Abstract

The U.S. Communist Party’s (CP) fight for racial justice is one of the most important and neglected chapters in the history of civil rights struggles in the United States. When it is studied the focus tends to be on the 1930s, however this conventional periodization ignores the dramatic growth in the Party’s understanding of race during the 1920s.

A focus on this period forces a reexamination of the relationship between the CP and the Soviet–based Communist International (Comintern). Rather than dictated from Moscow, the CP’s understanding of the issues facing African Americans evolved through a dialogue between Communists of all races around the world. This challenges the assumptions of the “Cold War” historians, who paint the Party as puppets of Russia, as well as “revisionist” histories, which tend to ignore the Comintern by focusing on the Party’s grassroots. By neither denouncing nor ignoring the relationship between international and domestic Communists, I show how this exchange provided a catalyst to the CP’s changing position on race. This not only has implications for the historiography of the Communism, but also sheds light on current debates over the feasibility of the political left as a vehicle for addressing issues of race.

In this thesis, I address this omission by analyzing previously unexamined editorial cartoons from Communist Party publications during the 1920s to highlight the CP’s changing views on race. Intended to succinctly communicate key policies and dictates to a heterogeneous, mass audience, these cartoons provide unique insights into the evolution of the Communist’s position on racial inequality in America and provide a critical lens through which to understand and rethink the complex domestic and international forces that reshaped the CP’s approach to race during this important period in the history of American racial politics.
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Introduction

Though the Soviet Union collapsed long ago, the Cold War still rages in the nation’s universities and on the pages of its academic journals. One of the most contentious fronts in the war over the history of US Communism is the Party’s work with African Americans. The US Communist Party’s fight for racial justice is one of the most important and controversial chapters in the history of civil rights struggles in the United States, though generations of historians have failed to properly understand the true nature of this crucial moment in history.

For decades, Wilson Record’s *The Negro and the Communist Party* (1951) was the definitive account on the relationship between the US Communist Party and African Americans in the interwar period. In Record’s analysis, Communists were simply manipulating the black community for their nefarious plans, and the African Americans that joined the Party were either dupes or desperately seeking whatever form of redress from the system of racial injustice that they could find. Sympathetic to the nascent civil rights movement, *The Negro and the Communist Party* was a warning to the United States that, unless it change its ways, radicals would seduce the normally liberal-minded black community. The public disavowals of the Party from prominent former African-American Communists, such as Richard Wright in his 1950 essay “I Tried to Be a Communist,” and Ralph Ellison’s 1950 novel *Invisible Man*, reinforced Record’s stance and, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Record’s depiction of Communists

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1 A note on terminology: The US Communists went through a number of name changes during their history. Within this thesis I will refer to the organization by its title as it stood at the time when referring to specific events. When referring to the movement as a whole, across these periods, I shall refer to it as the “US Communist Party,” the “US Communists,” the “US Party,” or the just “the Party.”

manipulating desperate African Americans remained largely intact. The 1967 historical jeremiad *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, by Harold Cruse, another former black Communist, extended Record’s critique of the US Communist Party by focusing on the stifling effect the Party’s dictates had on the black community’s creativity. Cruse also reserved special criticism for the black intelligentsia who willingly accepted the Party line because they either stood to gain financially or they were “unable to arrive at any philosophical conclusions of their own.” As a result, “the leading literary lights of the 1920’s substituted the Communist left-wing philosophy of the 1930’s, and thus were intellectually sidetracked for the remainder of their productive years.” According to the works of Record and Cruse, the US Communist Party’s work with African Americans was not only disingenuous but also disastrous.

Record and Cruse were part of the dominant postwar paradigm, which viewed the US party as fundamentally an appendage of the Soviet Union. Put forth in such works as Daniel Bell’s *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (1952), Irving Howe and Lewis Coser’s *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (1958), David Shannon’s *The Decline of American Communism* (1959), and Theodore Draper’s *The Roots of American Communism* (1957), and *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (1960), this “Cold War” scholarship, as I will call it, shared the conviction that US Communism was fundamentally a foreign ideology trying to impose itself on the United States. These scholars saw the US Communist Party as a


servant to the Soviet Union and the Moscow-based Communist International (or Comintern for short), the organization of worldwide Communist parties meant to act as the “General Staff of the World Revolution.” The dedication of the US Communists to its Soviet masters was so complete, according to Theodore Draper, that “even at the price of virtually committing suicide, [it] would continue above all to serve the interests of Soviet Russia.”

In the 1980s, a new generation of historians, who departed from the Cold War paradigm, came to dominate the field of US Communist history. Incorporating the “new social history,” inspired by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which focused on “history from the bottom up,” these “revisionist” historians, as I will refer to them, focused less on Party leaders and Comintern Congresses and more on grassroots activism and the day-to-day battles of the Communist rank and file. This revisionist approach informed such books as Maurice Isserman’s *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (1982), Paul Buhle’s *Marxism in the United States* (1987), Roger Keeran’s *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions* (1980), Paul Lyons’ *Philadelphia Communists* (1982), and Ellen Schrecker’s *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (1986). A part of the “New Left” generation of historians, many of these revisionists were politically active in the movements of the 1960s, and were more accepting of radicalism than their predecessors. This revisionist approach to US Communism was part of an effort to find a “usable past” in previous radical movements that could offer inspiration to contemporary social justice movements.

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7 Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 441.

particularly popular topic of the revisionists was the Party’s Popular Front years from 1934-1939, when the US Communist Party abandoned their ultra-left militancy and revolutionary rhetoric to ally with any and all liberal forces that opposed fascism. The Party in these years gained widespread mainstream acceptance and became a major cultural and political force in the United States. While denounced by Cold War scholars as a disingenuous effort to infiltrate US society, for revisionists the Popular Front served as a model of how a radical movement could successfully enter mainstream American life and, in the words of New Left historian, Warren Susman, provided a past that would enable historians “to remake the present and the future.”

Perhaps the most successful attempt to revise the history of the US Communist Party as a source of contemporary inspiration came from the Party’s work with African Americans. Two groundbreaking works, Mark Naison’s *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (1983) and Robin Kelley’s *Hammer and Hoe* (1990), revolutionized the historiography of the Party’s race relations by retelling the story of the US Communist Party’s extraordinary work with African Americans during the Great Depression. Rather than focus on the Party leadership or the international Communist movement, Naison explores the Communist activists in Harlem and “how the party grew from an obscure political formation with a handful of talented blacks into a mass movement that had an impact on almost every aspect of community life.” During the Depression the US Communist Party made impressive inroads in the black community. White and black Communists in Harlem fought evictions, organized rent strikes, formed relief organizations and unemployment councils, and provided a thriving interracial cultural scene that

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attracted the support of black intellectuals and artists. Kelley’s *Hammer and Hoe* tells a similar story of an extraordinary struggle for racial justice, but focuses on Communists in Alabama during the Depression. Like Naison’s work, Kelley described the work of grassroots radicals who organized black sharecroppers, fought segregation and disenfranchisement, incorporated Southern black culture, and pushed for interracial unity under the constant threat of violence and even death. Far from the Cold War interpretation of the Party as manipulating desperate African Americans, the US Communist’s approach to race during the Depression reveals a vibrant and successful interracial movement that, according to Naison, was a “landmark in American race relations.”

Historians, like Naison and Kelley, resurrected the history of the US Communist Party as a successful historical example of an interracial struggle for social justice. However, the revisionists faced a problem: if the US Party was simply ordered by Moscow to prioritize race, then it would suggest that the US Communists were only doing it because they were commanded to do so. In this case, the Communist Party’s fight against racism was insincere and that would diminish the success and ability to use the Party as a source for contemporary inspiration. To deal with the problem of Soviet influence, they simply sidestepped it. The revisionists did not stray very far from the Cold War concept that the Communist Party was foreign and essentially an arm of the Soviet Union. Instead, historians, like Naison and Kelley, argue that the Communist rank and file succeeded *in spite* of the US Communist Party by carving out a limited space at the grassroots level, which was free from the Party leadership and Comintern dictates. Naison and Kelley tried to make a distinction between the Party leadership, which was controlled by the Comintern, and the local activists, who, according to them, were the ones responsible for

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11 Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, 44, 47.
the successful efforts in making race a priority. Kelly explains that, “because neither Joe Stalin, Earl Browder nor William Z. Foster spoke directly to them or their daily problems, Alabama Communists developed strategies and tactics in response to local circumstances that, in most cases, had nothing to do with international crises.”12 This precarious distinction allowed the revisionists to simultaneously venerate the Party’s work with the black community, while accepting the fact that the Party leadership was controlled by the Comintern. However, this distinction soon became untenable with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the opening of the Comintern archives to the public in 1992. The previously unreleased documents of the Communist International revealed the full extent of the Comintern’s involvement with the US Communist Party. The undeniable involvement of the Comintern in US Party affairs produced a crisis among revisionist historians and the number of revisionist histories precipitously dropped off after 1992.

Comintern archives not only revealed the involvement of international Communists in domestic affairs but they also revealed sordid details of the US Party’s involvement with the Soviet espionage program in the United States. The extent of Soviet spying was further illuminated by the 1995 release of almost 3,000 Soviet spy cables gathered and decrypted by a top-secret counterintelligence program known as Venona in the 1940s.13 Proof of Soviet espionage spurred a new shift in the historiography of US Communism. A group of historians, whom I will refer to as the “traditionalists,” resisted the predominant revisionist tide of the 1980s. Works such as Harvey Klehr’s *The Heyday of American Communism* (1984), Ronald

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Radosh and Joyce Milton’s *The Rosenberg Files* (1983) and Klehr and John Earl Haynes’ *American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven* (1992) had kept the Cold War fires burning throughout the 1980s and maintained a critical interpretation of the US Communist Party as a tool of Soviet Union.\(^{14}\) The opening of the Comintern archives and the release of the Venona papers provided ammunition to the traditionalists and soon a surge of sensational stories of the US Communist Party’s involvement in Soviet spying filled the vacuum left by the revisionists. Among these were Klehr and Radosh’s *Amerasia Spy Case* (1996), Klehr and Haynes, *Venona: Decoding American Espionage* (1999) and *In Denial: Historians, Communism, and Espionage* (2003), and Herbert Romerstein and Eric Breindel, *The Venona Secrets* (2000). Even former revisionist historian Maurice Isserman was converted, evidenced by his 1999 essay “Disloyalty as a Principle: Why Communists Spied.”\(^{15}\) Klehr and Haynes now could confidently declare, “Espionage was a regular activity of the American Communist party.” From this, it followed that the “chief task” of the US Communists was “the interests of the Soviet Union.”\(^{16}\) For the traditionalists, the US Communist Party was once again seen as merely a tool of the Soviet Union, which diminished its accomplishments and disqualified it from being a source of inspiration.

Though the emphasis on espionage and Moscow’s control of the US Party has flourished following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the traditionalists have not enjoyed a monopoly on


\(^{16}\) Haynes and Klehr, *Venona*, 7.
the historiography of US Communism. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have tried to continue with the revisionist goal of finding a way to celebrate individuals associated with the US Communist Party, while maintaining their distance from the Soviet Union. I call these the “cultural” scholars, because they focus on the Party’s cultural realm as a space where artists and intellectuals associated with Communists could maneuver independently from the dictates of the Comintern. Professor of English, Alan Wald in his *American Literary Left Trilogy* (2002, 2007, 2012) revisits the often neglected writers on the Left from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, in an attempt to “return to memory dozens of extraordinarily talented writers of unique and pioneering texts who have “disappeared” from cultural history, while reassessing scores of others who have been appraised out of context.” Though, rather than defending Communists writers, Wald seems to be trying to free them from the stain of Communism. Wald, in effect, agrees with the critical Cold War beliefs about the US Communist Party, but argues that the writers within the Party’s orbit were able to carve out a space of independence.

Another example of this culturist trend is *The Cultural Front* (1996) by American Studies scholar Michael Denning. In this encyclopedic survey, Denning tried to rescue the cultural works of the 1930s from the Cold War and traditionalist claim that the Popular Front was a manipulative attempt to enter mainstream society with laughable and disastrous results, and that it ruined the creativity of a generation by creating a decade of “dreary social realism.” Instead, according to Denning, the Popular Front “informed the most powerful and lasting works of

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twentieth-century American fiction, music, theater, and film.” Denning claims that the entire Popular Front cultural scene, or the “cultural front” as he calls it, was actually a grassroots movement of leftist, proletarian culture that emerged from a growing “culture of the CIO working class… marked by a sustained sense of class consciousness and a new rhetoric of class, by a new moral economy, and by the emergence of a working-class ethnic Americanism.”\(^{20}\) The 1930s, for Denning, was actually the “Age of the CIO” where a laborist, class conscious, social democratic vision arose from the CIO working-class culture. According to Denning, the prevalence of this new working-class culture gave rise to the Communist Party, and not the other way around. He even goes so far to assert that the Communists joined the Popular Front. Denning tries to solve the problem of Soviet influence by divorcing the Popular Front from Communism. In this way, the cultural radicalism of the 1930s can be celebrated and the issue of the Soviet Union can be ignored entirely, leading to what one historian referred to as “a history of communism with the Communism left out.”\(^{21}\)

The cultural scholars’ method of focusing on culture over politics, however, has been useful for reclaiming the US Communist Party’s relationship with African Americans. Scholarship on black artists and intellectuals in the orbit of the Communist Party, such as Bill Mullen’s *Popular Fronts* (1999), William Maxwell’s *New Negro Old Left* (1999), James Smethurst’s *The New Red Negro* (1999), *Left of the Color Line* an anthology edited by Mullen & Smethurst (2003), Brian Dolinar’s *The Black Cultural Front* (2012), and Mary Helen Washington’s *The Other Blacklist* (2014), have thrived in recent years and gone a long way towards refuting Harold Cruse’s argument that the association with Communists hampered the

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 8.

cultural works of African Americans.\textsuperscript{22} These works show a thriving black artistic community that benefitted from their ties to the political left. Though, like Wald and Denning, many of these works by cultural scholars downplay the political and ideological ties of the black cultural workers to Communism.\textsuperscript{23} Instead of dealing with the issue of the Soviet Union, the cultural scholars have simply tried to ignore it.

The historiography of US Communism has been plagued by questions concerning the US Party’s relationship to the Soviet Union. Because of the inability to provide a satisfactory explanation, the scholarship on the US Communist’s work with African Americans remains incomplete. While the Cold War scholars and traditionalist historians never doubted the top-down, hierarchical connection of the Party to the Comintern, even the revisionist historians and the cultural scholars have failed to adequately address the issue. Though attempting to resuscitate the legacy of US Communists, the revisionists and cultural scholars accepted the basic premise of the Cold War: that the Party leadership was basically a tool of the Soviet Union, and the most they could do was to sidestep or ignore the issue.

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\textsuperscript{23} It is not the case that all of the cultural scholars have neglected the politics. Barbara Foley’s scholarship is a prime example of a successful attempt at showing the political influence of the Left on African American culture: Barbara Foley, \textit{Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941} (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Barbara Foley, \textit{Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro} (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Barbara Foley, \textit{Jean Toomer: Race, Repression, and Revolution} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).
The reason historians of US Communism have been unable to properly understand the relationship between the Party and the Comintern is in large part a problem of periodization. Scholars of every historical school tend to neglect the US Communist Party in the 1920s. The revisionists and the cultural scholars prefer to focus on the Popular Front (1934-1939) or the Party’s wartime alliance (1941-1944), when the Party became a successful mass movement, and to a lesser extent the preceding “Third Period” (1928-1934), which was characterized by the Party’s ultra-militant activism. The traditionalists, on the other hand, focus primarily on the Communist espionage of the 1940s and 1950s and neglect the 1920s because during that decade the US Communists “did not systemically maintain its covert apparatus.”24 The most extensive work on the Party’s first decade is Theodore Draper’s two-part work of Cold War history, The Roots of American Communism (1957) and American Communism and Soviet Russia (1960). Draper portrays the US Party of the 1920s as marginal and unable to successfully gain a following, aside from a handful of recent European immigrants. The only “crucially important” thing to happen to the Party in its early years, according to Draper, was that “it was transformed from a new expression of American radicalism to the American appendage of a Russian revolutionary power. Nothing else so important ever happened to it again.”25 Draper’s interpretation has remained the definitive account of the US Communist Party in the 1920s and, so, most historians simply ignore the decade.26


The result of the scholarly neglect of the 1920s has had an impact on how historians have understood the US Communist Party’s relationship to African Americans. In the first sentence of his book, Mark Naison states, “For most of the 1920s, the Communist Party represented a marginal phenomenon in Harlem’s political life,” He then explained that it was only at “the very end of the decade” that the Communists developed an approach to race. 27 Accepting Draper’s bleak diagnosis of the Party’s early years, scholars of the US Communists’ race policy have generally skipped over most of the decade and begun their analysis at the Sixth Congress of the Communist International in 1928. The Sixth Congress announced the beginning of the “Third Period” according to the Comintern. The “First Period” was the time of social and political upheavals immediately following World War I. As the global revolutionary potential diminished, a “Second Period” characterized by the “partial stabilization of capitalism,” was announced in 1924. Accepting that the worldwide revolution was not imminent, the international Communist movement during this period lowered their expectations and took a less militant approach, forming alliances with socialist and labor organizations. By 1928, though, the Comintern had decided that the capitalist stabilization had ceased. Communist parties in the new Third Period were to take an ultra-militant stance, ending alliances with non-Communists, and push for immediate revolution. 28

The Third Period coincided with a new theoretical framework put forth at the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928, which laid out a program for understanding and addressing the issue of race in the United States. According to the criteria laid out in Stalin’s Marxism and the

27 Naison, Communists in Harlem During the Depression, 3.
National Question, African Americans in the South now qualified as an “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture,” and, as such, they were entitled to self determination.\(^{29}\) The “Black Belt Nation Thesis” declared Southern African Americans an oppressed “nation within a nation,” and called for an independent African American country in the areas of the South where they constituted a majority, while African Americans in the North were considered to be a “national minority” and entitled to full social and political equality.\(^{30}\) While the self-determination of African Americans was never realistically pursued in the United States, this policy had an important psychological effect on the Party’s approach to race. The Black Belt Thesis led Communists to focus on Southern blacks for the first time, which resulted to the impressive efforts detailed in Robin Kelley’s book, and the concept that African Americans were a distinct people led to a greater appreciation and celebration of black culture by the US Communists. African Americans were now considered to have the most revolutionary potential in the United States, and since American capitalism was built on racism, the fight for racial justice was the same as the fight against capitalism.\(^{31}\) The combination of this new theoretical framework for race and the ultra-militant activism of the Third Period ushered in one of the most impressive struggles for racial justice in US history.

It is therefore easy to understand why so much attention has been placed on the post-1928 period. However, the problem with beginning the story at the 1928 Sixth Congress of the


Comintern is that it incorrectly gives too much weight to the Comintern. If the US Communist Party was inactive on the race question throughout the 1920s, and only prioritized the struggle of African Americans after the intervention of the Comintern at the end of the decade, then, of course, it follows that the Party’s approach to race originated in the Soviet Union. If this were the case, then the US Communists were not motivated in their struggle for racial justice, but rather they were simply following orders. This would tarnish the extraordinary history of the US Communist Party and African Americans; corroborate the claim that the US Party really was just a tool of Moscow; destroy the Party as a source of contemporary inspiration; and, call into question the viability of a left-led, economic class-based movement’s ability to understand and address the issue of race.

In this thesis, I revisit this neglected decade of the 1920s in order to demonstrate that the US Communists’ engagement with the problem of racial inequality preceded the 1928 intervention of the Soviet-based Comintern; that is, it emerged within the context of conditions in the United States.

However, in my examination, I depart from the established historiography of US Communism by not denouncing, sidestepping, or ignoring the Comintern, but rather by engaging and unpacking or “teasing out” the complexities of its relationship with the US Party. I do this through the examination of Communist editorial cartoons printed in the Party publications. Chapter 1 of my thesis lays out the importance of cartoons to the US Communist Party and explains their unique utility as a tool for historical exploration. In the following sections, I analyze previously unexamined Communist editorial cartoons as a way of unpacking the US Party’s changing views on race. Chapter 2 begins with the Left Wing split from the Socialist Party in 1919 and details the Party’s early efforts to address race in the first half of the decade.
This section spans the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922, and Fifth Comintern Congress in 1924 and shows how, with the aid of African American and international communists, the Party slowly began to develop an understanding of race under the rubric of anti-colonialism. Chapter 3 examines the events leading up to, and following, the US Communist Party’s controversial Fourth National Convention in August 1925. This National Convention was one of the major turning points for the Party’s pre-1928 approach to race and led to a period of unprecedented growth on the issue of race inequality in 1926. And Chapter 4 details the collapse of the Party’s early progress on race in 1927 and the events leading to the Comintern’s momentous Sixth Congress in 1928.

This examination of Communist cartoons shows that, rather than remain disengaged, the US Communist Party throughout the 1920s was improving in its ability to understand and address the issue of race. This progress only proves that the US Party’s dedication to African Americans did not arrive intact from the Soviet Union in 1928, but also provides a new way of understanding the relationship between the US Communist Party and the Comintern. In my conclusion I will elaborate on this new understanding and lay out its implications for the historiography of US Communism and beyond.
Political cartoons offer a rich source of historical information. By their nature, they need to able to convey coded messages that can be deciphered and easily understood by a distant audience. Decoding this shared language provides an understanding of how both the artist and the intended audience understand society. Cartoons are especially useful for understanding issues of race. Cartoons are a medium of extremes and stereotypes. Because they almost always represent bodies, racialized bodies, cartoons can reveal the artist’s (and often the audience’s) attitudes towards race.

There are a handful of works exploring radical cartoons of the early 20th Century, including, Richard Fitzgerald’s *Art and Politics*, Mark Summers, “American Cartoonists and a World of Revolutions” (1995), Rebecca Zurier’s *Art for the Masses* (1989), Michael Cohen’s “Cartooning Capitalism” (2007) and Rachel Schreiber’s *Gender and Activism in a Little Magazine* (2011), though scholars tend to neglect the US Communist Party. All of the studies of radical cartoons confine themselves to only one magazine: the *Masses*. Published in 1911 and 1917 in New York’s Greenwich Village during what is sometimes referred to as the “Little

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33 “Cartoons and Ethnicity” (Festival of Cartoon Art, Columbus: Ohio State University Libraries, 1992), 15.
Renaissance,” the *Masses* became a central fixture of this period of vibrant culture and popular radicalism. This period saw an explosion of creativity in arts and radical politics and the *Masses* helped fuse the cultural avant-garde and the bohemian artists to the Socialist, feminist, anarchist, and radical unionist movements that were thriving in the 1910s. The level and quality of radical art to come out of this period was impressive; however, World War I ended this era celebrated by scholars when the *Masses* was forced to shutter due to government wartime repression.

Fitzgerald, Summers, Cohen, Schreiber and Zurier seem to lose interest with radical cartoons after the *Masses*, and a wall seems to have been built around the US Communists when it comes to cartoons. Richard Fitzgerald’s *Art and Politics* (one of the few works on this subject that briefly ventures beyond the *Masses*) claims that the scholarly focus on the radical cartoons of the 1910s stems from a search for a usable past, and that the Communists “failed so miserably to deal with [the era’s] questions, that students of radicalism must turn to the decades before.” Fitzgerald ends his book with the rise of the US Communist Party as the major force of the political left in the early 1920s and spends the entire epilogue lamenting the shift to “the stylized wooden proletarian of left cartooning.” Fitzgerald writes off Communist cartoons as uninspired propaganda, and the cartoonists accused of abandoned art for politics.

Though the basis for Fitzgerald’s scholarly neglect is unfounded. While it is true that in many instances the cartoons of the US Communist Party were more explicitly politically focused than their radical predecessors, the distinction between the *Masses* and the US Communist cartoonists is, in many ways, an artificial creation. A number of artists within the socialist

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cultural world found the Communist style congenial to this new paradigm, and cartoonists such as Robert Minor, Lydia Gibson, Fred Ellis, Hugo Gellert, William Gropper, Maurice Becker and Art Young, transitioned over to the Communist publications throughout the 1920s. Artistic style remained an important aspect of the Communist-led left. Cartoons were seen as a legitimate art form and Communist cartoonists experimented with Surrealism, Cubism, and Expressionism as often as Realism, and were frequently featured in Party-sponsored art shows.37

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The Communist Party did not implement a uniform standard on the radical cartoons but they did provide a new theoretical approach to the art. The goal of Communist art was to spur people to action as summed up by the popular slogan “Art is a Weapon in the Class Struggle!” For Communists, art was meant to teach and incite. While drawing attention to the plight of people was important, using art as a weapon entailed situating the plight within the historical struggle for socialism. Not only was art supposed to describe how life was, but it should also explain why and suggest the way out.38 To this end, Communists looked primarily on murals and cartoons. Art historian, Andrew Hemingway, explains, while the connection between “what has often been regarded as the acme of high art with the political cartoon,” may seem strange, they “both, after all are a didactic media which usually rely on simple symbolic juxtapositions,” and as opposed to the “essentially… private and individualistic art” of easel paintings, the mural and the political cartoon were seen as a truly democratic form of art, to be shared by the masses.39


39 Hemingway, Artists on the Left, 48; Platt, Art & Politics in the 1930s, 87–88.
Because of their theoretical and practical value, cartoons became a central part of the US Communist Party’s agitation and propaganda work (agitprop). In his introduction to the Party’s 1927 edition of *Red Cartoon*, Marxist literary critic, V.F. Calverton states, “The cartoon represents a kind of snap-shot logic that often is sharper than words, and more effective than argument.” Communist writer Joseph Freeman, in the 1929 edition of *Red Cartoons*, asserted, “a few bold pencil strokes by an imaginative artist may convey a message more vividly than an editorial or an article.”

The ability of a cartoon to effectively convey the Party’s position was especially true, considering the fact that the majority of Party members during the 1920s were foreign-born and so the intended audience was often semi-literate and multilingual. Neither this heterogeneous polyglot nor the often-uneducated industrial laborers, who made up the rest of the Party’s political base, could be expected to understand highly theoretical arguments on the nature of capitalism. With dozens of Communist newspapers printed in over 25 different languages in the United States throughout the 1920s, the US Party needed to be able distill complex concepts into easily identifiable symbols that could be understood by anyone without any training, and so cartoons became a top priority of the Party.

The value placed on cartoons by the US Communist Party is shown by their abundance in the Communist Press. The *Liberator*, the successor to the *Masses*, was handed over to the US Communists in 1922, and it continued to feature dozens of cartoons every issue. This continued after the magazine became the *Worker’s Monthly* in 1924; though, as it transitioned to a purely theoretical organ in 1926 the *New Masses* was immediately formed to replace it as the US

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Communists’ cultural and literary organ in order to provide a venue for Communist cartoons. Cartoons were also featured extensively in the Party’s weekly newspaper the *Worker*, published from 1923-1924, and its successor the *Daily Worker*. The US Communist Party even published a series of books called *Red Cartoons*, which featuring nothing but Communist editorial cartoons reprinted from their publications.\(^{43}\)

Because the US Communists viewed cartoons as one of the most efficient and potent tools for agitprop work, they are perfect for historical inquiry. Far from superfluous, editorial cartoons communicated the most salient points of Party ideology, simplified and coded in symbols. Since cartoons were used to communicate the US Communist Party’s top priorities, they are particularly useful in determining the Party’s true feeling and stances on issues. Also, the top-down structure of the organization, and the fact that all of these publications were directly under the control of the Party apparatus, ensures that the messages the cartoons were conveying accurately reflected the official Party-beliefs. The accuracy of the cartoons’ message is further safeguarded by the fact that the line between the Party leadership and the cartoon work was porous. A prime example is Robert Minor (who I will discuss at greater length in Chapter 2) who was, at one point, the highest-paid cartoonist in the country. After joining the US Communist Party, Minor not only drew cartoons, but also wrote for the Party press, edited the *Daily Worker*, headed the Party’s Negro Commission and eventually served as acting General Secretary of the Party in the 1940s.\(^{44}\) Anton Refregier, a Communist painter and muralist

\(^{43}\) All of these sources were drawn upon for this study including the four annual *Red Cartoons* compilations: Walt Carmon, ed., *Red Cartoons from The Daily Worker, The Workers Monthly and The Liberator - Communist Publications* (Chicago: Daily Worker Publishing Company, 1926); Walt Carmon, ed., *Red Cartoons of 1927 from The Daily Worker* (Chicago: Daily Worker Publishing Company, 1927); Walt Carmon, ed., *Red Cartoons from The Daily Worker 1928* (New York: Daily Worker Publishing Company, 1928); Sender Garlin, ed., *1929 Red Cartoons Reprinted from The Daily Worker* (New York: Comprodaily Publishing Company Inc., 1929).

recalled that: “Doing cartoons was not a separate activity from our painting or from our lives.”

Cartoons were not separate from the rest of the Party’s functions, but were theoretically, tactically, and logistically central to the work of the US Communists. This makes an examination of them an unrivaled opportunity to understand the US Communists’ evolving position on race during the formative period of the 1920


Chapter 2

The Early Years, 1919-1925

In addition to a rich tradition of graphic art from previous U.S. radical movements, the Communists also, unfortunately, inherited their predominant views on race. The U.S. Socialist Party denied that there were any special circumstances facing African Americans. While they admitted that the black community was oppressed, they viewed the problems facing the African American as the same capitalist inequalities that oppressed the entire working class, although to varying degrees. Even though the white perennial candidate for the Socialist Party, Eugene Debs, admitted his desire for the labor movement to stand “unequivocally committed to receive and treat the Negro upon terms of absolute equality with his white brother,” he stated plainly that “there is no ‘Negro problem,’ apart from the general labor problem. The Negro is not one whit worse off than thousands of white slaves who throng the same labor market to sell their labor-power to the same industrial masters.” For Debs and many other socialists, class was seen to be “first” or foundational to understanding and eradicating other social inequalities.

Aside from denouncing slavery and a few remarks about the US Civil War in personal correspondences, Marx himself never specifically addressed the issue of race and, consequently, neither the Socialists nor the Communists had a substantial theory on race in the Marxist tradition from which to draw upon. The Marxist focus on the economic causes of social ills seemed to leave little room for an analysis of other forms of oppression, while the prescription

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for class unity suggested that any other forms of identification were fictitious, or even detrimental to the process of uniting workers along class lines. And since equality was thought to be possible only under socialism, all attention went to overthrowing capitalism, subordinating the issue of race.\textsuperscript{48}

This neglect was carried over to the Communist movement. Though officially committed to ending racism, the early years of the Party were characterized by factional infighting, to which the Party directed most of its energies. After the left wing split from the Socialist Party in 1919 there existed multiple competing Communist Parties. By 1922, most of the Communist groups had been consolidated into one organization, though it was internally divided. The Communists were driven underground during the post-WWI government crackdown on radicals, known as the “First Red Scare” (1919-1920).\textsuperscript{49} As the repression eased, the Communists formed a legal aboveground party known as the Workers Party of America. The legal party was originally subordinate to the illegal and clandestine entity, though as it grew the aboveground section challenged the underground for control of the movement. With both segments vying for power African-American issues were largely overlooked.\textsuperscript{50}

The few African Americans that did join the Party in the first few years, was a group of Caribbean-born radicals led by the African-Caribbean activist Cyril Briggs, who coalesced around the semi-clandestine the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB). The ABB’s mix of pan-African nationalism and socialism caught the attention of the US Communists, which was incorporated it as an auxiliary of the US Communist Party in 1922. The Caribbean-born radicals

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were attracted to the Communist’s ties to the Comintern and increasingly came to use the US Party’s international connections to bring attention to their grievances. During the 1922 Fourth Congress of the Communist International, two US Communists travelled to the Soviet Union to discuss the “Negro Question.” The first was Suriname-born Otto Huiswoud. Huiswoud was one of the few black members of the old Socialist Party and, after the split in 1919, he went with the Communists making him the first black Party member. At the Fourth Congress, Huiswoud denounced the racist policies of the labor movement and drew attention to the revolutionary potential of African Americans, though he maintained that the problems facing the black community were primarily economic. The other speaker was the Jamaican-American poet and writer Claude McKay, an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance who was drawn to the radical left, though he denied ever becoming a full-fledged Party member. McKay attended the Congress with credentials from the ABB and used this opportunity to share his harsh diagnosis. The Party’s efforts to organize African Americans, according to McKay, were willfully inadequate and, worse yet, the Communists themselves were plagued by racism. McKay called on the Congress to create a commission to address the problems of race, and the Comintern agreed, establishing an interim Negro Commission with Huiswoud as its chairman.

While the Comintern was receptive to Huiswoud and McKay’s pleas, this did not translate into immediate action in the United States. For over a year after the 1922 Fourth Congress, the US Communists were preoccupied with the factional dispute and undertook no new effort on the issue of race. It was only with the assistance of the Comintern that the legal status of the Party was finally settled. With both sides at an impasse, the US Communists

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51 Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 11, 42.
appealed the issue to the international Communists in 1922, and the Comintern decisively determined “the center of all Communist Activity in America lies not in the underground or illegal but in the open and legal work.” This decision gave the advocates of the legal party the upper hand and over the next year it allowed them to subordinate the underground party to the legal one. These events reveal a pattern that would continue to play out over the decade, in which the US Party use the Comintern a mediator to settle its internal disputes. Though, the fact that the Comintern’s decision did not immediately settle the debate, and it took over a year for the underground Party to be merged into the Workers Party, shows that the US Communists had a certain degree of independence and sheds doubt on the claim of Cold War and traditionalist scholars that the US Party was merely a tool of the Soviet Union.

When the underground section finally merged with the Workers Party in 1923, the now unified US Communists were able to devote more attention to the issue of race. In early 1924 the Workers Party participated in the All-Race Conference, also called the “Negro Sanhedrin,” after the Hebrew Supreme Councils during the time of the Maccabees. The Sanhedrin was comprised primarily of black middle-class organizations such as the NAACP, the Friends of Negro Freedom, the National Equal Rights League, the National Race Congress, and the International Uplift League, though the ABB assumed a central role in organizing the conference. Along with delegates from the Workers Party, the ABB attempted to use the organization as a vehicle for gaining a foothold in the black community, but their Communist ties drew ire from the

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mainstream organizations and their proposals were rejected. The ABB and Workers Party delegates were banned from the next, and final gathering of the organization.\footnote{C. Alvin Hughes, “The Negro Sanhedrin Movement,” Journal of Negro History 69, no. 1 (Winter 1984): 1–13; Zumoff, The Communist International and U.S. Communism, 317–18.}

... The improving attention to race following the unification of the Workers Party is reflected in the Communist cartoons of this period. From the time the Liberator was acquired by the Workers Party in October 1922 till 1924, only one cartoon that dealt with or featured African Americans was printed. However two cartoons that dealt with race were published in the magazine the month the Sanhedrin was founded. It is also telling that Robert Minor and his wife Lydia Gibson drew two of these cartoons. In addition to being an editor and writer for the Communist press, Minor, a white Texan, was deeply involved with the Party’s work with African Americans. He would head the Negro Commission and the Party’s efforts at organizing blacks in the South. Minor was one of the first white Communists to break with the “class first” traditions of the party and work to organize the black working class. Minor organized the Negro Tenants Protective League with Huiswoud and Lovett Fort-Whiteman, a top leader in the Party’s “Negro work” and a close friend of Minor.\footnote{Solomon, The Cry Was Unity, 44; Robert Minor, “The Black Ten Millions (Part 1),” The Liberator, February 1924; Robert Minor, “The Black Ten Millions (Part 2),” The Liberator, March 1924.} Minor and Gibson met during their time at the \textit{Masses}. Though Gibson was not as directly involved in Party politics as her husband, she did, however, share his passion for social justice. Born to wealthy English-born parents, Gibson was radicalized through her involvement in the women’s suffrage movement. In addition to her activism, Gibson was a poet and illustrator and, along with her husband, was responsible for many cartoons that dealt with issues of race in the Communist press.\footnote{North, Robert Minor: Artist and Crusader, 158–60.}
Minor’s early dedication to racial justice is shown in what is perhaps the first Communist cartoon to deal with the struggle of African Americans, “The Exodus From Dixie” (Fig. 1). The image portrays throngs of African Americans wearing workers overalls and hauling sacks and pitchforks fleeing the South. One of them clutches a photograph of Abraham Lincoln while a few others turn back to the South with a raised clenched fist shouting in defiance. In the background smoke plumes rise from a large fire behind a sign that reads “KKK.” Framing the flames are lifeless bodies hanging by their necks from trees. The image is unique for its African American subject matter, but also because it includes women and children. Communist cartoons generally featured male figures, often strapping and muscular workingmen that represent the proletariat, or fat or effete men portraying the bourgeois. In this image there appears a young child being swept off its feet as it is hurried along by an adult. Further back into the crowd there is a slightly older child wearing a cap and clutching a bundle. In front of him is woman trudging along with a large sack on her back. This woman is thick and muscular and her face is stern and resolute.

If the subject matter is novel, the style of the cartoon was classic Minor. Shunning the delicate pen work and cross hatching that was standard in political cartoons when he began his career, Minor popularized the use of large, blunt, grease crayons on textured paper. These drawing included bold lines and high contrast, and the raw and crude forms of the cartoons portrayed a sense of urgency. As Minor explained, this style not “for the sake of the appearance of lines, but because it forces simplicity – for you cannot draw tedious detail with a big crayon.” His technique would come to dominate the cartooning world for the next half century.58

One of the cartoons printed the month of the Sanhedrin was also inspired by struggles of African Americans fleeing the South during the Great Migration. Lydia Gibson’s “Runaway

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Slave” (Fig. 2) differs from Minor’s style. The sharp lines and angles and use of negative space are in the style of a woodcut or an engraving. It is drawn to resemble an old wanted poster. It features a black man running with a stick and bindle upon his back. Above him are the words: “Runaway Slave $1,000. fine for any Northern labor-agent encouraging fugitives.” And below the figure the text reads: “When last seen was Going North!” This image is referencing the efforts of white Southerners to stop African Americans from migrating north. The mass flight of black Southerners was depleting the region’s pool of cheap labor and Southern officials took to physically detaining migrating blacks, banning the advertisements of Northern jobs in newspapers and arresting labor agents that tried to recruit blacks for Northern industry. 59 By drawing the comparison between migrating blacks and runaway slaves Gibson conveying the idea that despite emancipation, the African Americans of the South were still practically enslaved.

While these two early works show that the Workers Party was beginning to recognize the plight of African Americans, they also reveal the Party’s limitations. Both of these cartoons fail to address the particular forms of oppression associated with race. African Americans were not treated as individuals, but instead, as part of a suffering mass or as a caricature of a slave. They are portrayed as victims lacking agency and being preyed upon by forces beyond their control. And the focus on the escape to the North infers that racism is confined to the South. That being said, the physical portrayal of African Americans in these two images surpasses the vast majority of images of black Americans of this time. The necessity of simplification in cartooning often

59 Shepherd W. McKinley and Cynthia Risser McKinley, “The Great Migration and North Carolina,” Tar Heel Junior Historian 45, no. 2 (Spring 2006).
leads to the use of stereotypes, and yet even in this early period both artists were careful to portray their subjects realistically and respectfully.  

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The Workers Party’s attention to race increased following the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in 1924, which explicitly discussed the “Negro Question.” John Pepper, (also known Joseph Pogany) the Hungarian-born Communist and delegate for the Workers Party spoke of the need for “complete equality between nations and even races.” In another example of black Communists using the Comintern as a venue for their addressing their concerns, Lovett Fort-Whiteman joined Pepper in Moscow. Fort-Whiteman went even further than Pepper, asserting, “The Negro problem is a peculiar [unique] psychological problem for the Communists. The Negroes are not discriminated against as a class but as a race… Socialists and even Communists have not realized that the problem must be dealt with in a specialized way.”  

Instead of resulting in a “specialized” approach, the “Negro Question” was entirely subsumed under the fight against imperialism, as it had been since the Fourth Congress in 1922, when the interim Negro Commission proclaimed that it was the “special duty of the Communists to apply (Lenin’s) ‘Theses on the Colonial Question’ to the Negro problem.” The “Theses on the Colonial Question” was Lenin’s attempt to revise Marx’s theory of pre-socialist national revolutionary movements to the new conditions under imperialism, the highest stage of  

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60 The third image is a cartoon by William P. Hicks featuring a man and a child bowing towards a huge bust of Abraham Lincoln (Fig. 3). The caption beneath reads: “Teacher (on Lincoln’s Birthday): ‘Bow to him, son; it’s true he emancipated the niggers, but he didn’t overdo it.’” While crudely drawn, this might be the funniest cartoon on the subject of race I found among the Communist publications.


capitalism. Presented to the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920, Lenin declared that the colonial bourgeois were no longer capable of successfully leading national movements because of their compliance with imperialism, and so it fell to the proletariat and the Communist International to lead these nascent movements with the possibility of even surpassing the capitalist stage of development altogether.⁶³

At the Fifth Congress in the summer of 1924, the fight against imperialism was one of the most pressing issues. Parties were directed to actively support anti-colonial struggles, and as African Americans were drawn into this framework, this had important implications.⁶⁴ African Americans were placed in a central role of the fight for global Communism. The International Communists wanted to begin a campaign in Africa but found the geographic and language barriers prohibitive, so the Comintern developed a strategy where African Americans and West Indians would be mobilized and eventually spearhead a global “Negro” campaign. This required the US Party to accelerate their efforts with the African American community.

As opposed to the Fourth Congress in 1922, factional fighting did not cripple the Workers Party during the Fifth Congress in 1924, and so they were more receptive to the Comintern’s framework and tried to incorporate the struggle against racism in the United States under the rubric of anti-colonialism. This shift in emphasis can be clearly detected in the Workers Party’s cartoons. Just a few months after the Fifth Congress a cartoon “Drop him!” (Fig. 4) by Maurice Becker perfectly encapsulated this change. Maurice Becker was a radical painter who immigrated to the United States as a young child from Russia. He was a veteran of

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the *Masses* circles and had work shown in the famed 1913 Armory Show in New York. Though a more experimental artist than Minor, Becker’s style of the cartoon is similar, using the same crayon on textured paper technique, yet the sloppier style captures mood as a form of expressionism. In “Drop him!” Becker depicts four black male figures carrying a sedan chair, a windowed cabin or platform often associated with elites or royalty that is carried by servants as a means of conveyance. The black figures are wearing only small coverings over their lower sections, suggesting they are African natives, and they are labeled as “French,” “Belgian” and “English,” suggesting they are colonial subjects. The sedan chair is adorned with a dollar sign and, within, a bald, heavy-set white man lounges with his scowled head emerging and a fist grasping a whip, representing global capitalism, which has enslaved the natives of Africa. The black figures appear to have stopped walking. The two figures in front look back at their passenger in anger suggesting the Africans are ready to end their subjugation, while the title caption beneath “Drop him!” can be taken as a call for the colonial subjects to overthrow the imperialist system which oppresses them. One of the most intriguing features of the cartoon is that the fourth black figure is labeled “American.” This shows how readily the Communists were able to incorporate African Americans into the anti-imperialist paradigm set forth by the Fifth Congress.

Though cartoons featuring the domestic issues facing African Americans were still rare, the months following the Fifth Congress saw a surge of cartoons focusing on imperialism. “The Interrupted Lynching,” (Fig. 5) drawn by Robert Minor in the same year as the Fifth Congress, features a large man in overalls, a cap adorned with a star, and the words “The Communist International,” floating above him, confronting a short, rotund man with a bulbous nose and a

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clichéd suit and top hat, with the words “British Imperialism,” down his vest. The Imperialist’s face has a worried frown, while the chiseled face of the Communist looks resolute, with one hand gripping a rifle equipped with a bayonet and the other hand, calmly outstretched, pointing to the Imperialist’s chest. The Imperialist holds a rope, which the Communist is standing upon, and on the other end is affixed to the neck a small figure crouching behind the Communist with the word “Egypt” floating above it.

This cartoon is a reference to the labor uprisings in Egypt in 1924, in which the Egyptian Communist Party played a large part but was ultimately crushed. It was, however, rebuilt by the Comintern who smuggled Egyptian Communists back into the country.66 The representation of the Egyptian is racially non-descript and shows a weak, small figure, though not pathetic. With one knee raised, it suggests the possibility of Egypt, and the rest of the colonial countries, rising once more, with the help of strong, and armed, Communism International. The reference to lynching shows an effort on the part of the Workers Party to connect the “Negro Problem” with imperialism.

Another cartoon by Minor published after the Fifth Congress, in 1925, titled “On the International Slave Plantation,” (Fig. 6) again draws attention to imperialism, and again uses tropes and symbols related to African Americans. The use of “plantation” in the title invites the connection of imperialism to slavery. We see three colonial subjects, India, China and Africa, as towering figures grinning menacingly down upon three, knee-high figures representing “U.S. Imperialism,” “French Imperialism,” and “British Imperialism.” The Colonial subjects are all dressed in identical overalls and shirtless, suggesting a unity of the globally oppressed, though their facial features contain more racial details. China has a small nose and his eyes are simply

slits. India is again wearing a turban, but the facial features are more apparent in this cartoon, with a long face and angular features. Africa has a wider nose and more pronounced lips than the others. Though the cartoon employs racialized features, and employs stereotypical symbols, the figures look closer to real people than the racist caricatures commonly portrayed in this period. A tiny figure behind them smiles on, wearing a Budenovka, the pointed felt hats that were designed for fighters in the Russian Revolution, and a rifle with a bayonet, representing the Soviet Union. The bayonet is secured to his back and his distance from the others suggests that the colonial subjects are capable of handling imperialism without his help. The figure representing China also carries a gun, which could be a reference to the increased militancy of the Chinese Communist Party in their national struggle. A caption at the bottom says: “Who Is That You All Are Going to Whip, Mr. Legree?” referring to the character Simon Legree in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. By referencing the brutal plantation owner, this cartoon directly connects imperialism with domestic racism. The fact that Minor employed symbols and tropes connected to domestic racism to draw attention to international oppression suggests that these symbols were, to some extent, widely accepted among the Party and its base as being negative, showing that the Workers Party was making improvements on the issue of race.

This increased attention to race shows a definite improvement upon the complete neglect the Communists inherited from previous Marxist traditions. From the efforts of black Communists and a few whites, the Workers Party was beginning to realize that race was a problem that needed to be dealt with in the United States. They were helped along by the international Communist movement, which gave a venue for Communists to discuss the issue

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and air grievances and provided encouragement and a theoretical framework that tied the struggle of African Americans to the global fight against imperialism.

The fact that the Workers Party initially disregarded the Comintern shows that Moscow’s decisions were not blindly followed. It also demonstrates the destructive effect that the factional fighting between the underground and legal segment had on the Party’s other works. With the arbitration of the international Communist movement, the Workers Party was able to curb their factionalism and took incremental steps towards recognizing and addressing the problem of race. However, the Communists’ focus on imperialism still neglected the specific problems of African Americans, and as a new conflict erupted within the Party leadership, the US Communists would become even more sharply divided than before. It would take events beyond their control to overcome these difficulties.
Chapter 3

The Party Improves, 1925-1926

If the Workers Party was making incremental steps in the right direction, the pace was not quick enough for Lovett Fort-Whiteman. Fort-Whiteman had risen quickly throughout the ranks of the Workers Party. Unlike the majority of other black Communists, he was born in the United States (as opposed to the Caribbean) and his Southern roots and dark complexion lent him an air of authority on the specific conditions facing the “American Negro.” Fort-Whiteman was chosen to study in the Soviet Union and, from his position in Moscow, he gained a sympathetic audience to his complaints. Fort-Whiteman both publicly and privately criticized the Workers Party’s lack of effort organizing African Americans. He called for the creation of a Negro Labor Congress, which, instead of allying with black elite organizations, would organize black workers and focus on the “social demands and grievances of the race.”

The Comintern responded favorably to Fort-Whiteman’s proposal and in December 1924, sent a “strictly confidential” letter to the Workers Party directing the creation of Fort-Whiteman’s Negro Labor Congress. When this failed to spur the Workers Party to action, the Comintern took further steps. In early 1925, the Comintern established a permanent Negro Commission headed by John Pepper, now a Comintern functionary, which sent orders to the Workers Party, again directing them to create a Negro Labor Congress, this time even laying out

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its structure, agenda, goals, and leadership, with Fort-Whiteman at its head. Again this order went unheeded. The lack of response to the Comintern’s orders shows again a certain level of independence the Workers Party had, but this also illustrates the destructive force of factionalism.\textsuperscript{69}

Even if there were white Communists willing to organize black workers, the Party was in no position to commence such an undertaking at that time. The brief moment of harmony, following the fusion of the Workers Party in 1923, was short lived. Soon warring factions emerged within the leadership. On one side of the factional divide were James P. Cannon and William Z. Foster. Cannon was a Midwesterner from the IWW tradition, and Foster was the son of an Irish immigrant and one of the only Communist leaders with ties to the labor movement. The Party’s General Secretary, C.E. Ruthenberg, led the other faction. Ruthenberg was one of the founders of US Communist Party and a man of decorum. He left the factional fighting to his lieutenant, Jay Lovestone, a young, Russian-born Jew, who was feared for his cutthroat politics and the files of potentially compromising information he allegedly kept on his fellow Communists.\textsuperscript{70} The Foster-Cannon faction was centered in Chicago and drew its support from the unions of the industrial Midwest, while the Ruthenberg-Lovestone faction’s center of power was New York City and attracted East Coast intellectuals and foreign-born workers. Beyond the geographic and demographic differences, these factions had different visions for the Party. Foster and Cannon were primary focus on “boring from within,” or infiltrating and radicalizing

\textsuperscript{69} Solomon, \textit{The Cry Was Unity}, 49–50.
\textsuperscript{70} Palmer, \textit{James P. Cannon}, 203.
mainstream union organizations, while Ruthenberg and Lovestone favored a “united-front” plan, which consisted of organizing leftist organizations into coalitions for political action.  

These differences intensified and, by 1925, the level of acrimony had risen to unsustainable levels. With the Party on the edge of tearing itself apart, Ruthenberg suggested the Workers Party, once again, appeal to the Comintern for arbitration. The Foster-Cannon faction readily agreed, as the balance of power within the Party membership was decisively in their favor. However, the Ruthenberg-Lovestone faction still had sway within the Comintern, especially in John Pepper, their former factional ally. The factional leaders agreed to a “parity commission” at the upcoming Workers Party’s Fourth National Convention in August 1925, consisting of three members from each faction and lead by a Comintern functionary, Sergei Gusev, acting as an “impartial chairman,” which would conclusively settle the contested balance of power.

At the convention, Foster and Cannon wished to use their numerical advantage to push the Ruthenberg-Lovestone faction entirely out of the leadership, which would likely have resulted in a breakup of the Party. However, Gusev intervened. While the Foster-Cannon faction maintained their majority, the Comintern ordered that the leadership remain roughly evenly divided between the factions and Ruthenberg would retain the post of Secretary of the Executive Committee. On paper, nothing had changed; however, in practice, this had a profound impact. The balance of power was now set in place. With neither side capable of factional dominance, the devastating internecine conflict that had dominated the Party was finally muted. This marked

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the beginning of a new period for the US Communists, which was underscored the Convention’s
decision to change the name of their organization to the “Workers (Communist) Party” (WCP). 73

After the parity commission, the US Communists issued their most comprehensive
program on African Americans up to that time. This program called for the inclusion of African
Americans in unions, the creation of separate all-black unions where necessary, the organizing of
agricultural workers and tenant farmers, an end to lynching, and the demand for full “social
equality” for African Americans. 74 In October of that year, the Fort-Whiteman finally got his
American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC). At its founding convention, the ANLC echoed the
WCP’s resolution and added even more specific demands pertinent to the Black community,
such as an end to segregated juries, housing, and the armed forces and made specific calls for
childcare and equality in education, while pledging to fight imperialism and the Ku Klux Klan. 75
The WCP promoted the ANLC extensively, so much so that some black organizers feared that
the Party’s level of involvement would taint the congress as a Communist front and scare away
conservative black unions. 76 For the first time, the US Communists began to throw significant
weight at the issue of race in the United States.

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The WCP’s new dedication to the race question was reflected in the Party’s cartoons. The
number of editorial cartoons containing issues relating to African Americans surged in the year
following the creation of the ANLC. Two cartoons by Fred Ellis appeared on the same page on

73 Ibid., 140–46.
74 “Resolution of the Parity Commission, ’Daily Worker (June 28, 1925),” in American Communism and
75 “Resolution of the American Negro Labor Congress, ’Daily Worker (Nov. 14, 1925),” in American
Communism and Black Americans, by Philip S. Foner and James S. Allen (Philadelphia: Temple University Press,
76 “Richard B. Moore, Otto E. Huiswoud, Aubrey C. Bailey, and August Warren to CEC, May 31, 1925,”
the January 1926 issue of the *Daily Worker*, and both deal with African Americans. Fred Ellis was an AFL sign painter before an accident ended his career. Robert Minor recognized Ellis’ talent and brought him under his wing, influencing both Ellis’ style and subject matter. What is telling is that these appeared with a full-page article about new mining technology replacing workers. Rather than accompany an article about African Americans, these images were interspersed throughout the contents of paper, suggesting that there was not a line between what was considered “Negro work” and the rest of the Party’s business. Racial justice was to now be an organic part of the entire program. The first cartoon is titled “I Mean to Get In!” (Fig. 7) and it features a bald, shirtless man lunging forward, with mouth agape and one arm forcefully extended, pointing his finger. The figure is racially ambiguous. There are black sections of his body but they could easily be mistaken for shadows. One defining feature is his bald head, which Ellis repeatedly uses on African American subjects. The caption below reads:

Fred Ellis shows the insistent demand of the Negro workers to obtain their full equality in the trade unions. The labor movement can never be what it should be until the Negro workers enter the unions on an equal basis.

In front of the figure light shines while behind him is shadow, suggesting the bright future that African Americans have in store in an integrated labor movement. One does not get the feeling of it being inevitable, however. While muscular in physique, the character is not imposing. The stance of the figure is not so much demanding, as he is defiant. Knowing of his potential, yet not having reached it, the figure almost seems to be reminiscent of a man yelling “I’ll be back!” after being kicked out of somewhere, yelling as much for his own sake as anyone else’s.

The accompanying image is less ambiguous. “Batter Down the Barriers!” (Fig. 8) features two burly, shirtless men, one black and bald, the other white, in a coordinated lunging

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position holding above them a large log. The black man is positioned behind the white one. His leg is behind the white man’s leg, but his arm is in front of the latter’s, producing an almost homoerotic image of the two interracial bodies intertwined in physical exertion. This glorification of the masculine body is typical of Communist art, with the burly male worker standing in for the proletariat, who is contrasted against the fat and effete bourgeois. The struggle for Communism is presented as the celebration of male camaraderie and, in this period, an ever-increasing interracial brotherhood. The focus on trade unions shows the extent that the Party had rallied behind the ANLC’s message. However, beyond inclusion in unions, these cartoons do not speak to any particular problem facing African Americans. They are just generic expressions of class unity. The figures themselves are almost identical, except for the color of their skin, which is an apt description for the early days of the Party’s focus on African Americans. While these images represent the Party’s efforts to organize Black workers, they also highlight its shortcomings in still not fully addressing the specific issues facing African Americans.

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While the issue of race was being increasingly addressed in the WCP’s cartoons following the parity commission, the most common occurrences were attacks on the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The second incarnation of the Klan, formed in 1915, found fertile soil in the culture wars of the 1920s. Issues, such as, the urban-rural divide, immigration, and the fight between modernity and tradition, polarized the country. The KKK’s advocacy of a return to traditionalist values, and their vehement opposition to what they saw as a dilution of their national culture by, not only African Americans, but also Jews, Catholics, and new immigrants, struck a cord among

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78 This was inherited from older left traditions, particularly the IWW. Smethurst, The New Red Negro, 56.
many Americans, and the Klan gained widespread support in the Midwest and Southwest of the United States in the 1920s. An untitled cartoon in the Daily Worker from November 29, 1926 by an artist identified as only “Chalmers” shows a blocky, ghost-like figure most likely representing the KKK (Fig. 9). On its body are the words “Religious Bigotry,” “Graft,” “G.O.P.,” “Indiana,” “Political Corruption,” and “K.K.K.” The figure is cowering under the spotlight which illuminates an otherwise black page, and in the beam of light are the words “Daily Worker.” Printed above an appeal for donations, the Daily Worker is advertising what it sees as its proud achievements of exposing the corrupt nature of the political and social systems of the United States. This suggests that exposing the KKK and the racism of the political and religious system were portrayed as one of its prime functions.

Instead of denouncing capitalism, Chalmers’ cartoon highlights corruption and fraud in the political system. The word “Indiana,” could be referring to the Indiana Klan, the largest chapter in the country in the 1920s. The association with the GOP could be bringing attention to the fact that while the KKK was viewed as a southern Democratic phenomenon, it was actually spread throughout the country with many states’ Klan’s dedicated to the Republican Party. The use of the figure of the KKK could be trying to bring negative associations to these other social ills or it could be an attempt to associate the KKK with these negative concepts. Either way, the condemnation of the KKK by the WCP is apparent.

Another cartoon by Fred Ellis in the January 23, 1926 issue of the Daily Worker also features the KKK (Fig. 10). In this cartoon, a heavy-set, disheveled man in a trench coat and a

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fedora presents a medal that says “Prize Hooch Hound” to a KKK member standing at attention. The caption underneath states, “Bootlegger: ‘Kookoo, you and I are pillars of society. Together we help to take up the slack and make it possible for the business world to carry on in spite of increasing difficulties. Co-operation is the word.’” The Second Ku Klux Klan was officially a huge supporter of prohibition. Starting out as a radical wing of the temperance movement, the KKK associated the use of alcohol with foreigners, especially Irish and Italian Catholics, who, aside from African Americans, were their prime enemies. In reality, though, many rank-and-file Knights were heavy alcohol users, and even participated in bootlegging themselves. The juxtaposition of a bootlegger in the comic awarding a Klansman an award as a “Hooch Hound” (a 1920s term for a prohibition agent)\textsuperscript{81} can be seen as exposing the hypocrisy of the KKK and seeking to undermine their claim that they stand for law and order and are, in fact, only using prohibition as a screen to justify their anti-black and anti-ethnic agenda.

This cartoon also sheds light on the complicated relationship the Communist Party had with prohibition. The Tsar had enacted Prohibition in Russia and the Bolsheviks, who inherited that policy, originally sought to use it in the service of the revolution. Without alcohol, it was theorized by Lenin and Trotsky, the workers of Russia would become much more productive, and with the satisfaction they would gain from their labor and culture, they would no longer need alcohol to cure their boredom. However, the underground manufacturing and sale of liquor continued unabated and, after Lenin died and Stalin came to power in 1925, the sale of alcohol resumed under the monopoly of the Soviet state, in large part to direct the profits out of the hands of the bootleggers and into the treasury.\textsuperscript{82} US Communist Party adopted an anti-

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{81} Jonathon Green, \textit{Cassell’s Dictionary of Slang} (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2005), 733.
  \item\textsuperscript{82} Mark Lawrence Schrad, \textit{Vodka Politics: Alcohol, Autocracy, and the Secret History of the Russian State} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 212.
\end{itemize}
prohibition stance, claiming that it was “\textit{based upon a criminal alliance between capitalists, crooked politicians and gangsters},” and had “\textit{bred a growth of criminals such as the world has never seen before}.” \textsuperscript{83} So the comic by Fred Ellis is not only condemning the KKK but also trying to link the lawlessness associated with the KKK to the corrupt practices of prohibition and the capitalist state.

In the same issue of the \textit{Daily Worker} the KKK is employed again to represent the corruption and violence of the capitalist state. This untitled piece by an undetermined artist portrays a rotund, shrouded figure in the traditional pointed cap of the KKK, standing over tiny figures, kneeling with their heads under its cloak (Fig. 11). Behind the Klansman in the shadows are the images of a burning cross atop a steeple and the body of a black man hanging from a noose. The caption of the comic reads: “Christianity, One-Hundred-Percentism, Lynching, General Dawes and General Bootlegging all covered by the skirts of the ku klux klan.” Not only bootlegging but a number of issues are connected with the lawless violence of the KKK. Christianity’s inclusion suggests that it is a negative feature of U.S. life that is used as a justification for racial terrorism. “One Hundred Percentism” was the jingoistic, anti-foreigner rhetoric from WWI, which claimed that the United States was for one-hundred percent Americans as opposed to “hyphenated,” or ethnic, Americans. The inclusion of this nationalist rhetoric implies that it is no different from the violent agenda of the KKK. The singling out of lynching shows a new dedication of the Party to the race issue, yet the African American hanging in the back has wide white lips, that evoke the imagery of minstrelsy, an image that would never be accepted by the Party in a few years’ time. While sympathetic to African Americans, this clearly shows that the Party’s understanding of racism was not yet fully formed.

\textsuperscript{83} William Z. Foster, \textit{Toward Soviet America} (Charleston, NC: Nabu Press, 2010).
A feature that stands out in the image is one of the tiny figures beneath the Klansman that has removed his head from under the cloak, with only his leg remaining under. He has a worried look on his face and the word “Dawes,” is next to him. The caption identifies him as “General Dawes.” This is likely a reference to Charles Dawes, former general and the contemporary Vice President under Calvin Coolidge. During this period there was a controversy surrounding Dawes and remarks he made on the Klan during the 1924 presidential race. While some historians and contemporary observers praise Dawes’ speech as a denunciation of the Klan, his pronouncements were lukewarm, at best.\(^8^4\) Dawes, replying to his Democratic opponent who had made his opposition of the KKK a keystone of his campaign, claimed that the Klan was correctly motivated and brave; however, the results were unfortunate and asserted that lawlessness could not be solved by lawlessness.\(^8^5\) In light of this, perhaps Dawes’ inclusion in the comic is suggesting that the Communist believed that the speech proved that he was actually a supporter of the KKK. The fact that he has removed his head could be interpreted as Dawes trying to distance himself from the Klan, though the fact that his leg remains firmly under the cloak suggests that this transformation is neither complete nor genuine.

The use of a Klansman as a symbol of the moral depravity of the United States is also used in a cartoon by William Gropper titled “This is the ‘America’ Which Refuses to Recognize Him.” (Fig. 12) Gropper the son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants was not only a cartoonist but an accomplished painter and muralist. The style of the cartoon is very uncharacteristic of the majority of Daily Worker editorial cartoons. It shows experimentation and


modernist styles, with sharp angles and unrealistic proportions and figures. The scene portrays a large, serene man tending to plants with a sickle while a group of miscreants glare and jeer at him on the opposite side of the page. The caption identifies this group as “The America of Politicians (symbolized by a heavy, mustachioed man in a top hat grimacing and shaking his fist), Bootleggers (a man in a derby holding two glass bottles with his back turned to the figure, with his head turned toward him with droopy eyes and a look of disgust), Gangsters (a man in a striped shirt, flat cap and a black mask over his eyes, hunched over and menacingly looking at the figure with a revolver in his hand), and Other Capitalist Henchmen (represented by two figures in the background, one a stereotypical police man with a mustache and his hat covering his eyes, yelling and waving his baton, and the other a Klansman lurking behind them with a gallows rising above him). The fact that the serene figure holds a sickle could suggest that this is the Soviet Union. If so, this is a commentary on the United States’ refusal to recognize or establish diplomatic connections with the Soviet Union during this time period. The sunrise on the horizon behind this figure furthers this interpretation, as the Soviet Union is often displayed in cartoons of this period as the rising sun in the east. The figure is a hulking peaceful giant, while US society is portrayed as corrupt and wicked and its opposition to good, hard working people (whoever they may be) shows the extent of its depravity and hypocrisy. Though this comic is not about African Americans, the inclusion of the KKK shows how central racism had become to the WCP’s critique of the United States.

These last four cartoons show that the WCP had begun to seriously tackle the issue of race in the year following the Comintern-brokered power sharing arrangement of 1925. The prevalence of the use of the KKK to condemn people and concepts shows that the leadership assumed that racial violence was widely accepted as a negative among its members; otherwise,
attempting to prove guilt by association would have been foolish. And this was not a given, considering the extent of the popularity of the KKK throughout the 1920s. While these comics do condemn racism in general, they employ racism as a symbol of capitalist injustice and do not address any specific issues facing African Americans aside from racial violence. There was no discussion of housing discrimination, barriers to employment, segregated schools, disfranchisement, Jim Crowism, police brutality, the endemic racism of the justice system, or any number other issues facing African Americans on a day-to-day basis because of their race. And none of these cartoons actually feature any African Americans, except one as a passive victim of violence in the background. While they clearly mark an improvement from the Party’s neglect during the period of factional infighting, these comics also show that the Communist Party had yet to achieve a sufficient understanding of and dedication to racial justice.

As 1926 progressed, the Party’s approach to understanding and addressing race improved. A cartoon by William Siegel, “He Wants More Than Pie in the Sky” (Fig. 13) in the December 1926 issue of *New Masses*, goes beyond racial violence and imperialism, to address a number of important issues facing African Americans. Siegel was a Latvian-born artist whose works frequently appeared in *New Masses*, as well as in art galleries and even children’s books through the New Deal’s Works Project Administration. His cartoon, while similar to Minor’s style, was drawn intentionally crude, eschewing the popular realism of much of his peers. It features an oversized black worker in overalls in the center of the frame. He has racially identifying features such as black skin and prominent lips, but the figure lacks the exaggerated

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features that often resulted in the racist caricatures prevalent in mainstream representations of African Americans during this era. He looks over his right shoulder towards a mass of white-faced workers in front of billowing smoke stacks welcoming him into the industrial future; however, he is being held back. A squat man in a top hat and suit and tie with a cigar clenched in his sneering mouth pushes him in the other direction as a mustachioed farmer in a straw hat pulls him from the other side by a rope that binds his hands. These figures are trying to keep him in the past or more concretely in the South, represented by the shadowy area to his left where a dark figure can be seen in the background, hanging from a rope around his neck from a tree.

There is much to unpack in Siegel image. The primary message of the cartoons is the issue of African Americans inclusion in trade unions. The topic was the same as Fred Ellis’ “I Mean To Get In!” (Fig. 7) and “Batter Down the Barriers!” (Fig. 8) from the previous year, however, Siegel’s cartoon showed a greater awareness to the problems facing African Americans and demonstrated how much the WCP had improved in its understanding of race. The caption of Siegel’s cartoon reads: “The Negro worker is turning to join his organized white comrades in a demand for decent living conditions on this earth.” While the mass of white workers welcoming the African American into its embrace neglected the prevalence of racism in the labor movement, it reflected the wishful thinking of the US Communists and shows the influence of the ANLC’s trade union work on the WCP. The farmer binding the black man’s hand and pulling him back to the South, can be seen as representing the system of sharecropping that kept much of the Southern blacks in a form of peonage, and a social system which kept them subordinate. The presence of a police officer standing at farmer’s back symbolizes the complicity of the justice system in keeping African Americans subjugated. The man in a top hat, representing capitalism, literally stands between the African American and the white workers, intentionally separating
white and black workers in order to exploit them. This shows a belief that capitalism is the source of racial divisions, but also an understanding that combatting racism is necessary in order to fundamentally transform society.

Siegel’s cartoon also brings up the issue of religion in the black community for the first time. In juxtaposition to the smokestacks, the shadowy area has two church steeples rising in the background, which reveals the South to be a land of superstition and ignorance. The addition of the phrase “on this earth” in the caption can be taken as a criticism of religion, whose promises of riches in the afterlife was seen as discouraging the struggle for social advancement in the here and now. This was particularly true of the black clergy, who the Communists saw as a reactionary force in league with capitalism, which kept African Americans submissive to traditional forms of hierarchy. This anti-religion message is bolstered by a figure, behind the farmer, in a robe and a clerical collar identifying him as a member of the clergy. Though the clergyman has light skin, the curly hair and round white lips likely make him an African American preacher. The preacher is wailing and flailing his arms, resulting in a cartoonish appearance. Contrary to the main figure, the preacher is closer to the racist caricatures of mainstream cartoons. This could be a metaphor, implying that the black clergy knowingly conforms to the stereotypes of African Americans, in effect becoming caricatures, in order to accommodate the white system and maintain their privilege status. Or the exaggerated image could be simply an attempt to insult the black clergy by portraying them negatively, in which case, it would reveal the limits of the Communists sensitivity to issues of race.

Underneath the main African American character lays a bible, recognizable by a large cross on its cover. Beneath the bible reads “Save your soul,” and above it are the words “God is…” with the rest of the sentence obscured by markings. This could be an accident, though if it
was intentional alteration it provides an insight into the WCP’s approach to African Americans. In order to organize the black masses, the Comintern advised the ANLC to criticize black “spiritual” leaders. However, simultaneously, it cautioned against “hurting any religious feelings” in the black community. This cartoon can be seen as part of the WCP’s attempt to walk that fine line: trying to overcome the African Americans’ detrimental dependence on the church, while not isolating the black community by understanding the unique traditions and culture. Perhaps the missing word in the phrase “God is…” went to far towards the latter and risked offending the community they were trying to reach, and so was redacted. While this could be dismissed as heavy-handed censorship, it could also be evidence that WCP during this period was beginning to approach African Americans as a unique people, and were adjusting their tactics based on the particular needs of the black community.

The cartoons of 1926 became more and more attentive to issues facing African Americans. This was even more impressive given the fact that in 1926 Robert Minor, who was responsible for the majority of the cartoons dealing with race in the Party’s early years, gave up cartooning for politics. However, his wife, Lydia Gibson, more than made up for his absence. A woodcut or engraving by Gibson titled “New Comers,” published in *Workers Monthly* in February 1926, shows a Black couple with their child on a sidewalk in some urban area (Fig. 14). They are fairly well dressed, with the man in a suit and tie, and the woman in a long jacket and wide brimmed hat. They carry with them a suitcase and package, suggesting they are among the many African Americans that left the repression of the South and headed up North in the Great Migration. The fact that there is a woman in the cartoon is important. Though the Party’s approach to race was improving, for the most part the Party’s cartoons, much like its art and

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policies, continued to ignore women. Revolution was seen as a manly endeavor. When women were depicted they were often overweight bourgeois women, masculine workers, or poor mother figures. This woman is neither pitiful nor masculinized. And while the family clearly fled Southern oppression, they are not portrayed as victims, and even though they made their way to the North, they do not seem heroic. This cartoon features ordinary African Americans living their lives and begins to go beyond the one-dimensional depiction that was common just a few years earlier.

Another cartoon revealing the changing Communists’ improving approach to race is “Which Way Now?” printed in the Daily Worker, in which Fred Ellis depicts a black man sitting in front of a signpost (Fig. 15). The sign pointing to his right signals the North and the South is to his left. Behind him on both sides are graveyards. The one towards the South has a noose hanging from a tree; however, the cemetery on his right side is even larger. This suggests that both paths lead to death. The figure conveys a sense of defeat as he hangs his head and looks angrily towards the ground. He has cast down his straw hat and a stick and bindle (signs that he is a migrant from the South) and the title of the cartoon suggests that his hope for a fight from the South in hopes of a better life in the North has been dashed.

A hint of the cause of this defeat can be found in a newspaper lying at his feet. The paper titled “Daily Paper” displays the headline “10 Killed in Gary.” This refers to the explosion of a coke oven at a US Steel subsidiary in Gary, Indiana on June 14, 1926, just 12 days before this cartoon was published. The explosion destroyed the plant and ended up killing at least twenty people, over half of which were African American. While addressing the Great Migration was not novel for the Communists, this cartoon differs from the earlier depictions by portraying the

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90 “Blast Kills Ten Or More; 100 Injured,” The Coshocton Tribune, June 14, 1926, gendisasters.com; “Toll Of Dead In Gary Blast Expected To Reach Twenty,” Lake County Times, June 15, 1926, gendisasters.com.
migrant as an individual rather than the mass of victims in as Minor’s “The Exodus From Dixie” (Fig. 1) or a slave caricature as in Gibson’s “Runaway Slave” (Fig. 2). The cartoon also departs from the past by suggesting that African Americans’ problems are not confined to the South. Though they escaped the brutal racial violence of the South, this cartoons suggests African Americans in the North continued to face problems due to their race, including job discrimination, which forced many Northern blacks into unsafe working conditions. While the migrant is portrayed as a victim, it is a much more nuanced assessment of the issues facing African Americans and an example of the WCP progressing understanding of race.

Perhaps the apex of the US Communists’ cartoons attentiveness to the unique issues facing African Americans was another cartoon by Lydia Gibson from July 1926. “The Way Its Done” printed in the Daily Worker, is actually two panels arranged vertically. The style is similar to Gibson’s engravings, though the fine lines and cross-hatching suggests that it is instead pen and ink. The top image shows an indignant white waitress presenting a check to an African American woman at a restaurant who is wearing a cloche hat and a frilled dress. The woman is shocked at the bill because it states: “1 Fried egg $4.00,” while the sign on the wall advertises: “Eggs and Bacon .30¢.” The second panel shows a Black couple entering a theater. The couple is, again, fairly well dressed, the woman in a cloche hat and frilled dress, the man in a three-piece suit and fedora, holding two tickets in his hand. They looking at a young white man identified as an usher by the title on his hat, who is telling them “Seats upstairs only!” while a white patron looks on from the seats and sneers. The African American woman is clutching the arm of the Black man, and has a worried but almost annoyed look on her face, while the man’s expression could be portrayed as a mix of dejection and anger. These panels show a different side of the African American experience. The African Americans portrayed are not invisible, nor are they
simply white in black skin. They are not the suffering masses of being lynched, nor are they the strapping, ebony laborers revolting against the system. These images portray middle class black families experiencing day-to-day racism and represent a major achievement of the Party’s approach to race.

Both on and off the page, African Americans were beginning to emerge from their one-dimensional roles. This could not have happened without the international Communist movement. But the policy was not simply dictated to the Party. Instead the Comintern assisted the US Communists by, first, giving an audience to black activists who were often ignored at home, and second, acting as an arbitrator that could curb the factional infighting crippling the Party. Once these two objectives were fulfilled, the Workers (Communist) Party began to devote significant resources to the issue. For the first time, the US Communists started to recognize African Americans as distinct people with their own unique desires and problems. 1926 marks a high water point in the pre-Third Period era of Communist race relations. This factional truce, however, was shaky and soon it, and the Party’s commitment to African Americans, would be threatened.
The parity commission’s reorganization of the US Party’s leadership in 1926 finally curbed the factionalism that had plagued the Communists since their inception and a tentative peace settled upon the Party. With no chance for victory, the Foster-Cannon bloc broke apart. William Foster continued to consolidate power in the Party’s trade union work, while James Cannon built a separate power base in the International Labor Defense, the radical legal action mass organization that gained international fame for its defense of a number of high clients, including Sacco and Vanzetti, Tom Mooney, and the Scottsboro Nine.\(^91\) With Foster and Cannon divided, the Ruthenberg-Lovestone group became the most powerful faction. However, since no one faction was mighty enough to wield power independently, an uneasy cooperation had set in. This collaboration was aided by the fact that CE Ruthenberg remained General Secretary. While neither a great theorist nor particularly inspirational, he possessed a special aptitude for executive work and was uniquely capable of running the day-to-day functions of the Party efficiently. Even his factional rivals respected him as a dedicated Communist and competent leader capable of maintaining the fragile truce.\(^92\)

This all came to an end following Ruthenberg’s sudden death on March 2, 1927. Almost immediately the political jockeying began. Jay Lovestone, Ruthenberg’s right-hand man, apotheosized Ruthenberg and wrapped himself in his legacy. William Weinstone, however, also

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\(^91\) Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 66.
a Russian-born Jew and ally of Ruthenberg, came forward to challenge Lovestone for the position of General Secretary. Cannon and Foster both sided with Weinstone, and though they had a majority in the Central Executive Committee, Lovestone was more firmly entrenched in the Party machinery and was able to utilize his control of the Political Committee (PolCom) to secure his appointment as the Acting Secretary, and to delay the process of electing a new General Secretary until he could secure his position. The moment of respite passed and the Party once again plunged into factional conflict.93

All parties involved appealed to the Comintern. However, the international Communists were preoccupied with a crisis in Britain over the state’s raiding of a Soviet trading company, the crushing defeat of the Communist Party in China by the nationalists, and a factional war within the Soviet Union itself between Stalin and Trotsky, and so were reluctant to get involved. Eventually the Comintern agreed to hear their case and the US leadership was invited to a Plenum in Moscow, where the Comintern once again tried to stymie the destructive factionalism through an equitable power sharing arrangement. However, without Ruthenberg, this did nothing to curb the hostilities of each side.94

The return to factionalism added and exacerbated problems within an already troubled American Negro Labor Congress. Fort-Whiteman’s assignment to the head of the ANLC, leapfrogging over the more seasoned black leadership, angered many of the old ABB cadres, particularly Otto Huiswoud, Cyril Briggs and Richard Moore, a Barbadian writer and activist. Huiswoud, Briggs and Moore feared that Fort-Whiteman’s ties to the Communists, and his sectarian refusal to ally with black bourgeois organization was dooming the ANLC. Their

93 Draper, American Communism and Soviet Russia, 248–49.
resentment grew as Fort-Whiteman became more arrogant and domineering. The ANLC’s underfunding, understaffing, and inability to make inroads in basic industry seemed to vindicate the ABB cadre’s misgivings about Fort-Whiteman. As Fort-Whiteman grew more aloof and preoccupied with speaking tours across the country, a series of white Communists stepped in to replace him as acting secretaries. Moore and Briggs tried to rescue the organization by mobilizing a grassroots campaign to raise funds and recruit members. Moore was selected as the permanent chairman by the ANLC leadership in May of 1927. However, he faced opposition both from within the ANLC, as well as the Workers (Communist) Party, as the Communist’s work with African Americans became a battleground for the larger factional war.

Most black Communists tended to align with the Ruthenberg-Lovestone faction. Foster’s focus on infiltrating all-white AFL unions disinterested African Americans while the Ruthenberg-Lovestone faction’s closer ties to the Comintern appealed to black Communists who had come to see the international Communists more favorably than their domestic comrades. In addition, the work of John Pepper as head of the Comintern’s Negro Committee and Robert Minor’s tireless efforts for African Americans at home (both factional allies with Ruthenberg) bolstered the reputation of the Ruthenberg-Lovestone faction. However, a rift had developed between the Caribbean-born ABB cadre and a younger generation of black Communists, such as HV Phillips, William Patterson and Fort-Whiteman, who were born in the United States. This generational and cultural divide became drawn into the factional conflict following Ruthenberg’s

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95 Fort-Whiteman was also prone to eccentric behavior. He took to wearing a traditional Russian tunic and large fur hat, which Huiswoud and Moore feared would give away the ANLC’s connection to the Communists. Oscar Berland, “The Emergence of the Communist Perspective on the ‘Negro Question’ in America: 1919–1931: Part One,” *Science & Society* 63, no. 4 (1999): 429; Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*, 122, 116.


death. The Caribbean-born Communists tended to be more independent and critical of the WCP leadership, while Phillips, Patterson and Fort-Whiteman, or the “Negro Comrades of New York City,” remained loyal to the Lovestone faction. As Moore became more outspoken in his criticism of the WCP’s handling of the ANLC, the Lovestone faction turned against him. The PolCom ignored his selection by the ANLC and tried to appoint James Ford, a young Southern-born black organizer who would eventually become the Communist Party’s vice presidential candidate in the 1930s. However, after seeing the shape the ANLC was in, Ford refused, and with Foster’s backing Moore was confirmed as permanent secretary of the ANLC.\footnote{Zumoff, The Communist International and U.S. Communism, 333; Gilmore, Defying Dixie, 61.}

In this hostile atmosphere, the Communist’s work for African Americans all but ground to a halt. The Party’s publications reflected this as the number of cartoons dealing with issues of race in the year following Ruthenberg’s death dropped sharply. The subject matter also suffered. Virtually every cartoon in 1927 that had anything to do with race focused only on one issue: the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. While this was a devastating crisis for many black Southerners, the manner in which it was depicted and the fact that it was practically the only issue regarding race to be discussed reflected the WCP’s disengagement with African Americans.

The Great Mississippi Flood was the most destructive in US history and disproportionately affected African Americans who were forced to live in the flood plains. Months of heavy rains swelled the Mississippi River to unprecedented levels. In places, African Americans were rounded up by gunpoint and forced to shore up the earthen levees holding the river at bay. When the high water appeared to threaten the city of New Orleans, the local business elites flexed their muscles and, in April 1927, convinced the federal government to
dynamite the Caernarvon levee upriver to prevent the economic center of the region from flooding. Instead the poorer and largely African-American St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes were flooded, destroying livelihoods and forcing about 10,000 people from their homes. The victims were promised recompense, but the government largely reneged. Though New Orleans was spared, the dynamited levee did little to prevent the overall flood as eventually 145 other levees broke, flooding over 27,000 miles, with some residential areas inundated with over 30 feet of water. In the end, somewhere between 250 to 1,000 people died. Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana were hit the hardest, with over 600,000 people displaced, 200,000 of which were African American.100

The scenes of destruction were portrayed on the pages of the Communist publications. A cartoon by William Siegel portrayed “The Story of the Plantation Owner who took his own cattle and left the other man’s ‘niggers’ to drown” (Fig. 17). The image in the July 1927 New Masses, shows a group of African American men huddled on a rock as the waters rise around them. One bends down to help another out of the water as the other three gaze pitifully in the distance at a boat drifting away filled with other men and their livestock. While this story is unconfirmed, situations like this, and worse, did occur. Thousands of African Americans were evacuated to Greenville, Mississippi and as the waters rose 13,000 were left stranded on a levee for days without food or water while whites were rescued by boat. The local whites feared that if the African Americans were removed they would not return and the region would lose its supply of cheap labor.101


Cartoonist Don Brown’s “The Great Mississippi Flood Exposes Peonage” Highlights the connection between race and unequal treatment by rescue efforts (Fig. 18). From the June 30th edition of the Daily Worker, the cartoon shows a man in a wide brimmed hat trying to pull a black man out of the water into his boat. However, a view from beneath the water shows the black man’s leg is chained to a post labeled “Peonage,” which prevents his rescue. The caption reads: “As a result of the flood Negro slavery, which has existed for years in the South was discovered to be still flourishing, and interfered with the savings of the Negro residents of flooded districts.” In the background a figure stands on dry land wearing a suit and wide brimmed hat, shaking his fist in anger at the pair, likely a representation of the southern elite, which kept the local African Americans in economic subjugation.

Brown tries to connect the devastation of the flood with the system of economic oppression facing many poor blacks in the south, a theme echoed by a cartoon by Fred Ellis in the Daily Worker from July 13, 1927 (Fig. 19). In this image a black man in tattered clothes wades through the flood, up to his chest in water, with a small child in pigtails clinging to his neck. Next to him a white man in a wide brimmed hat with a handkerchief around his neck sits atop a mule with a rifle pointed at the black man whose hands are raised in defeat. The caption identifies the white man as a plantation owner, who says to his captive “Wal, I Still Got You!” Though perhaps intended to highlight the semi-slave status of black southerners, Ellis’ cartoon mirrored actual events during the flood. In some relief camps set up to deal with the displaced, African Americans were forced to work at gunpoint digging out the towns as the floodwaters receded. In Greenville James Gooden, a respected African American in the community, was shot in the back by a white policeman after refusing to work a double shift. Reports of robbery, rape and murder went unheeded by officials and Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, placed in
charge of flood relief by President Calvin Coolidge, suppressed a report by the Colored Advisory Commission that documented these abuses for fear the bad publicity could hurt his presidential chances.\textsuperscript{102} Ellis’ cartoon accurately reflects the fact that it was not simply an economic system that endangered blacks in the disaster but also the actions of individual whites.

Though the cartoons addressing the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 by Siegel, Brown, and Ellis drew attention to the plight of African Americans, they also provide evidence of retreat in the WCP’s approach to race. The African Americans portrayed are not fully fleshed out individuals, but rather they have reverted back to the pitiful masses commonly portrayed earlier in the decade. None of the figures possess agency and they seem to be powerless to stop their suffering. The cartoons do not address the particular problems facing the black community, but instead the images use suffering as an illustration of the more general injustices United States.

These cartoons focus primarily on the southern racial system, which can be blamed, in part, on Lovestone. Lovestone was far less committed to the Party’s “Negro Work” than his predecessor and seemed to find it an annoyance and a liability to his struggle for factional dominance (He was not, however, the virulent racist that he was later portrayed as by factional opponents and historians\textsuperscript{103}). His disinclination was especially strong regarding southern rural African Americans, whom Lovestone believed were a “reserve of capitalist reaction” and not a possible source of social struggle. Only with the migration of African Americans to the North,


could they be proletarianized and incorporated into the Communist movement.\footnote{Jay Lovestone, \textit{Daily Worker}, September 22, 1927; Zumoff, \textit{The Communist International and U.S. Communism}, 337–38.} Lovestone’s position can be seen in the cartoons of Siegel, Brown, and Ellis. Like Minor’s “Exodus From Dixie” (Fig. 1) and Gibson’s “Runaway Slave” (Fig. 2) from the early 1920s, these three previous cartoons seem to situate the problems facing African Americans solely in the South. However, these African Americans are powerless victims, with the implication being that they will remain so as long as they are in the South.

The only cartoon in the year following Ruthenberg’s death that still adequately addressed the particular social and political issues facing African Americans was by Jacob Burck, a Polish born painter, sculptor, and eventual Pulitzer-Prize winning cartoonist.\footnote{Heinz Dietrich Fischer, ed., \textit{Editorial Cartoon Awards, 1922-1997: From Rollin Kirby and Edmund Duffy to Herbert Block and Paul Conrad}, vol. 13, The Pulitzer Prize Archive (München: Saur, 1999), 75.} His \textit{Daily Worker} cartoon “You Can’t Vote, Yer Too Ignorant” printed in November 29, 1927, portrays two African Americans attempting to vote, only to be blocked by a white man. Slouching against the voting booth casually, with a cigarette in hand, flat cap on his head, and a rifle perched under his arm, the white man glares threateningly at them. The African-American couple, a man and woman, is well dressed. The man has on a suit jacket and pants, a collared shirt and a fedora, while the woman has on a dress that looks like a flapper dress and wears a short haircut common to the era. The juxtaposition of the couple and the man draws attention to the irony that a white man who speaks in contractions, like “can’t” and “yer,” (leading us to believe he is, in fact, ignorant), believes that he is necessarily smarter than the respectable looking pair.

Burck not only invokes Robert Minor’s style in this cartoon, but also his spirit. Burck’s cartoon conjures up images from a better time and represents the best that Communist cartoons had to offer. The black couple is neither victims nor one-dimensional heroes. They are an
ordinary couple that is clearly recognizable as African American beyond just their skin color, though without resorting to stereotypical imagery. The rare inclusion of a woman accentuates the cartoons comprehensive approach to race. A number of issues particular to the black community are represented in the frame: the couple’s impediment to voting draws attention to the disfranchisement of many African Americans, the white man’s gun implies the constant threat of racial violence facing the black community, the irony of the white man’s statement belittles the ideology of white supremacy, and the sympathy invoked by the encounter implores for social equality between the races.

Though drawn in a period of deteriorating race relations, Burck’s cartoon shows that the US Communist’s views on race could not be completely turned back. Ruthenberg’s death ended a fragile peace that had enabled the Party to develop an implement an understanding of race heretofore unheard of among a class-based left movement. The factionalism that followed diverted attention away from African Americans and the year following his death saw a reversal of much of the gains of the truce. African Americans were ignored, portrayed as victims, or used as tools to condemn the capitalism system. However, Burck’s cartoon shows that the developments of 1925 and 1926 could not be completely uprooted. The US Communists dedication to racial justice would find fertile soil of the 1930s, and emerge once again, stronger than ever.
Conclusion

Jacob Burck’s cartoon may have shown that the Workers (Communist) Party’s strides towards a deeper understanding and commitment to the particular issues of race lingered though, by early 1928, Jay Lovestone’s disinterest in the social issues of African Americans prevailed. In May 1928, the faction of African American Communists aligned with Lovestone and centered in New York, led by H.V. Phillips, William Patterson and Lovett Fort-Whiteman, proposed sweeping changes to the WCP’s policy on race in an apparent attempt to hurt their rivals within the ANLC, as well as assist their factional leader. The “Thesis for a New Negro Policy” defended Fort-Whiteman’s former leadership, and blamed the ANLC’s failures on what they saw as a preoccupation with “the attainment of political or social equality” and the importance of the particular issues facing African Americans because of their race. Disenfranchisement, according to the “Negro Comrades of New York City,” was not the pressing issue because even if African Americans were allowed to vote, there were no candidates in the United States who could bring about the needed societal changes, especially in the South. Nor was Jim Crow segregation seen as high priority. The Thesis went as far to claim that “the Negro has come to regard [Jim Crow] as possessing certain unique advantages,” such as the development of a black commercial bourgeoisie, and a distinct African American cultural intellectual and social life. The New York black Communists even downplayed lynching, brushing it off as only an “occasional practice,” which was confined to the South and affected “an exceedingly small number” of African Americans.106

The Negro Comrades of New York City claimed that the ANLC’s focus on race had effectively “Jim Crowed” black Communists in the ANLC, by making African Americans “appendages” to the Party, who were only allowed to deal with racial issues. The Thesis concluded that the ANLC should be dissolved and African Americans should be fully integrated into the Party’s overall attempts to fight capitalism. The ANLC was spared but the Central Executive Committee, now under Lovestone’s control, accepted the new policy. Basically the Thesis for a New Negro Policy advocated for a return to the colorblind polices of the Party’s predecessors. All of the issues that showed that Communists had made strides in their understanding of race were under attack and the party returned to a class-first approach. This regression, however, was short lived. Just a few months later, in the summer of 1928, the Sixth Congress of the Comintern introduced a new theoretical understanding of African Americans as an oppressed nation. The new “Black Belt Thesis” overturned the New Negro Policy and initiated the beginning of a period of unprecedented appreciation for the unique aspects of the black community and a dedication to racial justice heretofore unheard of among the Marxist Left.

It is not surprising then, that many historians have argued that the Communist Party made little progress on race in the 1920s. In 1919, the Communists held a colorblind approach to race they inherited from the Socialists and on the eve of the Third Period in 1928 it appeared to be firmly intact. If one looks only at the beginning and at the end of the decade then it does seem as if nothing had changed. This naturally led to the conclusion that without being ordered to by the Comintern of 1928, the Communist Party would have never prioritized the struggle for racial justice. However, this view not only neglects the important progress that the US Communists made throughout this forgotten decade, but also fundamentally misrepresents the complex
relationship that the Party had with the international Communist movement.

The history of the US Communist’s approach to African Americans in the 1920s, as shown through the Party’s political cartoons, reveals that the Party did not remain indifferent during its first decade, but instead made significant progress towards understanding and incorporating the particular issues of race. The Workers Party formed from the shards of the Socialist Party in 1921 with the traditional socialist apathy towards racial identity intact. While sympathetic, the early Communists viewed racial oppression as subordinate or even equivalent to class oppression. When race was recognized as a unique problem, then it was believed that racial divisions could only be eliminated by the overthrow of capitalism. Either way this resulted in issues of race being second to class; the cartoons of this period reflect this. Robert Minor’s “Exodus From Dixie” (Fig. 1) and Lydia Gibson’s “Runaway Slave” (Fig. 2) show a sympathetic, yet one-dimensional portrayal of African Americans; a portrayal where racism is largely confined to the South, and the black community lacks agency.

This is where the influence of the international Communist movement becomes significant. Although rather than simply dictates issued from Moscow, the Comintern provided a venue for Communists from around the world to discuss issues. African American Communists, such as Otto Huiswoud, Claude McKay, and Lovett Fort-Whiteman, were particularly attracted to the Comintern’s internationalism and the audience that allowed them to participate and air their grievances about the domestic situation. What emerged was a transnational understanding of racial identity, where African Americans were increasingly drawn into the struggles of anti-colonial nationalist movements. However the Workers Party was slow to adopt this framework. Though the issue of African American oppression was discussed by the Comintern under the scheme of anti-imperialism as far back as 1922, it was only with the fusing of the underground
and legal Party entities that the first big shift in the Workers Party’s attention of race emerged in 1924. Cartoons such as Maurice Becker’s “Drop him!” (Fig. 4) and Minor’s “The Interrupted Lynching” (Fig. 5) and “On the International Slave Plantation” (Fig. 6) show a new dedication to the race question within the rubric of anti-colonialism. In some ways, this move empowered African Americans, who now held a more central role in the global fight for Communism, though the Workers Party still failed to incorporate the domestic issues facing the black community stemming from race.

The Comintern was involved in the next major shift in the US Communist’s progress on race, though again, it was a more nuanced involvement than is often realized. First, the international communists gave an audience and their backing to black activists, in this instance Fort-Whiteman. Secondly, the Comintern acted as an arbitrator to mediate between the hostile factions within the Workers Party. The intervention of the Comintern in the US Communist’s National Committee’s elections in 1925 is often singled out as an egregious example of the Soviet Union meddling in the US Party’s affairs, though in reality the Comintern only intervened once a split seemed imminent. And even then, the Comintern only interceded after being asked to by both factions. Even though the Comintern’s decision disproportionately benefitted the Ruthenberg-Lovestone faction over the Foster-Cannon section, the Comintern went to great lengths to ensure that neither faction would be able to dominate the other. This power-sharing arrangement worked for a time and, with the time-consuming infighting curbed, the US Communists (now the WCP) began for the first time to incorporate the struggle for racial injustice into their economic class-based movement.

The pages of the Communists’ press in 1926 mirrored this newfound commitment to race. Cartoons such as Fred Ellis’ “I Mean To Get In!” (Fig. 7) and “Batter Down the Barriers!”
(Fig. 8) began to feature African Americans, though at this initial stage, the representations were one-dimensional. The Ku Klux Klan emerged as a common symbol of the injustice of US society in cartoons such as Chalmers’ “Daily Worker shines light on KKK…” (Fig. 9), Ellis’ “Bootlegger: Kookoo you and I…” (Fig. 10), an unknown artist’s “Christianity One-Hundred-Percentism, Lynching…” (Fig. 11), and William Gropper’s “This Is the ‘America’ Which Refuses to Recognize Him,” (Fig. 12). Using the KKK as a method of proving guilt by association indicated that the WCP widely accepted racism as negative. Although these cartoons rarely featured African Americans, and when they did, they were portrayed as passive victims and racial violence was the only issue addressed.

However, throughout 1926, the Party continued to make progress and greater attention was directed to the specific problems facing African Americans. This new perspective emerges in William Siegel’s “He Wants More Than Pie in the Sky” (Fig. 13) Ellis’ “Which Way Now?” (Fig. 15) and Gibson’s “New Comers” (Fig. 14) and “The Way It’s Done” (Fig. 16). These cartoons go beyond racial violence and portray issues such as job discrimination, barriers to trade unionism, Jim Crow segregation, religion, police brutality, migration, and day-to-day racism. These images are not confined to the South, and they portray African Americans with agency and as ordinary people experiencing problems due specifically to their race and not solely economics.

This brief period of progress was cut short with the return to factionalism that followed the death of CE Ruthenberg. The return of hostilities not only preoccupied the WCP, but also politicized the organization’s work with African Americans. The factional fighting empowered segments of the Party that were disinterested in the Party’s work on race or stood to gain by attacking it. The portrayal of African Americans as one-dimensional victims in cartoons, such
Siegel’s “The Story of the Plantation Owner…” (Fig. 17), Don Brown’s “The Great Mississippi Flood Exposes Peonage (Fig. 18) and Ellis’ “Plantation Owner: ‘Wal, I Still Got You!’” (Fig. 19) mirrored the new role of African Americans in the minds of many Party leaders.

A pattern emerges from this examination of the US Communist Party in the 1920s: (1) black Communists frequently used the Comintern as way of having their voices heard; (2) the Comintern incorporated the desires of the black Communists into a framework and tried to encourage the US Party to adopt it; (3) the US Communists ignored the Comintern, until (4) the US Communists enter a period free from factionalism; and (5) the US Communists made progress on the issue of race. This is much different than the top-down relationship that is often used to describe the relationship between the US Party and the Comintern. While the Comintern did play an important role in the US Party’s development on race, it was not by issuing fiats from Moscow, but their primary contributions were giving a voice to black Communists who otherwise would not have been heard, and to act as an arbitrator to help mediate the factional disputes within the Party that kept the US Communists preoccupied. The fact that the Party progressed in times free from factionalism suggests that most Communists had a desire to fight for racial justice or, at least, saw it as generally desirable. They were, however, prevented from developing a cohesive policy on race because they were preoccupied with the internecine conflict.

This challenges the notion, which originated with the Cold War scholars and continued throughout the historiography of US Communist, that the US Communist Party was ordered by the Soviet Union to prioritize the struggle for racial justice. The 1920s show that the US Party was already on it way towards incorporating race into its class-based approach. It is not unimaginable to believe that the improvements of the mid-1920s would have continued if it were
not for the untimely death of Ruthenberg. It could be argued that the Communist Party would have progressed to the level of dedication reached in the 1930s, with or without the Comintern’s 1928 theoretical shifts.

Beyond suggesting that the Party would have developed its dedication to race without the Comintern’s 1928 orders, this new understanding of the relationship between the Comintern and the US Communist Party forces a reexamination of how we understand what occurred in 1928. The “Black Belt Nation Thesis” from the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928, which initiated US Communists’ extraordinary commitment to race, was not solely foreign in origin. Harry Haywood, the grandson of a former slave, was chosen to study in Moscow in 1925 and, with the help of Communists from around the world, Haywood advanced a theory at the Sixth Congress that joined the struggle for social equality in the North with the right to self-determination of African Americans in the South. The Comintern adopted his proposal and, true to form, the US Communists ignored it.\footnote{Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah, eds., \textit{Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience}, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Solomon, \textit{The Cry Was Unity}, 69–81.}

The struggle between the Lovestone and the Foster factions had, once again, brought the Party to the brink of collapse. And so, once again, they appealed to the Comintern to adjudicate. However, this time, in 1929, Lovestone refused the Comintern’s power-sharing arrangement between the factions. The Comintern quickly turned against Lovestone, and the Foster faction, seeing their opportunity, went on the attack. Lovestone’s enemies dug up whatever past transgressions they could find, including his position on African American Southerners as “reserves of capitalist reaction,” and, within months, they expelled him from the US Communist Party.\footnote{Zumoff, \textit{The Communist International and U.S. Communism}, 278; Draper, \textit{American Communism and Soviet Russia}, 419; Joseph Stalin, \textit{Speech Delivered in the American Commission of the Presidium of the ECCI, May 6, 1929} (San Francisco: Proletarian Publishers, 1970), marxists.org.} This is where this moment differed from all
previous factional reprieves, because now there were no longer any factions. What followed was the longest period of uninterrupted peace the Party would know, which (it should now come as no surprise) coincided with the Communist Party’s most intensive efforts to incorporate race into their economic class-based movement. In 1928 we see the exact same pattern of the mid-1920s play out.

Ignoring the mid-1920s gives us an incomplete view of the US Communist Party’s history. By taking into account the progress the Party made earlier in the decade, and the more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the Party and international and black Communists, 1928 marks less of a departure from the past, than more of a culmination of progressing efforts and theories. The US Communist Party did not receive its policy on race wholesale from the Comintern, but the international communist movement did help facilitate it by allowing African Americans to be heard and by helping to curb the inner-party conflicts. This new understanding of the complex domestic and international forces that reshaped the US Communists’ approach to race during this important period in the history of US racial politics not only causes us to rethink the entire history of the US Party’s relationship with African Americans, but also has implications for contemporary problems.

... Many of the issues surrounding race which US Communists struggled against almost a century ago are still alive and well in our society. The police shootings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, and Tamir Rice have sparked a debate over police brutality and united activists in the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement. Presidential candidates of a major

109 James P. Cannon had been expelled from the US Communist Party in 1928. Lovestone used Cannon’s siding with Trotsky against Stalin in the Soviet struggle for power as the fodder for an attack that would closely mirror the one against him a year later.
party make openly racist pronouncements. The mass incarceration of African Americans has led to more black men under correctional control today than were enslaved in 1850. Voter ID laws, designed to disenfranchise minority voters, and the striking down of key provisions of the Civil Rights Act by the Supreme Court in 2013 have stripped many African Americans of the right to vote. The gap between black and white student test scores highlights the continuing problem of educational and residential segregation. The Charleston church shooting of 2015 and the killing of Travon Martin in 2012 shows the continuing threat of racial violence. And African Americans remain economically oppressed whether through job discrimination, predatory lending practices by banks, or through the fact that every dollar a white man makes an African American man will make only 79, and black women only 60.  

Concurrently, a second debate has emerged in US Society over the efficacy and fairness of the economic system. The American people’s faith in capitalism was undermined during the Great Recession of 2008. As real wages continue to fall and income steadily concentrates at the top of the economic ladder, the US public has become increasingly critical of the growing gap between the rich and the poor. The Occupy movement brought the issue of income inequality back to the foreground of US politics and the Democratic presidential primary campaign of the self-avowed socialist, Senator Bernie Sanders, has reintroduced socialism into the mainstream discourse of the country. For a generation of Americans removed from the shadow of the Cold War, socialism no longer conjures up fears of nukes paraded through Red Square, and the appeal

of an economic class-based, left-led movement as a means for addressing the problems of capitalism has grown.\textsuperscript{111}

However, the ongoing fight for racial justice and the renewed attention to socialism in recent years have been unable to merge. In a recent series of articles in the \textit{Atlantic}, writer and intellectual Ta Nehisi Coates attacked Bernie Sanders’ dismissal of reparations, but he went further to denounce what he saw as socialism’s tendency to “address black people not so much as a class specifically injured by white supremacy, but rather, as a group which magically suffers from disproportionate poverty.” Coates questioned whether the “class-based remedies” of socialism could adequately address the issue of race, summing up the Left’s approach to racial justice as “something something socialism, and then a miracle occurs.”\textsuperscript{112}

It is understandable why Coates is skeptical of the ability of class-based movement to understand and address race. The history of the political Left in the United States is strewn with failures and the one example of success, the US Communist Party, has been prevented from being a source of contemporary inspiration because of the assumption that its policies on race originated in Moscow in 1928. This is why the history of the US Communist Party is so important. If the US Communists’ successes with the issue of race were widely accepted, then Coates’s analysis would not be possible and two of the great struggles of our time could be merged. I have shown that the US Communists were evolving on their approach to race throughout the 1920s, which not only proves their dedication to racial justice in the 1930s did not come solely from Moscow but was rather a earnest desire to help African Americans. The US


Communist Party is historical proof that a class-based movement can be used as a vehicle for addressing both economic and racial justice, but only if the movement can overcome internal differences and successfully incorporate the members of the diverse communities they are trying to serve. With this new appreciation of the 1920s and the cartoons and cartoonists that it produced, we stand to gain a better understanding, not only of the critical role that the US Communist Party has played in struggles for racial justice, but also of the complex intersection of race and class in contemporary US politics and the continuing struggle for social justice.
Figures
Figure 1. Robert Minor, “Exodus From Dixie.” *The Liberator* (June 1923).
Figure 2. Lydia Gibson, “Runaway Slave.” *The Liberator* (February 1924).
Figure 3. William P. Hicks, “Teacher (on Lincoln’s Birthday)...” *The Liberator* (February 1924).
Caption: Teacher (on Lincoln’s Birthday): “Bow to him, son; it’s true he emancipated the niggers, but he didn’t overdo it.”
Figure 4. Maurice Becker, “Drop him!” *The Liberator* (October 1924).
Figure 5. Robert Minor “The Interrupted Lynching.” *Daily Worker*, December 1, 1924.
Caption: Who Is That You All Are Going to Whip, Mr. Legree?

Figure 6. Robert Minor, “On the International Slave Plantation.” Daily Worker, June 27, 1925.
Figure 7. Fred Ellis, “I Mean To Get In!” *Daily Worker*, January 20, 1926.
Caption: Fred Ellis shows the insistent demand of the Negro workers to obtain their full equality in the trade unions. The labor movement can never be what it should be until the Negro workers enter the unions on an equal basis.

Figure 8. Fred Ellis, “Batter Down the Barriers!” *Daily Worker*, January 30, 1926.
Caption: It is the duty of the white workers to join with the Negro workers to batter down all restrictions which interfere with the admission of black workers into unions, says Fred Ellis.
Figure 9. Chalmers, “Daily Worker shines light on KKK…” *Daily Worker*, November 29, 1926.
Figure 10. Fred Ellis, “Bootlegger: Kookoo you and I…” Daily Worker, January 23, 1926.
Caption: Bootlegger: “Kookoo, you and I are pillars of society. Together we help take up the slack and make it possible for the business world to carry on in spite of increasing difficulties. Co-operation is the word.”
Figure 11. Unknown, “Christianity One-Hundred-Percentism, Lynching…” *Daily Worker*, January 23, 1926.

Caption: Christianity, One-Hundred-Percentism, Lynching, General Dawes and General Bootlegging all covered by the skirts of the ku klux klan.
Figure 12. William Gropper, “This Is the ‘America’ Which Refuses to Recognize Him.” *Daily Worker*, February 10, 1926.

Caption: The America of Politicians, Bootleggers, Gangsters and Other Capitalist Henchmen.
Figure 13. William Siegel, “He Wants More Than Pie in the Sky.” *New Masses* (Dec. 1926).
Caption: The Negro worker is turning to join his organized white comrades in a demand for decent living conditions on this earth.
Figure 14. Lydia Gibson, “New Comers.” *Workers Monthly* (February 1926).
Figure 15. Fred Ellis, “Which Way Now?” *Daily Worker*, June 26, 1926.
Figure 16. Lydia Gibson, “The Way It’s Done.” *Daily Worker*, July 31, 1926.
Figure 17. William Siegel. “The Story of the Plantation Owner…” *New Masses*, July 1927.

Caption: The Story of the Plantation Owner who took his own cattle and left the other man’s “niggers” to drown.
Caption: As a result of the flood Negro slavery, which has existed for years in the South was discovered to be still flourishing, and interfered with the savings of the Negro residents of flooded districts.
Figure 20. Jacob Burck. “You Can’t Vote, Yer Too Ignorant.” *Daily Worker*, November 29, 1927.

Caption: As our artist pictures the disfranchisement of the Negro voters in the southern states.
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