THE "BIG 3" AND INTERRACIAL SOLIDARITY

Blacks don't have the "speed and rhythm" for factory work, declared the head of the Michigan Manufacturers' Association on the eve of World War II, and he assured government investigators that "most Michigan employers have the same belief." This was certainly the belief and the practice among auto employers (with the eccentric exception of Henry Ford). They simply refused to hire blacks, except, occasionally, as janitors. Two years into the war, with black employment increasing in many automotive plants - as a combined result of the "labor shortage" and the UAW's push, in cooperation with the FEPC, to open shops for blacks - auto employers were still complaining that blacks "leave the job easily and are absent a lot." In "automobile equipment," black employment was 3.6 percent in 1940 (overwhelmingly at Ford) and rose to a high of 15 percent in 1945.

"Employers in electrical manufacturing," as Ruth Milkman points out, "were even more hesitant to hire blacks" than in the auto industry. In 1940, 0.5 percent of the workers in "electrical machinery" were black; a year later at Pearl Harbor, the figure was only 1.3 percent; and at the wartime employment peak, it was only 2.9 percent.  

Black employment was so low in electrical manufacturing because employers relied on reserves of white women workers to meet their requirements. Robert C. Weaver, head of the Negro Employment Office of the War Production Board, observed in 1946 that "those industries which delayed longest the employment of Negroes ... were usually light and clean manufacturing. They were the industries in which [white] women ... were used in the largest proportions." Even during wartime, electrical manufacturers "introduced blacks only in localities where they had no alternative."

The steel industry was already hiring more black workers than the auto and electrical industries in the prewar years, especially for otherwise shunned labor in the foundries and furnaces. In "iron and steel," black employment was 5.5 percent in 1940, but by mid-1942 it leaped to 18 percent, and then rose by the end of 1943 to 25 percent, where it stayed through the end of the war. After three years of war, in December 1944, UE had some 40,000 black members out of a total membership of half a million, or 8 percent of the total. In absolute numbers, though not relatively, both of the other two "Big 3" unions had over twice as many black members. USWA had 95,000, or nearly 16 percent of its total membership of 600,000. UAW had 90,000, or 9 percent of its total membership of 1 million.

In the next chapter, we assess the effects of rank-and-file democracy and radicalism in determining interracial solidarity in terms of three practical expressions of it, namely: (1) equality of access to membership, (2) black representation in the highest councils, and (3) establishment, during the war, of special "equalitarian racial machinery" to combat racism, such as a fair employment committee or committee to abolish discrimination. The question for this chapter is, How did the "Big 3" unions compare on these aspects of solidarity? Each had a constitutional guarantee against racial discrimination. Yet, according to Sumner Rosen, "segregated locals existed at one time or another" in both the UAW and USWA. Indeed, the UAW's Walter Reuther refused to move resolutely to integrate the Dallas, Memphis, and Atlanta locals because this would have lost him right-wing votes and tipped the balance of strength in the international to the so-called left-center bloc. Neither UE nor USWA established a committee to abolish discrimination during the war, whereas UAW did; but, as in other internationals in the shifting camp, UAW established its "interracial committee" under pressure from black unionists and the strong "Communist left" faction, which was the "most militant on racial issues" in the UAW and was "the main force behind the union's program for combating discrimination." Alone among the Big 3, the UE had an elected black officer, although, according to Donald Critchlow, "it was not until 1945

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1 Milkman (1987, pp. 54–55); Weaver (1946, pp. 15–80).
3 Weaver (1946, p. 81).
4 Milkman (1987, pp. 54–55); Weaver (1946, pp. 15–80).
5 Black membership: Labor Research Association (1945, p. 73); total membership: Huberman (1946, pp. 160–80).
6 Marshall (1964, pp. 249, 487n40). We discuss each of these as measures of interracial solidarity in the next chapter.
7 Rosen does not say how many segregated locals each had or when or for how long these locals existed (1968, p. 204).
8 Rosen (1968, p. 204).
9 Stevenson (1993, p. 50); Record (1951, p. 306).
that the first Black was elected to a national office... The CP’s labor secretary even publicly upbraided UE as late as mid-1949 for being, in his view, lagged in fostering black representation. Most “Left-led” internationals had blacks active in their national leadership, he said, but UE, “despite certain very good [civil rights] activities... has not yet faced up to the task of promoting and integrating Negro members into all levels of leadership.”

UE

UE’s leaders, according to Sumner Rosen, had “a commitment to racial equality” and a record, according to Harvey Levenstein, of “combating discrimination in both shop and union affairs [that] was generally exemplary.” This is disputed by Critchlow, however, who argues that UE’s record on “the black question” was not outstanding: “[T]he UE on the national level,” he says, “virtually ignored the ‘Negro problem’ in internal union affairs and in the electrical industry... [T]he national leadership generally ignored the integration of Blacks into the union.”

The figures on UE’s black membership, however, do not lend support to Critchlow’s claim. According to his own figures, black employment in the electrical manufacturing industry fell between 1940 and January 1945 from 5 percent to 2.7 percent. But in December 1944, as we noted above, the black share of UE’s total membership stood at 8 percent. In other words, blacks were “overrepresented” in UE by over three times their share of employment in the industry itself.

In contrast, the other major union representing workers in that industry, the AFL’s IBEW, excluded blacks. During the war, IBEW became a virtual industrial union in electrical manufacturing and more than sextupled the number of its members, to some 350,000, most of whom joined its industrial locals. IBEW rarely challenged UE in the bigger manufacturing plants, but it organized smaller manufacturing concerns throughout the country, where it engaged UE in a continual running battle. Even during World War II, IBEW continued its prewar “traditional racial policy toward blacks and excluded them from its new industrial locals, just as it excluded them from its construction locals. As the president of an IBEW local in Cincinnati explained: “We don’t want the Negroes to stick their foot in the door. We don’t want them for competitors in the postwar period.” Another representative of the same local said: “We represent the voice of the people. The voice of the people is that they will not work with Negroes.”

In vying with the IBEW to represent manufacturing workers, UE organizers made sure to let them know about IBEW’s racism. For instance, a UE Organizer’s Bulletin, “Some Facts on the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers” (March 41, 1950), published excerpts from an Urban League report that criticized the IBEW for maneuvering “either to exclude Negro workers or limit the number employed.” Indeed, as IBEW’s authorized historian herself observes, “it took the rise of a national civil rights movement – and the threat of federal legislation – to persuade the international to act on their [black workers’] behalf.”

Critchlow says that the UE international “did not initiate any FEPC actions [during the war] against electrical companies that practiced discrimination.” No policy to upgrade blacks or place them in jobs from which they were excluded was ever articulated, he says, in any UE “Officer’s Report to a [wartime] convention, in any pamphlet, or in any UE News editorial.” He argues that “the most important factor in determining” the UE international leadership’s reticence on issues of racial discrimination was the small percentage of blacks in the electrical industry and, consequently, the small black membership in UE. But, as our quantitative analysis in the next chapter shows, Communist-led internationals that had a small black membership scored much higher in interracial solidarity than those with a large black membership; they also scored far higher than their counterparts in the non-Communist shops. So the small size of UE’s black membership per se does not qualify as “the most important factor” determining the apparent reticence of UE’s international officials to make the fight for equality of black workers a national priority.

UE’s representatives see their own record much differently than Critchlow’s characterization. For instance, Russ Nixon, UE’s Washington, D.C., representative, wrote to NAACP Chairman Roy Wilkins, in a letter dated January 17, 1950: “As I am sure you know, throughout its existence the UE has been in the forefront of the fight against discrimination, for fair employment practices and for civil rights legislation. Since you are well-acquainted with the long history of

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these issues, you will know that this is true as far as the UE is concerned on a shop level, in the community, in the states, and here in the Capital.”  

Critchlow acknowledges that the UE international cooperated closely in “community work with liberal reform organizations, such as the Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax, the NAACP, and the Committee for a Permanent FEPC,” and also acted as a potent pressure group in Washington, D.C., in support of the FEPC. But he denies that the international made black employment rights a priority.  

In contrast to the situation in the UAW, as we see below, the issues of black representation in the leadership or of active support for civil rights do not seem to have played a role in the intruion factional conflicts between the “left” and “right” in UE over the years. Because UE was a large, decentralized international union, as we know, whose locals and powerful districts enjoyed considerable autonomy, a systematic comparison of the racial policies and practices of left-led and right-led locals and districts would be especially revealing. Unfortunately, the data are not available to allow a systematic internal comparative analysis. Yet we were able to cull some suggestive information from published accounts and public documents on several locals in UE’s New York—New Jersey, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, and St. Louis districts. How representative these are of the general pattern of race relations in UE locals, we do not know.

New York—New Jersey Locals

UE locals in the New York—New Jersey metropolitan area were conspicuous in their commitment to racial justice. Locals in New York city waged a concerted antidiscrimination campaign during World War II. A report by black New Dealer Robert C. Weaver, chief of the War Production Board’s Division on Negro Employment, singled them out for praise. UE Local 1225 established a fair employment practice committee of its own to fight discrimination. It investigated “the status of minority group employment ... [in] all [UE] shops; the local referred Negroes, Jews, and persons of foreign extraction to all shops.” If these persons were refused employment, the local took the issue to management; if management continued to discriminate, the workers in the shop met to pass a resolution against discrimination, and then again “sent a qualified worker of the race, color, or creed discriminated against to the plant ... [and] if this worker was [also] refused employment, the case was sent to the President’s [FEPC].”  

Other UE locals in district 4 followed this lead. They organized a campaign to raise the black share of employment among the city’s electrical workers to

20 percent. Although that goal was not reached, the campaign succeeded in less than a year (between May 1942 and January 1943) in raising the number of blacks in the electrical machinery plants in the city from 172, or barely 1 percent of the total, to over a thousand, or 3.7 percent of the total. For the electrical industry as a whole, the increase during this same period was “from 1 to only 1.5 percent.”  

In July 1944, UE’s New York—New Jersey district 4 signed a “mutual assistance pact” with the FEPC “to speed up the handling of cases of discrimination in UE shops or those under organization by it.” In the immediate postwar years, UE Local 150 (Nassau County and Brooklyn) adopted “a special provision on layoffs for Negroes” and won a contract requiring the company to retain the wartime ratio of black to white workers.

Philadelphia

At the Philco plant in Philadelphia, an enduring pattern of racial segregation and discrimination existed for many years. In 1952, Herbert Hill, then the NAACP’s Labor Secretary, sought to meet with the president of Philco Local 101 about this. The president refused and, in a telephone conversation with Hill, “made it clear he would not discuss this matter with any representative of the NAACP.” At Hill’s request, Harry Block, head of IUE district 1, then met with Hill and the president and other officers of Locals 101 and 102. “A rather lengthy and at times heated discussion ensued,” according to a June 4, 1952, memorandum by Hill, “in which I was informed that in the past white women had stated that they would rather quit than work with niggers.” Wielding the threat of a lawsuit against the Philco Corporation and the IUE under provisions of the federal government’s Contract Compliance Division and FEPC statutes in Pennsylvania’s municipal code, Hill was able to arrange an agreement with the Philco management and the locals’ officers, through which “for the first time in the history of the Philco plant,” as Hill wrote in 1952, “Negroes were promoted to production and assembly jobs.”

This development represents a complete departure from the pattern of Negro employment which had existed in the Philco plant for many years. . . . Negroes [had been relegated] to two segregated departments, salvage (scrap) and shipping. . . . The contract at the Philco plant is held by Locals 101 and 102 of IUE-CIO, District 1. The union contract provides for promotion via plant-wide seniority, however, the

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20 NAACP (1968, Reel 6: 0182, emphasis added).
21 Critchlow (1976, p. 234).
22 Critchlow (1976, p. 234).
upgrading provisions of the contract were suspended [regarding]... the Negro workers[,] and by tacit agreement between the local union officials and management the Negro workers were segregated into [the salvage and shipping departments]... and promoted only within these departments.23

IUE Locals 101 and 102 and the entire district 1 of which they were part had been among the first to secede from the UE in 1950 to join the IUE. In fact, UE Local 101 had been the home local of the now IUE president and once UE president, CIO secretary James Carey; Block had been Carey's successor as head of UE Local 101 and served also as UE district 1 president. From at least the 1942 convention on, all throughout the bitter battle between the "left" and "right" within UE over the next eight years, district 1, headed by Block, a principled anti-Communist Socialist, "had remained the stronghold of the right-wing forces."24

*Milwaukee*

The "racist practices of UE Local 1111 at the Allen–Bradley Co. in Milwaukee," according to Hill, "... began soon after UE got its first contract at the plant in 1937 and continued through all the many years the local [was]... under direct

21 Hill (1952, pp. 1–3, 4).
22 Herbert Hill brought the Philco case (and the Allen–Bradley case to be discussed next) to our attention as what he considered to be a glaring instance of "racist practices" by certain UE locals. He mistakenly assumed, however, that the two IUE locals at the Philco plant in Philadelphia had been "Communist-controlled" during their years in the UE, rather than having been, in reality (and as was pointed out to him by Zeitlin in a subsequent telephone conversation) solid "right-wing" locals (1999a, b; 2000). Block was called in 1946 and 1947 to testify beforeHUAC on Communist infiltration of the UE but refused, saying that "he and his associates" considered their fight with the Communist-led left none of HUAC's business; it was, he said, an intrasunion matter. Carey, however, did testify before HUAC at a later date, and, in 1948, at length before the House Education and Labor Subcommittee investigating "Communist infiltration" of UE, at which time he assured the committee "that the employers find it easy to get along with the Communists because the Communists cannot be aggressive in adjustment of a grievance." Why? Well, Carey explained, "that fellow is awfully easy [for the employer] to get along with, because he has to make compromises to position his position to serve what I consider another interest" (U.S. Congress 1948, pp. 13, 11). In fact, Carey and other right-wingers had been cooperating with the FBI for years, beginning as early as 1945, when Carey asked J. Edgar Hoover "to do background checks on certain left wingers, ... By 1946 Carey [was] seeing ... Hoover regularly to discuss Communists in the CIO" (Filippelli and McCollough 1995, pp. 141, 71, 126, 150, 104, 123).

23 Hill (1938, p. 1; also 1999a, p. 2).
24 Allen–Bradley (1957, p. 43); U.S. Department of Labor (1958, p. E-1). A decade later, in 1962, the number of black employees among the company's total of 6,383 employees was still precisely one (Hill 1968b, p. 18).
26 On the growth of Milwaukee's black population, see note 58 of this chapter.
27 Robert W. Oxanne points out that, "as industrial unions won union shops in the 1930's and 1940's, it was always on condition that the union would not interfere with the management's exclusive right to hire or renew the contract. The Taft–Hartley Act's (1947) prohibition of the closed shop reinforced management's exclusive control over hiring" (1984, p. 163, emphasis added). Although Oxanne says "always on condition," this is, as we now know, not correct, for, as we saw in Chapter 5, some 44 percent of UE's local contracts refused to cede so-called management prerogatives, among which is exclusive control over hiring, and not one of the UE/GE national contracts -- before, during, or after World War II -- ceded management prerogatives. Local 1111 was thus an exception among UE locals when it too refused to cede the "exclusive right" to management to hire "whomever it pleased."
find does not support this political characterization. Both in 1938 and 1939, Local 1111's president Fred Wolter "spoke out clearly against the Communist element in the leadership of Milwaukee's CIO" and was involved in an effort to oust them from leadership of the Wisconsin CIO. Allen-Bradley's own corporate history mentions Wolter's stance, but makes no mention of the political coloring of Local 1111 during the CIO era. Both of the city's newspapers, the Milwaukee Sentinel and the Milwaukee Journal, wrote a series of "exposes" of Communism in the CIO during the 1946 interelection "left-right battle," as the Sentinel called it, for control of the state and county CIO councils, but neither named Local 1111 as Communist-dominated. In fact, the reporter who wrote the Sentinel's series and actually participated in "secret caucuses with the purpose of ousting the alleged left wingers from power," reported that the electrical worker local was among "the militant locals in the Milwaukee County CIO that were "sympathetic" to "eliminating Communists from the ranks of CIO circles." Finally, Frank Emepak asserts that Local 1111 "never was left-led" but, on the contrary, definitely "was politically conservative then (in the forties)."  

Ozanne has a detailed discussion of the defeat and "purge" of the left wing in the Wisconsin CIO in 1946, but the only mention he makes of Local 1111 is to note also, as does Allen-Bradley's historian, John Gunda, that from the CIO's beginnings in Wisconsin, Local 1111's president, Fred Wolter, was an anti-Communist activist. Wolter was an avowed participant in the "struggle to oust Communists from active leadership in the CIO," as he wrote in a July 24, 1938 letter to the editor of the Milwaukee Sentinel, and to oust them from "control of the State and County CIO" (Ozanne 1984, p. 86). Harvey Bradley, president, and Fred Lock, his general manager, the authorized company history notes, had long "gravitated to the far reaches of the right wing" and were "active supporters" of the John Birch Society and the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade — and friends of Crusade head Frederick Schwarz, a regular visitor who usually left "with a check." That despite the far-right political activism of Allen-Bradley's owner and manager, two different company histories (one published by the company itself and the other by the Bradley Foundation) never suggest or even imply that Local 1111 was "Communist-controlled" at any time certainly lends no credence to Hill's unsupported assertion that it was (Gunda 1992, pp. 89, 92, 114, 115, 117; Allen-Bradley 1965, pp. 25, 49).  

The Sentinel's reporter, Hugh Swafford, reported that a "twin offensive" among the USWA and eleven UAW locals united to unseat the left leadership of the Milwaukee County CIO Council, and that "electrical worker, hosiery-worker, and brewery worker [newly members of the CIO] locals were sympathetic to the possible CIO purge" (Meyer 1992, p. 166). He did not specifically name Local 1111 as the "sympathetic" electrical worker local.  

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The "Big 3" and Interracial Solidarity

St. Louis

In St. Louis, one of "the most segregated cities in the nation," even the federal government's Employment Service had two offices, one for "white" and one for "colored" workers, and their staffs had no qualms about sending black applicants to segregated work places and contributed in this way to reinforcing the area's segregated employment pattern. The few blacks who applied at the "colored" office were referred to low-skilled jobs, but only if they passed a series of examinations, including a test for venereal disease.

The new all-black St. Louis unit of the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), founded in May 1942, was one of the most active, and radical, MOWM units. Several hundred black workers were laid off that same month by U.S. Cartridge, the city's major defense contractor, in response to mounting hostility from white workers. MOWM took "to the streets" and led the fight to reinstate them. MOWM "found a valuable ally," as Andrew Kersten observes, "in William Sennor, the Communist leader of the UE at U.S. Cartridge," and head of UE's district 8. District 8, as Rosemary Feurer puts it, made both "racial and sexual equality a high priority during the war." The district called vigorously for the employment of black and women workers as a solution to the wartime labor shortage and to ensure a "just economy in the postwar period... Senner was instrumental in getting the mayor to establish a Race Relations commission that dealt with employment as well as segregation issues in St. Louis." District 8 leaders launched a campaign calling for full and equal utilization of black and women workers and helped to open new job opportunities for black workers.

This campaign was part of UE's successful drive to organize U.S. Cartridge. One of the campaign's prime demands was "immediate employment of Negro women in production." The company conceded, and management agreed to hire 300 black male workers and also "pledged to hire seventy-five "Negro women matrons...to clean the lavoratories of the white women production workers."

In fact, the company hired only twenty "Negro matrons," and it never employed a single black woman among its 23,500 production workers. The next year, with the encouragement of MOWM, 3,600 black workers segregated in building 103 at U.S. Cartridge struck to protest against the company's failure to hire and train more blacks in skilled positions. The walkout was supported by the UE, despite its adherence to the wartime no-strike pledge, and the strike ended when the strikers won a
"significant concession" from the company to train a few black foremen in building 103. "Up to that point, all supervisors had been white." 16

MOWM repeatedly challenged the citywide unfair employment practices in defense industries. By early 1943, blacks employed in St. Louis’s war industries numbered 18,000, a 225 percent increase over 1942. These gains, according to Kersten, were the result of both a general but momentary labor shortage and the activities of the St. Louis MOWM and its allies, especially Senator UE, "which organized black workers and fought to gain more jobs for them." 17

The city’s black newspaper, St. Louis American (April 2, 1943), commended UE’s leaders for being in “the forefront of racial issues.” 18 They consistently supported the demand of St. Louis’s black community that FEPC hold hearings there on discriminatory labor practices. When a hearing was actually held, on August 2, 1944, Senner testified to the fact that from March of 1942 on, UE had been demanding that the labor utilization division of the War Production Board take effective steps to eliminate unfair employment practices in the city’s plants. Most important, the UE district insisted, according to Senner, that all collective bargaining agreements to which UE locals were a party contain a clause stating: “No employee or person seeking employment or job advancement shall be discriminated against because of race, color, creed, or sex.” 19

District 8’s leaders appointed a black staff member “to demonstrate the district organization’s hostility to any form of prejudice.” They were also active in civil rights activities in the community. 20 Yet, according to Kersten, “the UE’s leadership [in St. Louis] was unable to sway its rank and file to support fair employment.” UE’s leaders’ efforts to bring in black workers were met by protests and wildcat strikes by their locals’ white members. Apparently, white women workers were prominent among the instigators and initiators of the wildcats. For instance, in late 1944, when black core handlers were placed in the McQuay–Norris plant, fifty white female UE members walked out, despite the opposition of the local’s leaders, and they stayed out until management removed the black workers. The two top officers in the UE’s St. Louis Local 825 at McQuay–Norris urged a resolution to “reaffirm our beliefs in the policies of the union, the CIO and the nation to prevent and eliminate discrimination in employment because of race, creed, or color” and to authorize the local’s executive board to “effectuate the policies set forth in this resolution.” The

resolution passed initially but was then overturned “after strong protest from white workers.” Dejected by this defeat, the two officers resigned their posts. 21

Again, the contrast with IBEW enlightens. In January 1945, when the management at St. Louis’s General Cable Co. decided to train several black women for production jobs, over 1,000 “white women workers, who were [IBEW] members . . . staged a wildcat strike.” They returned to work only when the company agreed not “to train or employ black women or promote black men.” Unlike UE’s local and district leaders in St. Louis, however, IBEW’s counterparts did not oppose the women’s wildcat and did not endorse the principle of fair employment, and they “never went to bat” for the black workers. 22

The contrast of UE with the role of UAW in GM’s extensive manufacturing facilities in St. Louis is also instructive. GM there engaged in “systematic discriminatory practices,” which were embodied in UAW contracts, including a separate seniority line of progression for black and white workers at its Chevy plant. Under UAW, black workers in St. Louis’s GM plants were employed for many years “exclusively in menial jobs, such as porter, sweeper, and material handler.” 23

Explaining Racial Egalitarianism in UE Districts 4 and 8

Critchlow argues that UE’s New York and St. Louis districts gave “special consideration” to blacks only because both had a “great number” of them. He estimates that some 25 percent of UE’s members in the St. Louis district were black. Yet in the New York–New Jersey district, according to his own estimate, less than 10 percent of the membership was black. 24 Having offered the varying size of the black membership in the international and in these two districts as his explanation of their differing racial policies, Critchlow then mentions, in a footnote, that “Communists were leaders in these districts and being politically conscious of social issues, pressed the black question.”

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16 Kersten (1999a, pp. 161, 163).
17 Ibid., p. 165; 1999c. In 1950, when UE, the CIO’s newly chartered right-wing dual union, escalated its raiding of UE members in St. Louis electrical plants and at International Harvester, “the UE retained considerable loyalty among blacks by effectively contrasting its record on race with that of other CIO unions” (Filippelli and McColloch 1995, p. 150).
18 Hill notes also that more or less the same “racial employment pattern at Ford plants organized by the UAW” in Chicago, Kansas City, Long Beach, California, Atlanta, Dallas, and Memphis characterized the GM plant in St. Louis (1998, pp. 97, 106–107).
19 Critchlow estimates district 4’s black membership based on black employment in the electrical industry in various cities in the district, which ranged, he reports, between 4.6 percent and 8.8 percent (1976, p. 256).
Recall that Sentner, St. Louis district head, was—since his first days as a labor organizer—an open Communist; so, too, was James McLeish, head of UE’s New York—New Jersey district 4. Critchlow asserts, unconvincingly, that having politically conscious Communist leadership in both of these UE districts “does not serve as sufficient explanation” for these districts’ racial egalitarianism. First, he says, other Communist-led locals (unnamed) were not as active on the black question; second, neither district was “totally controlled by Communists.”

**UE, Race, and Gender at Work**

The critical question, of course, is why UE’s international leaders apparently did not make the fight for black rights a national priority. Marshall Stevenson’s answer is direct and derisive: He asserts that because UE had few black members, its “[white] communists were not willing to risk their position and status . . . by overemphasizing issues that appealed to a small minority of workers.” This charge (whatever its applicability to Communists and those close to them in the leadership of other unions) surely does not apply to UE’s Julius Empskar, secretary-treasurer, and James Mattes, its head of organization, for whom the equality of black and white workers was a lifelong cardinal principle. They were men of unquestionable radical commitment, egalitarian temperament, and well-tested mettle in workers’ struggles. If in truth the UE international failed to be a pacemaker in the struggle for black equality, this certainly was not because these men and women were “not willing to risk their position and status.”

We suggest an alternative explanation, but one for which there is substantial circumstantial evidence, as presented in Chapter 7: UE’s top leaders

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**The “Big 3” and Interracial Solidarity**

were already embroiled in a sharp struggle against electrical employers for pay equity and job protection for women. They led the way in fighting for integration of women into the industry on equal terms with men. Involved in the unrelenting conflict on this front, they were not able, rather than “not willing,” to engage in a conflict on a second front, that is, fighting against employers who, as we noted earlier, were even more resistant to hiring blacks than employers in other mass-production industries.

The strategy of UE’s leadership on the gender issue, as Milman says, anticipated “by several decades the struggles being waged today for ‘equal pay for comparable worth.’” But no effective strategy, especially one so far advanced for its time, springs full-blown. Rather it takes an exhausting expenditure of time and energy to devise and implement a strategy that will bring employers into battle in a way that the union can win. Under these circumstances, the fact that UE’s international leadership apparently could not muster the will to launch a second front against employers over the issue of black equality—an issue which, as radicals, they surely saw as a moral imperative—becomes understandable (though no less lamentable).

**UAW**

Beginning as early as the UAW’s 1939 convention and recurrently at subsequent conventions through the early 1950s, black activists, consistently supported by Communists and their allies, fought (and were defeated) time and again (most notably at the 1943 and 1946 conventions) to pass a constitutional

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43 Zieger (1976, p. 256).

45 In late 1955, in the midst of defending their union against fierce raids by rival CIO unions and from heavy attacks against its officers by various congressional committees, and despite previous NAACP refusals of UE’s calls for unity in the civil rights struggle, UE again called on the NAACP to join it in fighting discrimination. The Washington, D.C., representative of UE’s Fair Practice Committee, for instance, urged NAACP president Roy Wilkins to support a government “crack down” on companies that were in violation of President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s executive order banning discrimination by government defense contractors. “Numerous big corporations like General Electric, Westinghouse, General Motors, Ford and others,” Ernest Thompson wrote Wilkins on September 29, 1955, “are practicing widespread discrimination against Negro workers in the South, particularly Negro women who are totally excluded from production jobs with these companies. . . . they are in serious violation of the spirit, if not the letter of the Executive Order. In my opinion, the policy of the . . . [President’s Committee on Government Contract Compliance] and the President ought to be to crack down on all contractors [that discriminate] regardless of whether a particular plant has a defense contract or not, since the corporation does have a defense contract” (NAACP 1976, p. 175).
Left Out: Reds and America’s Industrial Unions

amendment reserving a seat on the executive board or a vice presidency for a black representative. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick place the blame for these defeats on the racism of auto workers: “[T]he elevation of a black to the International Executive Board,” they say, “[was not] possible so long as the rank-and-file majority remained overwhelmingly racist.” But they provide no evidence in support of either claim, that is, that the “majority” of UAW members were “racist” and (assuming this was so) that this was the main obstacle to black representation on the board.

On the contrary, as Meier and Rudwick themselves document, Walter Reuther and other top anti-Communist leaders of the UAW vehemently opposed the proposal for a black seat on the board, as they said, on principle and — perhaps even more so — for pragmatic political reasons. Spokesmen of the “Reuther faction” denounced “the special seat as a ‘hypocritical’ demand for racism in reverse.” To this charge, a black delegate replied: “We are getting desperate for real representation on that board and if we have to take it ‘Jim Crow’ we’ll take it.” Or, as Meier and Rudwick observe: “One of the fears of the Reuther faction, in fact, had been that, if [the] proposal passed, the black elected to the Board would be a member of the Addees group [the center-left coalition]; and [Addees’s] thirty votes would be enough to place [him] . . . in a dominant position on the closely divided Executive Board.” They note also: “Even after Reuther had consolidated his control and attained the presidency, [the issue of black representation] . . . remained intertwined with the union’s factionalism and typically was championed by Communists and the union’s left wing.” Throughout the CIO era, the overwhelming majority of the UAW’s black unionists supported the center-left coalition.

Local 600

The most conspicuous and powerful base of the left opposition to Reuther’s policies, as we know, was rooted in Local 600, whose officers consistently supported the proposal for a black seat on UAW’s executive board. In general, Local 600’s commitment to interracial solidarity contrasted sharply with the

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Reuther executive board’s. So, for instance, in 1949, a year after Reuther’s anti-Communist slate had won control of the IEB, Irving Howe and B. J. Widick singled out the leaders of Local 600 (and of Briggs Local 212) as having “consistently fought for the rights of their Negro members . . . .”

In other locals, the story is rather unpleasant: leaders who go through the motion of supporting the union policy but do not really exert themselves to defend Negro members . . . . Certainly, the experience of Ford Local 600 stands out as an example of what can be done to establish a sense of fraternity and harmony between white and colored workers. While no one in the local could seriously argue that discrimination has been completely abolished, it is clear to all Detroit observers that it has a qualitatively superior record on race relations. Since its formation, Negroes have actively participated in the local’s affairs, holding major positions and exerting powerful influence in its politics. There is no visible discrimination at social affairs or any other social function.

Howe and Widick suggest two sources of Local 600’s exceptional record of “racial tolerance”: one, that black workers were “so large a part of it that any official who ventured to make overt Jim Crow remarks would be committing suicide,” and, two, that “the local’s leaderships — of whatever faction — have worked toward that end [interracial fraternity and harmony].” Although Howe and Widick here decide to allocate credit to “leaderships . . . of whatever faction” for this achievement, earlier in their book, they characterize Local 600 (as did Reuther) as being “long under Stalinist leadership” and “controlled” by “the Communist Party.”

The unified stance taken by Local 600’s rank-and-file unionists on the touchy issue of segregation in public accommodations illustrates how appropriate actions by union leaders can result in what W. E. B. Du Bois called “an astonishing spread of interracial tolerance and understanding” among workers.

Dave Moore, vice president of the axle building at the Rouge plant, remembers:

There were some hotels where black delegates to a UAW convention couldn’t get in there . . . If a black guy was being refused admittance to a hotel or motel . . . that hotel was almost torn apart and would have been torn apart if they didn’t give them a room. White guys was doing it for us. And we even had run ins with other locals in the UAW. The white
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guys did, from Local 600, defending black guys. Some of the white guys from other locals around the country [would say], "Just what in the hell are you doing, he's a Negro, he can't eat in this room with the rest of us." [But] these [Local 600] white guys, "God damn it, if he doesn't eat in here, nobody is going to eat..." And we would put up a picket line, sometimes we did. The white guys themselves would organize.

Even more sensitive and fraught with tension was the issue of "race mixing," as it was used to be termed, especially between the opposite sexes. But, as Moore tells it, Local 600's leaders confronted the issue head on, with salutary results.

The local was giving dances, blacks and whites dancing together. They would give picnics, the kids were there playing together, they would have chorale ensembles, all of them singing in the choir together, they had bands, they played together, in the Labor Day marches all of them competed for prizes, and this kind of thing. Even though they weren't living in the same neighborhood together, they would visit each other, and these are the kind of social activities, I think, that went on and helped elevate the brotherhood and togetherness more openly. We had black beauty queens. Nowhere in the country would you find an organization [that] predominantly whites were sponsoring, that would select a black woman for a beauty queen. ... It was unheard of. But we had it here.\(^5\)

In the middle of World War II, the head of the local's huge recreational program sought (according to FBI reports from 1943 and 1944) to use that program to "break down the walls between the workers of various national groups and races," and he conducted a campaign to break down "racial barriers" in Detroit-area bowling alleys. The program's head was John Gallo, whom ACTU called one of the local's "most prominent Communists."\(^6\)

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Local 248

If Local 600 was the most formidable Red-led local in the UAW, Local 248 at the Allis-Chalmers agricultural equipment plant in West Allis, Wisconsin, the biggest private employer in that state, was also an important base of the UAW's governing center-left coalition until 1947, and the local's president Harold Christoffers and its other "Red-lining" officers consistently supported the call for black representation on the UAW's executive board. In 1937, the local spearheaded the formation of the Milwaukee Scottsboro Defense Committee, which consisted of a cross-section of black and white civic, labor, and religious leaders; this cemented a tight bond between the local and the city's blacks. As early as October 1940, Local 248 filed a grievance against the company's discriminatory layoff policies. And the Wisconsin CIO News, under the aegis of Local 248, attacked racial discrimination by the railway brotherhoods and various AFL locals. This, says Joe Trotter, was "particularly gratifying to black workers."\(^5\) Yet blacks never constituted more than a tiny share of Allis-Chalmers workers and of the local's membership, in a city and county with a miniscule black population.\(^6\) Of 11,250 Allis-Chalmers workers in December 1941, only 110, or barely 1 percent, were black, and by the end of the war, in 1945, the number had increased to only 695 of over 16,500 total workers, or 4.2 percent, employed in the main plant and two others opened during wartime.

with high seniority in the foundry, who would then retain their total seniority in the new job. The foundry committeemen agreed, and the foundry workers, "Oh, they applauded," Dorosh said, "they were happy." Management resisted the idea but finally agreed to implement it. But once workers started taking new jobs outside the foundry, "within two or three days," according to Dorosh, "they wanted to go back." Soon a committee of foundrymen asked to have the plan scrapped. The workers, they said, were used to the work in the foundry, and, besides, that was where "they knew everybody, it's just like a community." So although this pioneering agreement with Ford to erase the racial division of labor in the Rouge plant remained in force, according to Dorosh, few black foundry workers took advantage of it (Dorosh interview, 1984).


"The wartime black migration to Milwaukee came in a vortex rather than a flood." In 1940, black Milwaukeeans numbered 8,821 or 1.5 percent of the total city's population. In 1945, the figure increased slightly to 10,200, or 1.6 percent (Meyer 1992, p. 124; Trotter 1985, p. 149). By 1950, the total black population doubled to some 21,750, or about 2 percent or so of the total population of the Milwaukee metropolitan area (Department of Labor 1968, p. E-1). The old and established, small black community in Milwaukee was not "militant" on civil rights, let alone on the issue of racial employment equality, according to Hill (2000). But at a 1968 demonstration at Allen-Bradley calling for minority hiring, and these were led by the NAACP's Father James Groppi, a white Catholic priest.
Until the war, Allis-Chalmers refused to hire blacks except as "porters, janitors and common laborers," and even when faced with a war labor shortage, the additional blacks the company hired to labor in the foundries, to replace workers serving in the armed forces, were imported contract workers from Jamaica (of the plant’s 693 black workers, 387 were Jamaican). Allis-Chalmers housed the Jamaicans in segregated army barracks at the Milwaukee airport. "In contrast to such segregation," as Stephen Meyer observes, "the UAW [Local 248] welcomed the black Jamaicans to union social and cultural activities...[and] praised them as models for American workers." Even though most of the company’s workers were of German, Polish, and other Slavic origins, who "were known to be openly hostile to blacks," Local 248 leaders conducted a militant struggle to achieve racial equality. In 1941, this Red-led local’s membership endorsed a resolution to support the proposed "March on Washington" for equal employment of blacks in defense production. Local 248 established its own Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) with a black foundry worker as chair and, as Trotter says, "vigorously worked for the employment and upgrading of black workers" during the war, against a management that otherwise firmly refused to upgrade them into more skilled and better-paid jobs. Local 248 leaders promoted the hiring of black men and women; when the company refused to hire a black woman they sent to apply for work, they filed an FEPC case and pushed for her employment. Within a month the company hired her and five other black women. The local continued throughout the war to call for black women’s equal employment.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{USWA}

The USWA experienced no such internal factional struggles or open differences in racial policies and practices among its major locals. Basically, the stance of the USWA’s international leadership toward black representation was akin to Reuther’s. For instance, Philip Murray, president both of the CIO and USWA, told the major black daily, the \textit{Pittsburgh Courier} (August 16, 1947): “We have substantial representation among the Negro elements.... You’ve got to give these guys equality of treatment, you don’t pick a man for the job because he’s a Negro. That provides a bar to good feeling among various elements within the organization.” USWA secretary-treasurer David McDonald added: “He also should be respected for his ability, and not his color.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} Trotter (1985, p. 174).
\textsuperscript{20} Cited in Williamson (1947, p. 1013).