

# The Unknown Origins of the March on Washington: Civil Rights Politics and the Black Working Class

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The very decade which has witnessed the decline of legal Jim Crow has also seen the rise of *de facto* segregation in our most fundamental socioeconomic institutions,” veteran civil rights activist Bayard Rustin wrote in 1965, pointing out that black workers were more likely to be unemployed, earn low wages, work in “jobs vulnerable to automation,” and live in impoverished ghettos than when the U.S. Supreme Court banned legal segregation in 1954. Historians have attributed that divergence to a narrowing of African American political objectives during the 1950s and early 1960s, away from demands for employment and economic reform that had dominated the agendas of civil rights organizations in the 1940s and later regained urgency in the late 1960s. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and other scholars emphasize the negative effects of the Cold War, arguing that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other civil rights organizations responded to domestic anticommunism by distancing themselves from organized labor and the Left and by focusing on racial rather than economic forms of inequality. Manfred Berg and Adam Fairclough offer the more positive assessment that focusing on racial equality allowed civil rights activists to appropriate the democratic rhetoric of anticommunism and solidify alliances with white liberals during the Cold War, although they agree that “anti-communist hysteria retarded the struggle for racial justice and narrowed the political

Research for this article was supported by a National Endowment for the Humanities/Newhouse Fellowship at the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Graduate School at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The author is grateful for assistance from staff at the Schomburg Center, the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, and the Library of Congress and for comments and criticism from Eric Arnesen; Daniel Bender; Eileen Boris; Dorothy Sue Cobble; Christina Ewig; Leon Fink; Jacquelyn Hall; Steve Kantrowitz; Nancy MacLean; Florencia Mallon; Paul Ortiz; Adolph Reed; Touré Reed; Renee Romano; James Wolfinger; participants in the Schomburg Center Scholars-in-Residence Seminar, the Newberry Library Labor History Seminar, the Long Civil Rights Movement Conference at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the Labor Studies for the Twenty-First-Century Graduate Seminar at University of Wisconsin, Madison; and anonymous readers at *Labor* and the *Journal of American History*.

*Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, Volume 7, Issue 3

DOI 10.1215/15476715-2010-008 © 2010 by Labor and Working-Class History Association

options of the civil rights movement.” Meanwhile, Thomas Sugrue, Nancy MacLean, and Timothy Minchin focus on renewed attention to economic inequality in the late 1960s, attributing it to a resurgence of black working-class activism inspired by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and a resurfacing of radical voices previously “driven underground by McCarthyism.” These and other studies remind us that Rustin, A. Philip Randolph, and Martin Luther King Jr. remained committed to economic radicalism between 1954 and 1965 but portray them as isolated individuals who, as Sugrue writes of Randolph, “did not have much of a movement under his aegis.”<sup>1</sup>

However, the signature demonstration of that decade was the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which mobilized a quarter of a million people in 1963 behind demands for equal access to jobs, public accommodations, and voting rights; raising the minimum wage and extending it to workers in agriculture and domestic service; and placing all unemployed workers in “meaningful and dignified jobs at decent wages.” The March on Washington was initiated by the Negro American Labor Council (NALC), which Randolph and several thousand other black trade unionists created to challenge discrimination within the AFL-CIO. Black trade unionists expanded their agenda to embrace demands for integration and voting rights advanced by King and other southern militants, but they refused to abandon economic reforms to curry favor with liberal leaders of the NAACP or the AFL-CIO. Instead, they drew support from local unions and civil rights organizations in black working-class communities, mostly in the urban North, where they had lived

1. Bayard Rustin, “From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement,” in *Down the Line: The Collective Writings of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 112; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91 (2005): 1250. See also Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Robert R. Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Manfred Berg, “Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War,” *Journal of American History* 94 (2007): 96. See also Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890–2000* (New York: Penguin Press, 2001), 214–16; Eric Arnesen, “No ‘Graver Danger’: Black Anticommunism, the Communist Party, and the Race Question,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 3, no. 3 (2006): 51; Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), 289; Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 38; Timothy J. Minchin, *Color of Work: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Southern Paper Industry, 1945–1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). John D’Emilio dismisses the NALC as a “shadow organization” and credits Rustin and Randolph with building the March on Washington “out of nothing”; *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 331, 340. Thomas Gentile writes that of the “six civil rights leaders who organized the March . . . all but Randolph headed major civil rights organizations in 1963”; *March on Washington: August 28, 1963* (Washington, DC: New Day, 1983), 3. See also Michael Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike* (New York: Norton, 2007); Dona Cooper Hamilton and Charles V. Hamilton, *The Dual Agenda: Race and Social Welfare Policies of Civil Rights Organizations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

and worked since the 1940s. Liberal civil rights and labor leaders finally joined the mobilization a few months before the march, placing their considerable financial and political resources behind an agenda that had already been defined by the radicals who initiated and organized the demonstration. The March on Washington Coalition did not achieve every aspect of that agenda, but it convinced President John F. Kennedy to add equal employment measures to the civil rights bill that he proposed a few months earlier and persuaded Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, to couple the Civil Rights Act with the war on poverty.<sup>2</sup>

The March on Washington addressed the economic crisis facing working-class African Americans more effectively than any other mobilization since the Second World War. While liberals shied away from economic demands during the Cold War, black trade unionists insisted that access to jobs and union representation were even more critical in an era when automation and economic restructuring were destroying the entry-level industrial jobs that had provided black men with critical economic opportunities since the 1920s. Building on the networks that civil rights, labor, and left-wing activists forged during struggles against employment discrimination in the 1940s, they also provided financial and tactical support to King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and other grassroots organizations that emerged from the direct action campaigns against segregation and disfranchisement in the South. By the early 1960s, that alliance of northern and southern radicals was able to challenge liberal leadership of the civil rights movement, mobilizing working-class communities across the country behind a combined agenda, "for jobs and freedom." Polls taken just before the March on Washington indicated that African Americans were far more concerned with getting a job at decent wages than with getting served at a segregated restaurant, so it is unlikely that so many would have joined a demonstration that focused narrowly on racial equality.<sup>3</sup>

Black trade unionists forged a broad consensus among civil rights and labor leaders—as well as the Johnson administration—that racial equality could not be achieved without broad-based economic reform, but they failed to solidify a political coalition capable of fully realizing that agenda. Even before the March on Washington was over, Nation of Islam leader Malcolm X criticized Randolph and King for allegedly compromising their agenda to please white liberals. There was little substance to that charge, but it gained credibility after march leaders closed ranks with Johnson to secure passage of the Civil Rights Act and ensure his reelection over civil rights opponent Barry Goldwater in 1964. Meanwhile, an increasingly vocal cohort of black "labor feminists" pushed black trade unionists to expand their agenda beyond securing jobs for black men, arguing that it was equally important to improve wages and working conditions in service and light industrial jobs that employed increas-

2. "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," newsletter 2, March on Washington folder, box 39, B. F. McLauren Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and History, New York Public Library, New York.

3. Polls cited in Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 172.

ing numbers of black women. Those disagreements grew in the face of a conservative backlash against the gains of the early 1960s and the Johnson administration's rising commitment to the war in Vietnam, leading to the collapse of the March on Washington Coalition and a splintering of the NALC, the SCLC, and other radical organizations that had transformed the civil rights movement in the previous decade. Written in the context of that crisis, Bayard Rustin's 1965 essay was directed at white liberals and black nationalists who he feared were abandoning the economic reforms that he and others had pushed to the center of the civil rights agenda in the previous decade.

In addition to complicating common assumptions about the civil rights movement, this account of the March on Washington forces us to reconsider a broader historical narrative in which the social democratic liberalism of the New Deal era was, as Nelson Lichtenstein writes, "eclipsed, if not actually replaced" by the rights-conscious liberalism of the Cold War. Gary Gerstle links that "unraveling of the Rooseveltian nation" directly to the March on Washington, arguing that Martin Luther King Jr.'s failure to address economic inequality in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech reflected not just the stifling impact of anticommunism but also a broader disillusionment with the civic nationalism that animated economic reform during the New Deal. Both Lichtenstein and Gerstle assume that civil rights leaders faced a stark choice between New Deal and Cold War liberalisms, overlooking the possibility that by insisting that social democracy and civil rights were not only compatible but also mutually reinforcing, the March on Washington transcended American liberalism in both its postwar varieties. Journalist Murray Kempton acknowledged that accomplishment after watching Bayard Rustin close the march by leading participants in a mass recitation of their official demands. "No expression one-tenth so radical has ever been seen or heard by so many Americans," Kempton reported in the liberal magazine *New Republic*.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Negro American Labor Council**

The NALC was not formed until 1960, but in many respects it was an outgrowth of the March on Washington movement of the 1940s. A. Philip Randolph initiated that earlier movement by threatening to organize one hundred thousand black workers to protest employment discrimination during the Second World War. Randolph cancelled the demonstration after President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) in 1941, but he and other black trade unionists continued to mobilize for stronger and more lasting legislation. Garment workers Maida Springer and Dorothy L. Robinson staged a series of massive rallies in New York City, working closely with Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Bayard Rustin, Pauli

4. Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 141–211; Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 270, 279–86. For a more recent argument for the incompatibility between racial equality and economic justice, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006); Murray Kempton, "The March on Washington," *New Republic*, September 14, 1963, 19.

Murray, and other activists who would play key roles in the 1963 March on Washington. Other black trade unionists established fair employment committees within their unions and forged ties between labor and civil rights activists in their communities. They included packinghouse workers Charles Hayes and Addie Wyatt in Chicago, autoworkers Horace Sheffield and Robert Battle in Detroit, Theodore McNeal of the sleeping car porters and Ernest Calloway of the teamsters in St. Louis, and Cleveland Robinson (no relation to Dorothy) of the retail workers union in New York City.<sup>5</sup>

The March on Washington movement disintegrated following the Second World War, primarily because of strategic differences between radical black trade unionists and liberal leaders of the NAACP and the National Urban League. Drawing inspiration from a variety of sources including Gandhian nonviolence and Debsian socialism, Randolph argued that large demonstrations and rallies were more effective methods for social and political change than lawsuits and private meetings with elected officials. Leaders of the NAACP and Urban League endorsed the March on Washington early in 1941, but they feared that continued demonstrations would alienate them from white supporters after the United States entered the war later that year. Randolph attempted to sustain the movement by organizing the National Council for a Permanent FEPC, which he recruited Anna Arnold Hedgeman to lead, but liberals refused to fund activities other than legal action and lobbying. In 1948, leaders of the NAACP dissolved the national council and transformed it into a formal lobbying organization called the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, bureaucratization of civil rights activism also eliminated leadership positions held by Maida Springer, Pauli Murray, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, and other black women who would continue to play important but often hidden roles in the civil rights and labor movements.<sup>6</sup>

5. Herbert Garfinkel, *When Negroes March: The March on Washington Movement in the Organizational Politics for the FEPC* (New York: Atheneum, 1973); Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 45–132; Yvette Richards, *Maida Springer: Pan-Africanist and International Labor Leader* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 57–76; Melinda Chateauvert, *Marching Together: Women on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 163–87; Anna Arnold Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds: A Memoir of Negro Leadership* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964); D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 39–71; Roger Horowitz, "Negro and White, Unite and Fight": *A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930–1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 235; Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 375–77; Robert Bissell, "A Trade Union Oriented War on the Slums: Harold Gibbens, Ernest Calloway, and the St. Louis Teamsters in the 1960s," *Labor History* 44 (2003): 49–76; Joshua B. Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor since World War II* (New York: New Press, 2000), 72–95.

6. Boris Shishkin to A. Philip Randolph, August 12, 1946, and Sidney Wilkinson to Allan Knight Chalmers, May 19, 1947, and other correspondence in folder 5, box 258, group II: A, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC; Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 89–132; Chateauvert, *Marching Together*, 188–97; Richards, *Maida Springer*, 77–99; Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987). On black women, see Anna Arnold Hedgeman, "The Role of the Negro Woman," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 17 (1944): 463–72; Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

In contrast to clashes over strategy, anticommunism had relatively little impact on black trade unionists in the late 1940s and 1950s. Randolph had excluded communists from the March on Washington in 1941, long before most liberals considered them a threat, and he fully supported efforts to expel them from civil rights and labor organizations after the war. While liberals responded to conservative attacks by distancing themselves from any form of radicalism, Randolph remained active in the Socialist Party and continued to work closely with anti-Stalinist socialists such as Jay Lovestone and A. J. Muste. He allowed Bayard Rustin to play a prominent role in the March on Washington, despite the fact that Rustin had belonged to the Young Communist League just a few months earlier. Maida Springer, Pauli Murray, and Ernest Calloway belonged to Lovestone's dissident Communist Party (Opposition), and Horace Sheffield was affiliated with Soviet dissident Leon Trotsky. Even those such as Cleveland Robinson and Charles Hayes, who maintained close ties to communist-led unions in the late 1940s, shifted their loyalties fairly easily when noncommunists rose to power in the 1950s. Referring to Robinson's union, Joshua Freeman explains that such realignments were possible "because the rival groups fundamentally agreed about racial equality, integrationism, and the importance of organized labor."<sup>7</sup>

Although black trade unionists failed to sustain links between civil rights and labor activism at the national level, they retained considerable influence in local movements for economic justice and racial equality. Maida Springer, Dorothy Robinson, and Cleveland Robinson helped build a powerful coalition of civil rights and labor activists in New York City that launched movements against school segregation and police brutality and helped elect former-Lovestonite Ella Baker to head the local NAACP. Addie Wyatt and Charles Hayes led what historian Roger Horowitz dubs an "incipient black power movement" in Chicago, leading campaigns against discrimination in housing and employment and challenging conservative congressman William Dawson's control of the local NAACP. In St. Louis, Ernest Calloway was elected president of the NAACP branch, and his wife, Deverne, headed the local Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Black trade unionists were perhaps most influential in Detroit, where Horace Sheffield and Robert Battle created the Trade Union Leadership Council to empower working-class African Americans within the NAACP and the autoworkers' union. National leaders of the NAACP reached out to black trade unionists by hiring former union organizer Herbert Hill to head its Labor Department in the early 1950s and encouraging local branches to create labor and industry committees to support unionization of black workers and to fight employment discrimination in their communities.<sup>8</sup>

7. Eric Arnesen, "No 'Graver Danger'"; Richards, *Maida Springer*, 36–56; Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*, 103; Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 142–66; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 34; Lichtenstein, *Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 375–77; Freeman, *Working-Class New York*, 91.

8. Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 148–59; Horowitz, *Negro and White*, 235; "NAACP Assails Rep. Dawson: Criticizes Stand of Civil Rights," *Chicago Tribune*, August 31, 1956; Thomas R. Brooks, "Black Upsurge in the Unions," *Dissent*, March–April, 1970, 129; "Civil Rights Leader to Be Dawson's Foe," *Chicago Tribune*, January 24, 1964; Richards, *Maida Springer*, 90; Bissell, "A Trade Union Oriented War

The eruption of mass movements against segregation in the South provided black trade unionists with an opportunity to extend their influence beyond local communities. Charles Hayes led efforts to publicize the murder of Emmett Till, a Chicago teenager who was lynched while visiting Mississippi in 1955, while Cleveland Robinson's union and the New York NAACP cosponsored a massive "labor rally" in New York's Garment District to protest "racist terror in Mississippi." A few months later, Randolph, Robinson, and Ella Baker created In Friendship to support a bus boycott that black trade unionist E. D. Nixon launched against segregation in Montgomery, Alabama. After white supremacists bombed the home of Martin Luther King Jr., the young minister whom Nixon had recruited to speak for the movement, Randolph sent Bayard Rustin to train King in Gandhian nonviolence. Rustin and Baker helped King form the SCLC to spread the movement to other southern cities. Hayes and Robinson joined the board of directors of the new organization, which was funded primarily by donations from their respective unions.<sup>9</sup>

The stirrings of the movement in the South also inspired black trade unionists to attack segregation and discrimination within the AFL-CIO following the merger of the labor federations in 1955. Leaders of both federations had supported the civil rights movement since the 1940s but argued that they lacked the authority to discipline affiliated unions that excluded or discriminated against black workers, a position that appeared particularly hypocritical after unions were expelled for affiliation with the Communist Party. At Randolph's request, the New York Labor and Industry Committee hosted a meeting to discuss the matter with trade unionists who were attending the NAACP's fiftieth annual convention in 1959. They drafted a resolution calling for the expulsion of all discriminatory unions, which Randolph introduced to the AFL-CIO's national convention a few months earlier. The resolution met an angry response from union leaders, including AFL-CIO president George Meany who lashed out at Randolph, demanding to know "who the hell appointed you guardian of all the Negroes in America?" Black trade unionists regrouped a few weeks later in Cleveland, where they decided to create a national organization.<sup>10</sup>

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on the Slums"; Mary Kimbrough and Margaret W. Dagen, *Victory without Violence: The First Ten Years of the St. Louis Committee of Racial Equality (CORE), 1947-1957* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000); Lichtenstein, *Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 375-77; Sophia Z. Lee, "Hotspots in a Cold War: The NAACP's Postwar Workplace Constitutionalism, 1948-1964," *Law and History Review* 26, no. 2 (2008): 327-77; Nancy MacLean, "Achieving the Promise of the Civil Rights Act: Herbert Hill and the NAACP's Fight for Jobs and Justice," *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 3, no. 2 (2006): 13-19.

9. Joe Wilson, "Interview with Charles Hayes, United Food and Commercial Workers Union," New Yorkers at Work Oral History Collection, Tamiment/Wagner Library, New York University, New York; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 224-27; Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 162-69. For images of this and other rallies organized by Robinson's union, see UAW District 65 Photo Collection, Tamiment/Wagner Library.

10. New York Labor and Industry Committee, "Meeting Minutes," May 26, 1959, folder 2, box 4, James Haughton Papers, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library, New York; "Constitution," May, 1960, and other documents in folder 1, box 1, Negro American Labor Council Papers, Richard Parrish Papers Additions, Schomburg Center; Roy Ottley, "Defends NAACP's War on Union Bias," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 25, 1960, 10; Horace Sheffield, "Militant Black Labor Movement Was Born Here in 1960," *Michigan Chronicle*, July 17, 1976, 3.

Drawing on the activist networks developed over the course of the 1940s and 1950s, founders of the NALC described their campaign to reform organized labor as integral to an international movement for racial equality that stretched back to the New Deal era. Sheffield and Battle agreed to host a founding convention in Detroit, and twenty-four trade unionists including Maida Springer, Dorothy Robinson, and Ernest Calloway formed a temporary steering committee. Calling “all Negro trade unionists” to a founding convention in 1960, they contended that the event would coincide with “that momentous point in history when the rising winds of the civil rights revolution are sweeping the continents of America and Africa with ever increasing force and challenge.” Randolph chaired the provisional steering committee and asserted in his keynote address to the founding convention that the struggle “for equality in the House of Labor is bigger and deeper” than winning jobs or union representation for individual workers, “although, without a doubt, this is highly important.” Since New Deal labor laws had imbued unions with “governmentally-derived privileges, position and power,” he explained, gaining access to employment and union protection was critical to the process of moving “from a status of second-class citizenship to a status of first-class citizenship.”<sup>11</sup>

Estimates of the NALC’s membership vary widely, from four thousand to more than ten thousand, but the leadership that black trade unionists commanded in local civil rights and labor organizations gave them far more influence than was indicated by their numbers. Formal chapters operated in twenty-three cities, where NALC members worked to unite civil rights and labor activists around a broad range of economic and racial issues. In New York, Randolph recruited Anna Arnold Hedgeman to head the Emergency Committee for Unity on Social and Economic Problems, which united groups ranging from the NAACP to the Nation of Islam and demanded jobs, housing, fair treatment from police, and collective bargaining rights for twenty thousand black and Latino workers in city hospitals. The Trade Union Leadership Council helped elect a racial liberally mayor of Detroit, defeating an incumbent supported by the powerful autoworkers union. Employing an explicitly socialist analysis of those events, the *NALC Newsletter* contended that black trade unionists’ rise to power indicated “how the building of unity required an understanding of the historic role to be played by the black working class.”<sup>12</sup>

11. “Constitution,” A. Philip Randolph, “Keynote Address to the Founding Convention of the NALC,” May 28, 1960, folder 13, box 2, Haughton Papers.

12. Ray Marshall estimated that membership fell from ten thousand to forty-five hundred by 1963 in *The Negro and Organized Labor* (New York: Wiley, 1965), 53–85. NALC vice president Calvin Sherrod claimed membership was fifteen thousand in 1964: “NALC Votes Work Stoppage,” *Milwaukee Star*, June 6, 1964, 1; Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, “Mass Job Rights Rally Planned,” August 30, 1961, and Emergency Committee for Unity on Social and Economic Problems, “Mass Rally for Unity,” September 6, 1961, folder 5, box 2, Haughton Papers; “Hospital Strike Backed,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1962, 13; Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 168; “Sense and Common Sense—Unity,” NALC newsletter, August 1961, folder 1, box 3, Haughton Papers.

### Remaking the March on Washington

Having established a national organization, black trade unionists were finally in a position to revive the demonstration that Randolph had proposed in 1941. The catalyst for that revival occurred in 1961, when the AFL-CIO executive committee fired black trade unionist Theodore Brown for attending an NALC meeting while employed by the Civil Rights Department of the AFL-CIO. Union leaders charged that he used federation funds to support a group hostile to organized labor. They also voted to censor Randolph, the only black member of the executive committee, for making allegedly “false and gratuitous statements” against the federation. Cleveland Robinson called an emergency meeting of NALC leaders in New York, where he stated “with a great burst of anger” that Meany and other white labor leaders were “racist” and “just like Hitler.” Some proposed suing the AFL-CIO under the Landrum-Griffin Act, which allowed the government to investigate undemocratic practices in organized labor, but laundry worker organizer Odell Clark objected that this would strengthen conservative attacks on the labor movement. Instead, she proposed to organize a massive demonstration of black workers outside the AFL-CIO’s national headquarters in Washington. NALC Vice President L. Joseph Overton agreed, proclaiming, “Let’s march on Washington.”<sup>13</sup>

Initially, black trade unionists viewed the March on Washington as an opportunity to focus attention on economic problems that had been overshadowed by the movement against Jim Crow, but they expanded their agenda to win support from the southern civil rights movement. Black trade unionists shifted the focus of their demonstration from the AFL-CIO to Congress in 1962, after President Kennedy’s Civil Rights Commission issued a report stating that federal legislation was necessary since union leaders had been “largely ineffective” at combating discrimination within their ranks. Randolph also observed that competition between black and white workers was being exacerbated by the automation of American industry, which could be addressed only through economic planning at the federal level. Randolph won support from black leaders who gathered to discuss “the national economic picture” in New York City, but Anna Arnold Hedgeman recalled that several encouraged him to coordinate his efforts with a demonstration that Martin Luther King Jr. was planning to pressure Kennedy on desegregation and voting rights in the South. Hedgeman arranged a meeting between the two leaders a few weeks later, where King and Randolph agreed to a “March for Jobs and Freedom” that would address “both the economic problems and civil rights.”<sup>14</sup>

The combined agenda won enthusiastic endorsements from the Congress of Racial Equality and the recently formed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Commit-

13. “Negroes Gird for Support of Randolph,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 13, 1961, 10; James Haughton, “Minutes of Emergency Meeting of the National Executive Board, NALC,” n.d., folder 1, box 2, Haughton Papers.

14. Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 168–69; Lucy G. Barber, *Marching on Washington: The Forging of an American Political Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 159.

tee (SNCC), but liberal civil rights and labor leaders objected that a mass mobilization might alienate their supporters and strengthen conservative opposition to a civil rights bill. George Meany was pleased to no longer be the target of the demonstration and, in an abrupt shift from his previous attacks, agreed to cooperate with the NALC to pass a fair employment law. He refused to back the march, however, arguing that it would only bolster conservative charges that the civil rights and labor movements were controlled by communists. Leaders of the NAACP and National Urban League also balked, insisting that they had sufficient support from Kennedy already and were making headway through quiet negotiations. Kennedy rejected the recommendation for a fair employment law, and he agreed that a demonstration would destroy his chances of passing even a moderate civil rights bill.<sup>15</sup>

Liberal fears were heightened when, in the midst of those discussions, the House Un-American Activities Committee opened an investigation into allegations that communists had infiltrated NALC branches in Cleveland, Buffalo, Chicago, and other cities. The NALC constitution barred communists from leadership positions in the organization, and Randolph directed the Executive Committee to investigate and reorganize any branches found to be controlled by the Communist Party. Black trade unionists refused to conduct a broader purge of suspected communists, however, on the grounds that the charges were based on hearsay from “a self-confessed paid informer” of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Pointing out that Martin Luther King Jr. had spoken repeatedly on “the negative role of the FBI and its activities as they relate to the over-all struggle for full freedom and equality of the Negro people,” leaders of the Chicago branch demanded that the informants also be removed from leadership in the NALC. As they had since the 1940s, black trade unionists established their distance from the Communist Party without aligning themselves with conservatives or “Cold War liberals.”<sup>16</sup>

Rather than temper their politics to appease liberals, black trade unionists built the March on Washington with support from the local unions and civil rights groups that had sustained them since the 1940s. Cleveland Robinson headed the Administrative Committee of the march, which operated out of his union’s downtown office before moving to official headquarters in Harlem. Robinson’s union chartered three trains and eighteen buses and organized several caravans of automobiles, providing each passenger with boxed lunch and dinner as well as a hat and pin marked with the official logo of the march. Maida Springer’s union paid for sixteen trains and fifteen buses. Chicago schoolteacher Timuel Black chartered two trains and an airplane and raised \$30,000 to send a thousand unemployed workers to Washington. New York trade unionists Corrine Smith and Geri Stark raised \$14,000 in one night by orga-

15. New York NALC newsletter, February–March, 1962, folder 8, box 3, Haughton Papers; Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 221–23.

16. “Chicago Correspondence, 1962–1969,” Sc Micro R 2986, microfilm edition, reel 5, Richard Parish Papers (Additions), 1959–1976, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York.

nizing a midnight benefit show at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, featuring performances by Thelonius Monk, “Little” Stevie Wonder, and other stars. Anna Arnold Hedgeman observed that such early actions “were worth noting because without this basic effort made across the country in the early months of 1963 there could not have been the mammoth turnout of August 28, 1963.”<sup>17</sup>

Having opposed the March on Washington for nearly a year, liberal civil rights and labor leaders finally joined the mobilization just two months before the march was set to occur. Randolph and King saw an opportunity to recruit Roy Wilkins and United Auto Workers president Walter Reuther when Kennedy made a last-ditch effort to convince them not to march. Meeting with the four activists in the White House, Kennedy warned that a large demonstration would alienate moderate supporters of his civil rights bill. Randolph countered that demonstrations were already breaking out across the nation, playing into the president’s fear of communist subversion by suggesting that it was better to have them “led by organizations dedicated to civil rights and disciplined by struggle rather than leave them to other leaders who care neither about civil rights nor about non-violence.”<sup>18</sup> Kennedy was not persuaded, but Wilkins and Reuther endorsed the march at a lunch meeting later that afternoon.

Last-minute support from liberals transformed an already massive mobilization into the largest demonstration in U.S. history. On July 2, an interracial group of civil rights, labor, and religious leaders gathered in New York to formally sponsor the march, including Randolph, King, Wilkins, and Reuther as well as representatives from the Urban League, CORE, SNCC, National Council of Churches, the American Jewish Congress, and the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice. Despite his initial reservations, Wilkins wrote to all NAACP branches, youth councils, and state conferences with orders to bring “no less than 100,000” people to Washington and dispatched Herbert Hill to help labor and industry committees establish organizing committees in cities across the country. George Meany withheld support from the AFL-CIO, but the march won endorsements from seventeen international unions, several state and municipal labor councils, and the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO, which was headed by Walter Reuther. Reuther’s autoworkers union rented two hundred hotel rooms in Washington, printed two thousand signs, hired buses and trains to transport 5,000 people to the march, and split the cost of a \$16,000 sound system with the garment workers. Liberal mayors of New York and Chicago even granted holiday leaves to city employees who wished to join the march.

17. “March on Washington,” newsletter 2, McLauren Papers; Harvey Swados, “Revolution on the March,” *Nation*, September 7, 1963, 104–7; “Midnight Benefit Show,” poster, August 23, 1963, RLG Photo Collection, Tamiment/Wagner Library; Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 173–75; Anna Arnold Hedgeman, *The Gift of Chaos: Decades of American Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 161–65; D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 326–57; Barber, *Marching on Washington*, 145–56.

18. Randolph quoted in Lichtenstein, *Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 382; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 270–80.

By the end of July, organizers reported that local committees had chartered two thousand buses, twenty-one trains, and ten airplanes. Bayard Rustin estimated they could transport 115,000 people to Washington.<sup>19</sup>

Liberals continued to express concern about the radicalism of the march, but they joined the mobilization too late to impose significant restrictions on its message. At the July 2 meeting, Wilkins attempted to block Randolph from naming Bayard Rustin the official director of the march on the grounds that his communist past and homosexuality would discredit the mobilization. Randolph outmaneuvered Wilkins by agreeing to serve as director and then appointing Rustin to act as deputy director. Rustin and Cleveland Robinson also ensured that the Administrative Committee of the march was dominated by a “Randolph clique” that included Anna Arnold Hedgeman, black trade unionists L. Joseph Overton and Theodore Brown, and Socialist Party activist Norman Hill. Most other administrators were close allies of Martin Luther King Jr., according to Randolph’s biographer, leaving Urban League director Whitney Young “concerned about who exactly was making decisions” about the march between meetings of its official sponsors. Journalist Harvey Swados, who watched the mobilization more closely than any other reporter, claimed that the agenda grew broader and more radical over time, eventually “surpassing anything conceived of by white liberals and well intentioned officialdom, and involving a dislocation—with incalculable consequences—of the welfare-warfare state and its present power structure.”<sup>20</sup>

Struggles over the message continued through the day of the march, although Randolph retained the upper hand. The first significant challenge to his leadership came not from liberals but from black women who had played central roles in the March on Washington movement since the 1940s. Early in the planning stage of the 1963 march, Randolph ignored a request from Anna Arnold Hedgeman to seek representation from a black women’s organization. Hedgeman drafted a protest letter with two New York NALC activists, and some women even suggested picketing Randolph when he addressed the male-only National Press Club, but Maida Springer convinced them not to take any actions that would detract from the success of the mobilization. The conflict would inspire black women to push harder for gender equality after the march, but at the time they settled for a token tribute to Montgomery activist Rosa Parks and other heroines of the movement. “We grinned, some of us,” Hedgeman recalled, “as we recognized anew that Negro women are second-class citizens in the same way that white women are in our culture.”<sup>21</sup>

19. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 244; D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 342; Lichtenstein, *Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 371–87; James Ritch, “City Lends Time to Race Marchers,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 10, 1963; M. S. Handler, “40,000 from New York Area to Take Part in Capital March,” *New York Times*, August 25, 1963, 81; “March on Washington,” newsletter 2, McLauren Papers.

20. D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 339; Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 257; Swados, “Revolution on the March,” 107.

21. Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 173–80.

Randolph responded in similar fashion to a dispute that erupted when several sponsors objected to a speech that SNCC representative John Lewis intended to deliver. Randolph dismissed complaints that Lewis used “communist” phrases such as “revolution” and “masses,” stating, “I’ve used them many times myself.” King and Rustin raised a more substantive objection to Lewis’s threat to “pursue our own ‘scorched earth’ policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground—nonviolently,” pointing out that, despite the disclaimer, the line violated Gandhian principles that had been central to the March on Washington movement since the 1940s. Finally, Walter Reuther insisted that Lewis omit the statement that SNCC “cannot support wholeheartedly the administration’s civil rights bill, for it is too little too late.” He and others were deeply critical of the bill, but they wanted to strengthen and pass it. Critics would later cite this incident as evidence that liberals restrained the radicalism of the march, but King, Rustin, and Reuther objected to what they saw as deviations from the original goals and tactics of the movement. Furthermore, it was Randolph who finally convinced Lewis to change the speech. Lewis remembers him pleading, nearly in tears, “I’ve waited all my *life* for this opportunity, please don’t ruin it.” Lewis omitted direct references to violence and agreed to a critical endorsement of the civil rights bill, but he and other SNCC activists felt “that our message was not compromised.”<sup>22</sup>

Journalist Russell Baker described the crowd that gathered in Washington on August 28, 1963, as a “vast army of quiet, middle-class Americans who had come in the spirit of a church outing,” but his and other descriptions revealed a significant presence of the organized working class. In contrast to the suburban commuters who would have been “creeping bumper-to-bumper” down the capital’s streets on a typical weekday morning, most demonstrators arrived by chartered bus and train from Baltimore and cities farther north. Surveying the crowd gathering at the base of the Washington Monument, Baker recognized New York trade unionist Peter Ottley holding a press conference with a hundred delegates from his nursing home and hospital workers’ union. The journalist marveled that marchers seemed to shift direction “spontaneously, without advice from the platform,” and make their way toward the Lincoln Memorial, apparently unaware that the crowd was guided by an “internal police force” that Rustin organized in collaboration with the Guardian Association, an organization of black police officers from New York City. Bayard Rustin also ensured that marchers would leave room for speakers and dignitaries by establishing a twenty-yard buffer around the platform that he “filled in with trade unionists.”<sup>23</sup>

22. John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Harvest Books, 1998), 222–26. Among those who cite this incident as evidence of moderation are Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 257; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 306; Higgenbotham, “Forward,” in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles outside the South, 1940–1980*, ed. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), viii.

23. Russell Baker, “Capital Is Occupied by a Gentile Army,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1963, 7–8; D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 355; “Negro Policemen to Guide March,” *New York Times*, August 25, 1963, 81; William H. Johnson to delegates from Guardian Association, Signs for Bus folder, box 39, McLaurin Papers; “Biggest Protest March in History!,” *Ebony*, November 1963, 40; “March on Washington,” newsletter 2, McLauren Papers.

Musicians and religious leaders focused the attention of marchers as they approached the Lincoln Memorial, before Randolph stepped to the stage and reminded them of the political tasks before them. “We are gathered here in the largest demonstration in the history of this nation,” he declared, taking obvious personal pride on that accomplishment. “We are the advanced guard of a massive moral revolution for jobs and freedom.” True to the socialist tradition that had animated his activism since the 1920s, the seventy-year-old radical asserted that those gathered before him represented “the advance guard of a massive moral revolution” aimed at creating a society where “the sanctity of private property takes second place to the sanctity of the human personality.” He situated the civil rights movement in a broad historical arc stretching back to the struggle against slavery, arguing that although the revolution would benefit all Americans, African Americans were destined to lead it “because our ancestors were transformed from human personalities into private property.” Randolph ended by endorsing Kennedy’s civil rights bill while also clarifying its limitations. “Yes, we want all public accommodations open to all citizens,” he explained, “but those accommodations will mean little to those who cannot afford to use them.”<sup>24</sup>

Following Randolph’s lead, representatives of the sponsoring organizations insisted that racial equality could not be achieved without economic reform. “We want employment and with it we want the pride and responsibility and self-respect that goes with equal access to jobs,” Roy Wilkins declared, adding that “the President’s proposals represent so moderate an approach that if it is weakened or eliminated, the remainder will be little more than sugar water.” Walter Reuther called Kennedy’s bill “the first meaningful step,” insisting that “the job question is crucial; because we will not solve education or housing or public accommodations as long as millions of American Negroes are treated as second-class economic citizens and denied jobs.” Having omitted direct references to violence, John Lewis still delivered a scathing critique of Kennedy’s bill. Pointing out that the proposed legislation did nothing to address police brutality, attacks on civil rights activists, and voting-rights violations in the South, he asked what such a bill would mean to “a maid who earns \$5 a week in the home of a family whose income is \$100,000 a year.” Echoing Randolph’s opening address, Lewis proclaimed: “The Revolution is at hand, and we must free ourselves of the chains of political and economic slavery.” Acknowledging the radicalism of Lewis’s remarks, journalist Murray Kempton noted that, as Lewis returned to his seat, “every Negro on the speakers’ row pumped his hand and patted his back; and every white one looked out into the distance.”<sup>25</sup>

By the time Martin Luther King Jr. took the stage, he may have believed that other speakers focused *too much* attention on economic injustice at the expense of the equally pressing struggle against Jim Crow. Contrary to the popular belief that

24. Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds*, 186; “Excerpts from Addresses at Lincoln Memorial,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1963.

25. “Excerpts from Addresses at Lincoln Memorial”; Kempton, “The March on Washington,” 20.

King became an economic radical only in the late 1960s, historian Thomas Jackson has shown that the young minister's critique of economic exploitation emerged while he was a student in the 1940s and was nurtured by his close collaboration with Randolph, Cleveland Robinson, and other trade unionists in the 1950s. Nevertheless, Jackson notes that King's address to the March on Washington "left out his customary call for a wide distribution of privilege and property and an end to class suppression of 'the masses.'" King had included an explicit demand for jobs when he delivered a version of the same speech just a few weeks earlier in Detroit but dropped that line when he departed from the prepared speech in Washington. Noting that every other speaker "concentrated on the struggle ahead and spoke in tough, even harsh language," Journalist E. W. Kenworthy found it paradoxical that King, "who had suffered perhaps most of all," gave the most conciliatory speech of the day.<sup>26</sup>

Having stirred the crowd into an emotional frenzy that left even hardened SNCC militants "laughing, shouting, slapping palms," and teary-eyed, King returned the microphone to Randolph and Rustin, who refocused attention on the specific purpose of the mobilization. Murray Kempton contended that the "moment in that afternoon which most strained belief" occurred when Rustin read the full list of demands and then led marchers in a pledge to persist until every one of them had been fulfilled. Subsequent accounts have focused almost exclusively on King's address, but at the time, media provided detailed coverage of the entire event. Three major television networks carried live coverage of the march, and the A. C. Nielsen Company reported that viewing jumped 46 percent in the New York metropolitan area. Newspapers quoted extensively from all of the speeches, often reprinting the text Lewis had intended to deliver, and weekly and monthly magazines devoted entire issues to detailed biographies of march leaders and analyses of their objectives.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the fears expressed by Kennedy, Wilkins, and other liberals, the March on Washington united a wide range of activists, voters, and elected officials around the belief that racial equality could not be achieved without economic justice. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on the day of the march that nearly two-thirds of whites in northern and western cities disapproved of the demonstration, and liberal senator Hubert Humphrey conceded upon watching the capital city fill up with marchers that "this probably hasn't changed any votes on the civil rights bill." Criticism was blunted by the tremendous size and orderly conduct of the mobilization,

26. "Excerpts from Addresses at Lincoln Memorial"; Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 181; Drew D. Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Speech That Inspired a Nation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 112–13; E. W. Kenworthy, "200,000 March for Civil Rights in Orderly Washington Rally; President Sees Gain for Negro," *New York Times*, August 29, 1963, 16.

27. Michael Thelwell quoted in Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 181; Kempton, "The March on Washington," 19. Drew Hansen notes that King's speech did not move to "the center of the public debate over civil rights" until after his assassination in 1968 in *The Dream*, 167; "TV and Radio Slate Rights March Shows," *New York Times*, August 28, 1963, 21; Val Adams, "TV: Coverage of the March," *New York Times*, August 29, 1963, 43; "In Color: Spectacle of the March," *Life*, September 6, 1963; "The March—Gains and Losses," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 9, 1963.

however. Embarrassed at having abstained from the largest demonstration—and perhaps the largest march of union members—in U.S. history, George Meany mobilized the AFL-CIO's powerful lobbying machine behind the campaign to add fair employment measures to Kennedy's civil rights bill. Kennedy conceded to this just before his assassination in November, and in his first State of the Union address, President Lyndon Johnson pledged to pass the bill and follow it with an "all-out war on human poverty and unemployment." Johnson won a landslide victory over Republican Barry Goldwater the following November, in an election widely viewed as a referendum on the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>28</sup>

### A Crisis of Victory

Even as they forged a broad consensus around the demand for jobs and freedom, black trade unionists found they could no longer unite African American activists around a specific program for realizing that agenda. Discord emerged during the March on Washington when Nation of Islam leader Malcolm X, who had cooperated with Randolph in 1962, accused black leaders of toning down the militancy of the march in exchange for financial support from white liberals. March leaders denied the charge, but it gained credibility as Randolph and others collaborated with liberals to strengthen and pass the Civil Rights Act. Randolph, Rustin, and King declared a moratorium on protests to support Johnson's election in 1964 and cooperated with Wilkins and Reuther to defeat a SNCC campaign to seat an interracial delegation from Mississippi at the Democratic National Convention. John Lewis recalled that was "a major letdown" for SNCC activists "who had given everything they had to prove that you could work through the system." Malcolm X said it indicated that African Americans would be better off with Goldwater in the White House, since "they would at least know they were fighting an honestly growling wolf, rather than a fox who could have them in his stomach and have digested them before they even knew what is happening."<sup>29</sup>

Randolph sought to overcome the impasse by inviting forty-five leaders of black political, civic, and religious groups to "clarify the courses of action possible" at the State of the Race Conference in New York City. He initiated the conversation by stating that "the Civil Rights Revolution has been caught up in a crisis of victory," which he compared to the situation faced by abolitionists following the Civil War

28. "Most Whites in North, West Say They Oppose Rights Demonstration," *Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 1963; Warren Weaver Jr., "Congress Cordial but Not Swayed," *New York Times*, August 29, 1963, 1; Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker* (New York, 1974), 349–50; Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960–1972* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 83–87; Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 161–84.

29. Malcolm X, "Message to the Grassroots," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 4–17; D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 383–92; Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph*, 261; Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 291; "Malcolm X Article Favors Goldwater," *New York Times*, September 8, 1964, 19.

and by labor leaders after the New Deal. In each previous case, he claimed, tremendous legal victories “provoked a sense of relaxation and weakened the will to struggle and resulted in the loss of much of its freedom.” Just as the Emancipation Proclamation failed to address ongoing problems of disfranchisement and peonage and as New Deal labor laws “neglected migrant farm laborers, and the Jim Crow, underclass laboring masses,” Randolph contended, the Civil Rights Act would not provide affordable housing, quality education, and “jobs or a guaranteed decent income for all.” Unless African Americans united themselves, “their fellow white poor, and citizens of good will” around that broader agenda, he warned, “history will again pass us by.”<sup>30</sup>

Black leaders agreed that they needed to address the concerns of working-class African Americans but clashed bitterly over the best way to do that. Roy Wilkins discounted the need for more radical reform, arguing that the Civil Rights Act provided an adequate basis for legal equality and that voting provided “the basic weapon” for fighting other battles. Urban League director Whitney Young did not attend the meeting, but he sent a statement outlining policies for addressing poverty and unemployment in black communities. Boasting that President Johnson had asked him personally to develop such a program, Young called for education, training, and targeted hiring programs that would give black workers “a foundation for a normal middle-class American life.” Young’s statement provoked an angry response from representatives of more militant organizations. James Forman of SNCC urged civil rights leaders to reject “middle-class values” such as status and accumulation and to focus on earning the respect of people living in Harlem and other black working-class communities. SCLC representative Andrew Young agreed, stating that the movement’s purpose should not be to “assimilate into white society.” Bayard Rustin, Cleveland Robinson, and Pauli Murray attempted to refocus discussion around a specific program for future action, but the State of the Race Conference produced only a vague statement of unity.<sup>31</sup>

By 1966, even black trade unionists disagreed over a way forward. Convinced that the AFL-CIO had been won over to their struggle, Randolph, Rustin, and Maida Springer resigned from the NALC to create the A. Philip Randolph Institute, which was funded by the AFL-CIO and focused on registering black voters, solidifying ties between the civil rights and labor movements, and promoting the war on poverty. Other black trade unionists were not so sanguine about allying with the AFL-CIO or the Johnson administration, and Cleveland Robinson was elected president of the NALC on a platform aimed at organizing low-wage workers and demanding more

30. A. Philip Randolph, “Opening Remarks at Conference of Negro Leaders,” folder 3, box 3, George Wiley Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison.

31. George Wiley, “Notes on Conference of Negro Leaders,” and Whitney Young, “Help Wanted: New Jobs for Negroes,” folder 3, box 3, George Wiley Papers; Conference of Negro Leaders, “Statement to the Press,” January 31, 1965, box 5, Merritt and Anna Arnold Hedgeman Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and History, New York Public Library, New York.

funding for the war on poverty. Whereas Randolph and Rustin insisted that domestic reforms would not compete with Johnson's ongoing efforts to win the Cold War, Robinson blasted the president for diverting antipoverty funding toward the war in Vietnam and accused the AFL-CIO of supporting anticommunist unions in Latin America and other regions while neglecting the plight of low-wage workers in the United States. Meanwhile, Dorothy Robinson, Addie Wyatt, and other women left the NALC to help build the National Organization for Women, which was founded by Pauli Murray and other feminists who were frustrated by male leaders' refusal to accept women's leadership or address the racial, economic, and gendered inequalities facing American women.<sup>32</sup>

Other civil rights organizations attempted to link struggles for racial equality and economic justice in the late 1960s, but none achieved the influence that the NALC had demonstrated with the March on Washington. The NAACP launched an ambitious campaign to enforce the Civil Rights Act by mobilizing local branches to identify cases of employment discrimination and bring them to court, but legal activism did little to address deindustrialization and may have undermined the interracial working-class cooperation that Randolph and other black trade unionists viewed as critical to the success of more radical reforms. Likewise, the Johnson administration adopted the Urban League's recommendations of job training and preferential hiring while ignoring Randolph's proposal to create new jobs through public works. The SCLC launched the ambitious Poor People's Campaign in 1967, working closely with Cleveland Robinson and other black trade unionists, but it collapsed under the weight of personal and organizational rivalries following Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968. Some of the more passionate calls for economic justice came from black power activists who sought to radicalize the agendas of SNCC and CORE in the late 1960s. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton paraphrased Randolph's address to the March on Washington in their 1967 manifesto *Black Power*—urging activists to reorient their agenda around “the dignity of man, not the sanctity of property”—but the black power movement failed to mobilize working-class African Americans or to articulate a solution to the economic crisis that faced them.<sup>33</sup>

32. D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 414–39; Cleveland Robinson, “The Meaning of the Watts Riot,” *The 65er*, August, 1965, folder 3, box 17, Cleveland Robinson Papers, Tamiment/Wagner Library; *A Freedom Budget for All Americans: Budgeting Our Resources, 1966–1976, to Achieve “Freedom from Want”* (New York: A. Philip Randolph Institute, 1966); Cobble, *Other Women's Movement*, 185–201.

33. MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough*, 76–113; Cleveland Robinson to Martin Luther King, July 14, 1967, folder 3, box 17, Cleveland Robinson Papers; Chicago NALC, “The Other Chicago: The City's Employed Poor,” 1966, Wisconsin State Historical Society Pamphlet Collection, Madison; Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*; Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 41. On the limitations of black power, see Adolph Reed Jr., “Sources of Demobilization in the New Black Political Regime,” in *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 117–59.

Having pushed the civil rights movement to demand both racial equality and economic justice in the 1950s and early 1960s, black trade unionists succumbed to the “crisis of victory” that Randolph predicted would “weaken the entire organizational structure of the civil rights movement” in the late 1960s. The A. Philip Randolph Institute continued to register voters and advocate on behalf of black workers within the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party. The NALC operated until 1972 when Cleveland Robinson, Charles Hayes, and others merged it into the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, which a younger generation of activists created out of frustration with the persistent conservatism of the AFL-CIO. The following year, Addie Wyatt and other black women helped create the Coalition of Labor Union Women to increase cooperation among the feminist, civil rights, and labor movements. All three of those organizations can trace their roots to the March on Washington movement of the 1940s, but none of them extended that legacy as successfully as the NALC had in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>34</sup>

### Conclusion

The failure of efforts to link struggles for racial and economic justice in the late 1960s led some to attribute the success of earlier struggles to a narrower and less controversial agenda. Ironically, that critique was initiated by Bayard Rustin and other activists who emphasized the limitations of their accomplishments during what he called the classical phase of the movement in order to convince supporters of the need to keep pushing for radical reform after 1965. Seeking to expand federal funding for job creation, housing, and education, Rustin implored readers of the liberal journal *Commentary* to “recognize that in desegregating public accommodations we affected institutions which are relatively peripheral both to the American socioeconomic order and to the fundamental conditions of life of the Negro people.” Such statements were echoed by Stokely Carmichael and other left-wing critics who charged that “what we have called the movement has not really questioned the middle-class values and institutions of this country,” as well as by conservatives who praised leaders of the March on Washington for focusing narrowly on racial equality while silencing John Lewis and others who called for “radical social, political and economic changes.” While they disagreed on the merits of that narrow agenda, most commentators agreed that the movement splintered as its objectives expanded, as Juan Williams wrote in 1987, “from the moral imperatives that had garnered support from the nation’s moderates—issues such as the right to vote and the right to a decent education—to issues

34. “A Basic Answer to Watergate,” *Freedomways* 2 (1973): 101–6; Cobble, *Other Women’s Movement*, 201–6; NY Trade Union Women, “NY Trade Union Women Holding First Conference,” November 9, 1973, box 1, folder 1, Papers of Betsy Wade on the Coalition of Labor Union Women, Tamiment/Wagner Library; “Black Feminists Meet in NY,” *Guardian*, December 19, 1973; box 5, folder 13, AFSCME Program Development Department Files, series 1, women’s files, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit, MI.

whose moral rightness was not as readily apparent: job and housing discrimination, Johnson's war on poverty, and affirmative action."<sup>35</sup>

Recent studies have complicated Williams's narrative of declension by demonstrating that employment and other economic demands had been integral to the civil rights agenda since the 1930s, but Rustin's classical phase persists as an exceptional period when, as Mary Dudziak writes, "the narrow boundaries of Cold War-era civil rights politics kept discussions of broad-based social change, or a linking of race and class, off the agenda." Scholars who examine the March on Washington and other iconic events of that era now emphasize the "significant compromises in the style and the political demands of the march," which Lucy Barber claims were critical to its success. Evidence of a more expansive agenda appears only on the margins of the mobilization, as scholars turn their attention from "leaders on the platform high above the crowd" to photographs, newspaper accounts, and other sources that "capture the motivation that led relatively obscure individuals to the March." Malcolm X has replaced Martin Luther King Jr. as the defining figure of the March on Washington, standing on the edge of the crowd as a harbinger of a Negro revolt that, according to Thomas Sugrue, "called into question the very institutions that had defined the black freedom struggle since World War II."<sup>36</sup>

Such accounts enrich our understanding of the concerns that motivated so many people to participate in the March on Washington, but they overstate the political and ideological distinctions between the marchers and their leaders. The March on Washington succeeded precisely because it was led by radicals who understood and shared the concerns of the working-class African Americans who made it such a large and effective demonstration. Having challenged cold war liberals for leadership of local unions and civil rights organizations in the 1950s, black trade unionists ensured that demands for employment and economic reform remained at the heart of the civil rights agenda. Refusing to return to a New Deal liberalism that turned a blind eye to segregation and disfranchisement in the South, they also reached out to militants who demanded an immediate end to Jim Crow. Merging northern and southern traditions of black radicalism, the March on Washington linked their agendas under the powerful slogan, "For Jobs and Freedom." Its organizers did not achieve every aspect of that agenda, but they linked struggles for racial and economic justice more effectively than any other mobilization in the postwar era. ■

35. Rustin, "From Protest to Politics," in *Down the Line*, 111; Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 41; Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 145; Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 287.

36. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 13; Barber, *Marching on Washington*, 143; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 306; Higgenbotham, "Forward," vii–ix. See also Nicholas Mills, "What Really Happened at the March on Washington?," in *Civil Rights Since 1787: A Reader on the Black Struggle*, ed. Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 493–500.