement listed “some upgrading by stores and numerous industrial concerns” among its long list of accomplishments. Yet for many black workers, “some” was not good enough. As the ACMHR called for “More in ’64,” black workers in Birmingham continued the fight for access to the best jobs available.

Nancy MacLean has ably demonstrated that African Americans seized the opportunity presented by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to demand inclusion at the workplace. The new bill gave black workers unprecedented legal power to achieve this goal, and it created a federal agency with the capacity to enforce the new order. But the legislation did not create the demand, nor did it entirely meet the lofty expectations

98 “Alabama Drops Case,” Baltimore Afro-American, February 7, 1959, p. 2; Patrick Murphy Malin, American Civil Liberties Union, to E. O. Jackson, August 1959, AR1102.1.1.11, Birmingham World Office Files, Correspondence Series. Howard was not at his home when it was bombed in 1957; he was in Washington, D.C., preparing for the national Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, held on May 17.
99 “Eight Years of Progress of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights” (eighth anniversary commemorative program), p. 5, AR1102.2.4, Birmingham World Office Files.
100 Nancy MacLean, Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace (New York, 2006).
of African American laborers who had struggled toward the same end for decades. Still, the passage of Title VII and the flowering of the movement that won it did embolden black workers to engage in yet another round of protests for justice on the job.

Colonel Stone Johnson credited his union activism with preparing him for the civil rights movement, but other black workers reversed his formula, believing that their activism on the job stemmed from their training in the movement. For example, Jimmie Louis Warren recalled, “And so the Christian Movement [ACMHR] kind of gave me an insight on how to handle myself out there on the job.” When he got fired from Birmingham Paper Company, Warren and his friend Wilson Brown left town to attend a series of SNCC training seminars. “I had this little training from Talladega and Atlanta from SNCC about how to move up when things come open,” Warren remembered, so when he got the job at U.S. Pipe, he was ready to begin the fight for access to the good jobs reserved for whites. In addition to bidding for those posts, Warren and other black U.S. Pipe workers staged a sit-in during a union meeting, refusing to sit in the “so-called black side” of the hall and instead intermingling with the white members. Warren and his peers later filed a series of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaints against both the company and the union, the Molders and Allied Workers, and the black workers eventually won and forced the removal of Jim Crow signs from the union hall. But the union remained in the same space at the time of Warren’s oral history interview in 1996, leaving dual water fountains and dual restrooms as durable signs of past discrimination (all workers used both sets of facilities by 1996).101

In the early and mid-1960s, black workers at ACIPCO brought the civil rights movement back to the job despite the fact that their plant remained nonunion. Harvey Lee Henley Jr. remembered that both Andrew Young of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC often tried to recruit black industrial workers to participate in their organizations. “They would meet with us and talk about labor’s untold story,” Henley recalled.102 Early in


102 Harvey Lee Henley Jr. interview, ibid., 110–12 (quotation on 111). Henley narrated the stories of these actions and dated them around 1963. He also listed 1963 as the peak of the movement. But he paradoxically concluded that “if you don’t have the national government supporting you, it
the decade Henley led a pair of efforts aimed at winning access to jobs and desegregating plant facilities. Since ACIPCO received government contracts, Henley and other black workers filed complaints with the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity in 1961. Henley remembered that the agency initially gave them "the runaround," so they continued to write letters until government investigators came to the plant in 1963. Still, the committee's attempt "to get good faith agreements" stalled, and the case remained in limbo. The passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 allowed Henley and his coworkers to sue ACIPCO in court, where they ultimately won their case. On the shop floor Henley and his coworkers formed a caucus called the Committee for Equal Job Opportunity, which then staged a sit-in at the plant cafeteria. "When the sit-ins were going on downtown, we were sitting in at the ACIPCO restaurant. Those were bold moves because we didn't have no union," Henley recalled. Management tore down the wall that had divided the cafeteria, and the change in the plant's race relations was palpable. Henley remembered, "We would come out of the shop, all sweaty and dirty, and go to the restaurant and sit next to white people who were dressed in suits." On one occasion a white carpenter threatened the black workers with a hammer, but they walked past him without incident, and the cafeteria remained integrated.103

Black workers did not carry out their struggles in isolation from one another. Rather, their personal and political relationships overlapped to create a loose network of like-minded activists. Colonel Stone Johnson, for example, organized the watchmen group by drawing on his union and industrial community contacts. By the mid-1960s these informal networks had produced at least one formal organization of activist black workers. Initially, Jimmie Louis Warren and coworker Willie Hicks formed a committee of black workers at U.S. Pipe that met on Sundays at a nearby YMCA. Warren remembered, "We had a secretary and treasurer, president, and things like that. And so we would get blacks to come and educate them about what they can do." Later workers from other plants joined the U.S. Pipe committee for the Sunday meetings. Black workers from ACIPCO, U.S. Steel, Stockham Valve, and others joined together to coordinate their campaign for access to skilled jobs.

103 Ibid., 110-11. See note 32 regarding the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity.
"We had people from each plant," Warren recalled. Members of this citywide caucus began filing complaints even before the creation of the EEOC. Warren claimed that they filed so many charges that the EEOC was forced to establish a branch in Birmingham in order to process their cases.  

Despite this ongoing activism, the struggle for justice on the job remained far from over. Conflicts over the integration of company bathhouses raged at mines, mills, and yards in the Birmingham area into the late 1960s. According to several black workers, most white workers refused to bathe or share locker rooms with blacks for years after passage of the Civil Rights Act. Some whites initially responded by leaving work without showering. Black workers fondly remember that this strategy failed because the white workers’ wives protested their husbands’ smell in the car on the way home from their shifts. At one mine, white workers then rented their own trailer in order to bathe and change clothes there rather than rub shoulders with their black counterparts.

In 1966 the labor and industry committee of the NAACP Birmingham branch conducted a study of ongoing violations of the Civil Rights Act in and around the Magic City. Focusing its efforts on government contractors in heavy industry, the committee received over five hundred complaints filed by black workers against their employers and unions. Of these, over three hundred originated at the Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Company (TCI) or other U.S. Steel facilities. In one egregious case, a union representative at TCI told a black worker with a grievance to "get the hell out." Nearly all major corporations in Birmingham maintained segregated locker rooms, pay lines, and cafeteria sections by assigning numbers to employees based on race, the committee reported. At the U.S. Pipe Company, management created a numbering system to prevent the integration of the bathhouses. Workers numbered 1–900 were black and used one set of facilities, while white workers

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105 These stories recur frequently in the oral history interviews and can be thought of as the black workers’ oral tradition. The best account is Leon Alexander interview, pp. 3–8, 55–58, Behind the Veil. Also see Transcript of Jimmie Louis Warren interview, p. 24, BCRIOH; Earl Brown interview, pp. 5–6, Behind the Veil; and notes on author’s unrecorded conversation with Colonel Stone Johnson, Birmingham, Alabama, October 10, 2008, in author’s possession.
106 John W. Nixon et al., “Report of the Labor and Industry Committee of the Birmingham Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” 1966, pp. 1, 8 (quotation), 9, AR1102.1.1.6, Birmingham World Office Files, Correspondence Series.
were labeled 1,000 and up and used another.\textsuperscript{107} Hayes Aircraft hired black workers frequently but for only weeks at a time in order to doctor its aggregate numbers to mislead government regulators into thinking the firm hired equally across racial lines. ACIPCO—like all the unionized plants—maintained separate facilities, used racially biased or often rigged examinations to determine promotions, and counted seniority based only on time of service in a given occupation rather than overall time employed in the plant. This last practice, common both before and after the Civil Rights Act, guaranteed that layoffs disproportionately affected black workers who had either just arrived in skilled jobs or continued to toil in the rapidly disappearing unskilled positions. The NAACP committee called for immediate “positive and affirmative action in rectifying these discriminatory abuses.”\textsuperscript{108} The association’s call went unheeded. As Judith Stein, Nancy MacLean, and others have shown, it took numerous EEOC complaints and copious court battles before the steel industry settled these grievances in a “consent decree” in 1974.\textsuperscript{109}

Yet the string of complaints, lawsuits, and negotiations do not entirely explain the eventual shift toward racial equality at work sites across Birmingham. Rather, the change also required that Johnson, Davis, Warren, Henley, and myriad other black workers engage in a wide range of struggles on the shop floor and in the union hall. They did so before the formation and during the heyday of the Alabama Christian Movement as well as before and after the Civil Rights Act, in all cases drawing strength from networks and caucuses with their fellow black workers. Their daily activities helped shape the black freedom struggle in all of Birmingham while providing on-the-ground enforcement of court rulings and federal laws. If Project C helped create the Civil Rights Act, as is commonly assumed, black workers helped first to write the landmark law and then to define its meaning.

African Americans’ struggle for jobs and justice persisted throughout Birmingham’s “long civil rights movement.” Economic issues, often recognized as paramount during the Great Depression and World War II, did not simply disappear in the late 1940s. Nor did they suddenly reappear after 1964. Rather, despite the rising anticommunism of the cold war, occupational mobility continued to serve as a rallying cry for

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 4–5 (quotation on 4).
black activists in Birmingham—and perhaps elsewhere. It is true, in the words of Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, that some opportunities were in fact lost. As Jacquelyn Hall has recently reasserted, during the “classical phase,” black activists “could not ground their battle in growing, vibrant, social democratic unions” and instead relied on “independent protest organizations.”

But the innumerable examples of black working-class activism recounted above suggest that this moment of rupture and this dichotomy at an organizational level might not have been as sharp and severe as many historians have assumed. Indeed, these stories highlight a marked continuity of vision, tactics, and personnel at the level of on-the-ground activists. Black trade unionists in Birmingham both led and populated the ACMHR, a so-called independent protest organization. Black participation in the labor movement remained sufficiently robust in 1958 that the Alabama Christian Movement celebrated a hero nicknamed John L. Lewis without the need to further explain what the honorific epithet meant.

More generally, from teachers to industrial workers to maids to garbage men, African American workers fought for and often won access to better jobs and a degree of dignity at work throughout the long post-war period, including before the Civil Rights Act. Drawing on one, two, or more decades of experience, many black working-class activists were well primed to extend their struggle into new arenas by the time the so-called classical phase of the movement began in the mid-1950s. In Birmingham, the outlawing of the NAACP opened up space for new leadership in the black community, and African American workers helped propel Fred Shuttlesworth to fill the vacuum. This working-class preacher, with the support of his laboring congregation, laid out an agenda that foregrounded the ongoing organizing tradition in Birmingham’s industrial areas. The ACMHR he led fought nearly all of its battles with one eye toward expanding economic opportunities, a goal that no doubt sprang from the expansive political agenda of many rank-and-file movement participants.

Black workers became the foot soldiers of the struggle, physically protecting its leaders and taking its campaigns to desegregate public spaces to the streets, often at great personal cost. African American laborers brought the struggle for racial equality to work and the fight for economic justice to the larger community. Each arena of struggle

reinforced and strengthened the other, and both profited from the exchange of people and ideas from work site to community and back again. The short civil rights movement in Birmingham was a product of protracted working-class organizing even as it spurred new demands and protests on the job. Black workers did not merely contribute to a movement led by preachers and students; the workers built it. And in so doing, they endowed it with an unmistakably working-class vision.