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The Popular Front and the Origins of the National Negro Congress

DURING THE SUMMER OF 1935, Communist Parties throughout the world gathered in Moscow to confirm a new political strategy that made resistance to fascism the International's preeminent objective. Frightened by the growing belligerence and power of Hitler's Germany and the rise of fascist movements throughout much of Europe, the Soviet leadership decided to seek collective security agreements with Western democracies and to focus the energies of Communist Parties on preventing right-wing governments from coming to power. Using the World Congress—the highest Comintern body—as their stage, the Soviets called on Communists everywhere to abandon temporarily their goal of a revolutionary conquest of power and join with Socialists, trade unionists, and liberals in a "Broad People's Front" to stop the rise of fascism and prevent a new world war. To give Communist policies greater appeal, they instructed parties in Western democracies to assume the role of defenders of the democratic tradition, fighting to "extend the hard won democratic rights of the masses," and prevent the abolition of bourgeois democratic liberties. They hoped that such a program would attract the middle class as well as workers and broaden the base of antifascist activity.[1]

The new Comintern program aroused considerable excitement within the CPUSA. Even before the World Congress, many sections of the American party, recognizing the absence of revolutionary (or even socialist) sentiment among the people with whom they were working, had in practice abandoned revolutionary agitation in favor of coalitions for practical reforms. As seen in Chapter 6, this had been occurring with considerable force in Harlem. But the Comintern now invested this change in policy with a romantic aura and a sense of revolutionary duty. The new Comintern program simultaneously instructed Communists to put themselves at the service of the Soviet state ("We do not only defend the Soviet Union in general," Italian Party leader Palmiro Togliatti told the Con-

gress, "we defend concretely its whole policy and each of its acts,") and identify with the national traditions and culture of the countries they lived in. Contradictory though this was, it spoke perfectly to the split personality of many American Communists, who, while loyal to the Soviet Union, were anxious to transcend their position as outsiders (ethnic as well as political) in the American nation. Seeing an opportunity to expand their influence, American Party leaders began to dramatically recast the Party's image, "to come forward as the bearers and pioneers of that revolutionary tradition out of which the United States was born." They returned from the Congress with a program that emphasized work within established trade unions (AFL or independent), the organization of a Farmer-Labor Party, and the development of alliances with liberals and Socialists to protect civil liberties, extend Negro rights, and prevent the domestic and international growth of fascism.[2]

The Seventh World Congress inaugurated a period of Party history—the Popular Front—which represented the high point of Communist influence in the United States. During the next four years—until the Nazi-Soviet Pact undermined its credibility and forced the abandonment of its antifascist stance—the American Communist Party launched a dramatic attempt to adapt its ideology, tactics, and structure to American political conditions. Beginning in 1936, the CPUSA leadership, anxious to increase its electoral influence and to develop smooth working relations with antifascist liberals, deemphasized conspiratorial features of the Party's local organizations and sought to cultivate an image as a "responsible American organization." Party leaders enlarged their neighborhood units, renamed them "branches," and encouraged them to open public headquarters, reorganized their sections to conform with election district lines, and reduced the workload of Party members to allow more time for leisure and family life. In addition, Party leaders, beginning in 1938, dissolved their "shop units" or fractions in industry to remove the suspicion that Communists aimed to dominate the trade unions they worked in and thus gave Communist trade union leaders considerable freedom to work out policies that protected their position in the CIO hierarchy.[3]

The Party's program and rhetoric also changed substantially. During the 1936 Presidential election campaign, Party candidate Earl Browder, discarding bolshevik terminology, declared that "Communism is 20th Century Americanism" and that Communists "were the most consistent fighters for democracy for the enforcement of the democratic features of our Constitution, for the defense of the flag and the revival of its glorious revolutionary traditions." In succeeding years, Browder spoke of the possibility of an American path to socialism that deviated from the Soviet model, claiming that the Party abjured force and violence except in self-defense, and had no wish to impose socialism on the American people if

the majority of the population opposed it. To show that the Party's commitment to democracy was sincere, Browder proclaimed that the Party respected differences of opinion among "progressives" and would deal with them in a principled manner. "To our allies in the fight against fascism," he wrote, "we pledge the use of democratic methods as the sole means of resolving disputes between us."[4]

Significantly, this public endorsement of American democracy involved no change in the hierarchical process of decision making *within the Party*. At the very same time that the Party proclaimed its respect for the Bill of Rights, it warned members that it would continue to ban factions, limit political discussion to issues defined by the leadership, and "burn out any tendency to irresponsible political gossip with a red hot iron." An outline for new members classes, printed during December, 1936, reaffirmed the authority of the Comintern over the U.S. Party and the basic principles of democratic centralism—"subordination of the minority to the majority," "subordination of the lower bodies to the higher bodies," and "iron party discipline."[5]

Nevertheless, the changes in the Party's organization and program proved to be far more than cosmetic. Once initiated, the policy of alliance with American liberalism set in motion forces which were difficult to reverse. As institutional power within American society became the Party's major objective, and "socialism" receded to the status of a distant dream, it attracted a large number of American-born cadre who viewed it as the most efficient vehicle available for combatting fascism and accelerating social reform. Educated in American schools, brought up on radio and movies and sports, they felt the pull of the "American Dream," tarnished though it was by depression and poverty, and they longed for respectability and success in their native land. Unwilling to challenge the principles that stood at the core of the Party's identity—and which Comintern authority enforced—they pushed the Party as far as they dared to accommodate it to practical politics and American popular culture, and with Browder's blessing, tried to infuse Party life at the grass roots with greater dynamism and flexibility. Rising quickly to positions of influence in the Party apparatus, these young Communists, many of them of Jewish ancestry, invested Americanization with a romantic aura and displayed considerable aptitude for the coalition building and political maneuvering that the new policies implied.[6]

In Harlem, Americanization, which made the Party's program and rhetoric indistinguishable from that of many black liberals, brought Communists an easy acceptance in community affairs that had been denied them in the past. "The launching of the Popular Front," Claude McKay wrote, "simultaneously with the New Deal WPA, gave the Communists . . . vast influence among colored professional groups." Although

Party membership in Harlem grew only marginally beyond 1936 levels, Communists became a recognized force in Harlem politics, exerting a power far beyond their numbers. "Communist Party headquarters," a *Saturday Evening Post* writer observed:

> is a place where every Negro with a grievance can be sure of prompt action. If he has been fired, the Communists can be counted on to picket his employer. If he has been evicted, the Communists will guard his furniture and take his case to court. If his gas has been cut off, the Communists will take his complaint, but not his unpaid bill, to the nearest office. . . . There is never a labor parade, nor a mass meeting of any significance in the colored community, in which Communists do not get their banner in the front row and their speakers on the platform.[7]

Unlike the early '30s, the Party's influence in Harlem came to rest on a significant degree of institutional power. Communists obtained an influential, and sometimes dominant role, in numerous city unions, in the relief system and the WPA, and in a newly formed third party that promised to become a force in city politics—the American Labor Party. Wheeling and dealing like Tammany stalwarts, they developed close working relationships with many leading Harlem ministers, social workers, and politicians. During the Popular Front years, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., referred to Communists in his weekly column as "my brothers in red," and Lester Granger described James Ford, in an *Opportunity* book review, as "my good friend." Liberal Harlem politicians worked closely with Communists in drafting legislation and coordinating lobbying at the state legislature and occasionally sought and won Communist endorsement for their election campaigns. A writer for *Interracial Review,* a Catholic journal devoted to countering Communist influence, observed sadly that "Communism has come off the street corners of Harlem and is appealing to the educated Negroes, winning among them leaders who shall bring the black race to Marx."[8]

The Party's movement into the mainstream of black life, as we have seen, began well before the Seventh Comintern Congress—as early as the summer of 1934, the Party had begun pursuing "united-front relationships" with important black organizations. But the changes in Party policy that followed the Seventh World Congress, some immediate, some gradual, brought about a qualitative change in its relations with nonradical blacks, making the Party seem far more accessible, and less threatening.

During the fall of 1935, the Party leadership took several steps to make

the guiding principles of Party "Negro work" more in tune with the pragmatic policies and outlook of major black organizations. At the November, 1935, meeting of the Central Committee, Party leaders formally abandoned "self-determination in the Black Belt" as an agitational point in the Party's organizing and decided to concentrate on immediate issues such as disfranchisement, discrimination in employment and denials of civil rights. Dissolving the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, the organization most identified with the self-determination program, it redirected its energies into building support for the National Negro Congress, a nationwide federation of black organizations which it had helped to launch. The congress idea, which had arisen almost simultaneously in Party circles and among some influential black liberals critical of New Deal racial policies, became the primary focus of Party "Negro work." To facilitate its growth, vestiges of earlier, more "sectarian" policies were removed. In December, 1935, the Party disbanded the *Negro Liberator,* the newspaper of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, and moved its editorial staff to the *Daily Worker.* From this time, the Party concentrated its coverage of black political, cultural, and economic life in the pages of the *Daily Worker* and the *New Masses* and tried to increase circulation of these organs in black communities.[9]

In Harlem, the strategic orientation mandated by the Seventh World Congress gave Communists additional flexibility in pursuing alliances with black organizations and leaders, particularly those representing middle-class constituencies. Without relinquishing an emphasis on mass protest action, Party leaders began to speak of extending the "united front" into electoral politics, of forming a labor party embracing "liberals, radicals and all workers, manual, white collar and professional."[10] This recognition of the importance of elections helped narrow the gap between the Party and influential Harlemites who took questions of political power and patronage seriously. Combined with other new features of Party policy—notably its willingness to let other leaders serves as spokespersons for Party-organized coalitions—it reinforced the Party's image as a "respectable American organization" able to wheel and deal effectively in the world of practical politics.[11]

But the introduction of the People's Front in Harlem took place against a background of controversy. In mid-August, 1935, during the height of the Seventh World Congress, Herman Mackawain, the once-prominent leader in the Harlem section, resigned in protest from the Party, issuing a long statement of explanation to the black press. Mackawain complained of the suppression of internal dissent by the Harlem Party leadership, both during the Harlem jobs movement (1933–34) and in current protests in behalf of Ethiopian independence. Attacking the Soviet Union's refusal to halt trade with Italy or publicly condemn its aggression, he accused

Russia of abandoning revolutionary activities in Africa and Asia to appease its European allies and spoke of a "campaign of harassment" against Communists who brought the issue up.[12]

A *New York Times* story in early September, reporting Soviet sales of coal tar, wheat, and oil to Italy at below market price, added fuel to Mackawain's charges. Although the Soviets finally spoke out against Italian aggression at a meeting of the League of Nations, Harlem newspapers seized upon their trade policies as yet another sign that "the Soviet Union cannot be counted to stand steadfast as far as Negroes are concerned." The October, 1935, *Crisis,* speaking for the NAACP, contained an editorial complaining of the "shameless" opportunism of the Soviet Union and the "holier-than-thou" attitude of Communists, accompanying it with a year-and-a-half-old "Open Letter," from George Padmore to Earl Browder explaining his disillusionment with Comintern policies.[13]

Such charges—repeated and embellished by nationalist street speakers—appeared to have an impact on the Party's rank and file. Although Party leaders denied the *Times* story and pointed to demonstrations by Communists worldwide protesting Italian aggression, they did not quell the doubts of all their supporters, especially those who came from nationalist backgrounds. Pressed to explain to friends and family members why "Russia sold Ethiopia out," many found Party membership too great a burden and quietly left the organization. Although the black membership in Harlem did not go down, it ceased its rapid growth, as losses sustained on Ethiopia almost equalled gains made during other campaigns.[14]

Nevertheless, the turmoil about Soviet diplomacy did not hinder cooperation between Communists and most Harlem organizations. Communists took an extraordinarily conciliatory approach to non-Party critics, gently chiding them for "slander mongering" when unity was the order of the day. "Would it not be better," Earl Browder asked NAACP leaders in a *Crisis* article, "if instead of attacking us, you would combine forces with us in fighting for Negro rights, for Angelo Herndon, for the Scottsboro boys, and for the defense of Ethiopia. We would welcome cooperation with you for these things, in place of having to answer your attacks, which is indeed an unpleasant duty."[15]

NAACP leaders, in turn, showed little inclination to quarantine the left on the Ethiopian question. Walter White and W. E. B. Du Bois were among the featured speakers at a September "Hands Off Ethiopia" rally at Madison Square Garden sponsored by the American League Against War and Fascism, and following Mussolini's full-scale invasion of Ethiopia in October, the New York branch of the NAACP endorsed a League-sponsored "People's March for Peace." Whatever doubts association leaders possessed about Communist sincerity, groups like the league represented the only force mobilizing large numbers of people in behalf of

Ethiopia's independence (9,000 at the Garden rally, 15,000 at the March). Association leaders did not want to isolate themselves from that constituency, especially since no restraints on "free speech" governed their participation in League protests.[16]

In addition, many black leaders stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Communists on questions of protest strategy. At the Madison Square Garden rally, Benjamin McLaurin of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Capt. A. L. King of the UNIA, and Rev. William Lloyd Imes all made speeches describing the fight for Ethiopian independence as a worldwide struggle of the oppressed of all races. "This is a fight of the masses against the classes," King declared. "We black people will join you liberal whites all over the world not only to protect the rights of Negroes, but in the interest of all mankind." Rev. Imes called on the audience to "stop sneering at radicals for they serve as a gadfly to goad us from our complacency," and Benjamin McLaurin "brought down the house" with an impassioned plea for working-class unity. "When the next war is fought," McLaurin declared, "it must be a workers war—a war of the workers, Negro and white, against their oppressors."[17]

Communists accompanied such demonstrations with a campaign to provide material aid for the Ethiopian government. In cooperation with several black physicians, they set up a "Medical Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia" in August, 1935, that worked to collect funds and medical equipment for the Ethiopian army. Harlem's medical community rallied enthusiastically to the committee's work. Setting up booths on Harlem street corners and holding meetings in churches and lodges, it collected two tons of medical equipment and nearly a thousand dollars in cash.[18]

In December, 1935, Communists followed up this campaign by organizing a federation of some of the largest Ethiopian aid organizations in Harlem—the Medical Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia and the Friends of Ethiopia. Called "United Aid for Ethiopia," the group won endorsement of the Ethiopian government as its "official representative" in Harlem and sought to coordinate fund raising in that community to insure that it reached its proper destination (a few enterprising street speakers had discovered that "fund raising for Ethiopia" was a quick way to fill their pockets). Although Communists brought the groups together, made the contacts with the Ethiopian government, and did much of the fund raising and paperwork, they encouraged non-Communists to serve as United Aid's major spokesmen, confident that an "antifascist" perspective would be projected nevertheless. The Party's representative, Cyril Philip (a former youth leader of Salem M. E. Church) served as secretary of the group, while its meetings featured speeches by Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.,

Dr. Willis Huggins, Capt. A. L. King, Dr. P. M. H. Savory, and Rev. William Lloyd Imes.[19]

The antifascist orientation of these groups attracted bitter opposition from some Harlem nationalists. In October, 1935, Ira Kemp and Arthur Reid, now militantly anti-Communist, began holding street meetings and picket lines in front of Italian-owned stores in Harlem. Rejecting cooperation with white workers, who they claimed "couldn't be trusted," they appealed to Harlemites to act politically on a strictly racial basis and to drive outsiders from positions of power in Harlem's economy. Though their message of black solidarity struck a responsive chord "on the street" —some of their rallies attracted thousands and ended in near riots—they proved unable to attract support from the black intelligentsia, black professionals, or the black clergy. With few exceptions, Harlem's established leaders supported Ethiopian defense groups which solicited white support, allowing Communists to remain influential in this important protest movement.[20]

A very similar coalition emerged during a boycott of the *Amsterdam News* provoked by the dismissal of seventeen editorial employees. When the dismissed workers, who had joined the American Newspaper Guild, began picketing the paper's offices and demanding their reinstatement, their activities became a rallying point for Harlemites who viewed labor organizations as essential to black progress. Frank Crosswaith and Elmer Carter, working closely with Guild officials, organized a Harlem Citizens Committee in support of the boycott that included representatives of the Urban League and the NAACP (Walter White and New York branch president James Egert Allen both participated), several large churches, and the Socialist and Communist Parties. Joining black and white guildsmen on the picket line, along with representatives of other unions, Harlem activists welcomed the boycott as the harbinger of a new labor militancy that would cut across racial lines.[21] "I believe fundamentally in the cause of the workers when they come into conflict with the employers," Rev. Shelton Hale Bishop told a *New York Age* reporter who interviewed him on the picket line. "Unionism is the only hope of all," Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., added, "especially Negroes."[22]

The *Amsterdam News* publisher, Mrs. Sadie Warren Davis, tried to rally Harlemites against the boycott on nationalist grounds. She denounced the Newspaper Guild as a "white man's union" and attributed the unrest on her staff to the influence of Communist employees intent on "destroying all capitalist enterprise." Letters to the editor buttressed her position, denouncing the boycott as "an attempt to make a Negro business submit to the dictates of white influence," and decrying the importation of "white radicals to harangue the Harlem public."[23]

But though she received aid with her campaign from Ira Kemp and Arthur Reid, she proved unable to match the Citizens Committee in breadth of support. As the dispute dragged on, more and more ministers and civic leaders took to the picket line and urged their followers to boycott the paper. By mid-December, the protests had so reduced *Amsterdam News* revenues that Mrs. Davis filed a petition for bankruptcy and put the paper up for sale. It was quickly purchased by two wealthy Harlem physicians with prolabor sympathies, Dr. P. M. H. Savory and Dr. C. B. Powell, who opened negotiations with the Guild and returned all discharged employees to their previous posts. In early January, they signed a two-year contract with the Guild establishing a union shop and providing editorial workers with a 10 percent wage increase, a grievance committee, severance notices, vacation time, and a forty-hour week. It was the first such agreement reached between the Guild and a black-owned newspaper.[24]

The new publishers, though more conservative than they first appeared, expressed strong editorial support for alliances between black organizations and the left. "It is the task of every intelligent Negro in America," one of their first editorials stated, "to begin to combat the rising forces of fascism in this country. . . . Support the . . . Scottsboro defense. Fight for the freedom of Angelo Herndon and the Mississippi sharecroppers. Demand federal anti-lynching legislation. Join hands with the many organizations now combatting the rise of fascism in America and elsewhere."[25] The publishers reaffirmed this activist stance by hiring Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., as a weekly columnist. Powell quickly established himself as a forceful advocate of political and economic cooperation between black and white workers, and of broad protest coalitions to force improvement in Harlem conditions.[26]

The alliances which the Party forged in the Ethiopian protests and the *Amsterdam News* boycott carried over, at least in part, into the campaign to create a National Negro Congress. The story of this movement's origins, or at least that portion of it that we can reliably reconstruct, dramatizes the growing convergence of outlook between Communists and activist black intellectuals that took shape in the protests of the mid-Depression years (1933–35) but reached full fruition in the Popular Front. Building on a consensus on three important issues—support for organized labor, resistance to the rise of fascism, and the use of mass-protest tactics to challenge racial discrimination—Communists were able to help create a black organization of national significance whose constituency and leadership extended considerably beyond the Party's ranks.

The congress movement was "officially" launched at a May, 1935, conference at Howard University in Washington under the auspices of the

Joint Committee on National Recovery, an "ad hoc lobby" to protect black interests in the federal government, that was partially funded by the NAACP.[27] The 150 participants, drawn together by Joint Committee leader John P. Davis, represented a cross-section of black intellectuals critical of New Deal racial policies, who proved receptive to Davis's suggestions, echoed by other conference speakers, that blacks form a national coalition of church, labor, and civil rights organizations to coordinate protest action in the face of deteriorating economic conditions for blacks. At the conclusion of the conference, Davis and Howard political science professor Ralph J. Bunche invited a "select group of negro leaders" to Bunche's apartment to put the idea into operation.[28]

Neither the Howard Conference nor the congress itself was openly promoted as a Communist initiative, but the Party played a significant, and possibly determinative role in setting the stage for the congress's creation. According to Abner Berry, the idea for a congress arose within the Harlem Section of the Party, in late 1934, in response to the Party's success in creating alliances with a wide variety of black organizations. Impressed by the growing militancy of black religious, fraternal, and civil rights organizations, Harlem Party leaders felt that the Party could take the lead in launching a nationwide coalition of black organizations concerned with eliminating racial discrimination, fighting lynching and disfranchisement, and encouraging black participation in unions. After bringing the idea to the Party Politburo for approval, black Party leaders tried to promote the congress within their own publications and meetings.[29] In January, 1935, James Ford spoke in favor of a congress in a Harlem debate with Frank Crosswaith and black Chicago Congressman Oscar DePriest, and Communists won endorsement of the congress idea at a Harlem conference of the Scottsboro-Herndon Action Committee in February of the same year.[30] But the limited response to these initiatives persuaded Party leaders to hand responsibility for launching the project to John P. Davis, a Washington-based economist who was not publicly identified with the Communist Party (though he was possibly a secret member) and who had good contact in black government, academic, and civil rights circles. Davis argued forcefully for a Negro congress in an article in the May, 1935, issue of *Crisis,* and used the Conference at Howard as a means of setting the plan in motion.[31]

Black Communists were active in the Howard conference and in subsequent efforts to launch the congress, but they did not stand out politically from other participants. Eschewing references to violent revolution, Communists instead cultivated an image as "radical democrats," exponents of militant protest action to win blacks full equality within American society. With this orientation, they fit easily with the group of leaders Davis had invited to Bunche's apartment to plan the congress and write

its call. The sponsors of the movement represented a fairly diverse group of liberal and radical black intellectuals: Bunche and Alain Locke of Howard University, A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, James Ford from the Communist Party, Lester Granger and Elmer Carter of the Urban League, and Charles Houston, a prominent attorney close to the national leadership of the NAACP.[32] Significantly, the consensus they reached—with little Communist prodding—had an anticapitalist tone. "The keynote of the Howard conference," former Howard University dean Kelly Miller wrote, "... was that the Negro must combine with white labor and overthrow the existing order in order to wrest their common rights from capitalism which exploits them both." But Miller's distress was not widely shared by conference participants, who felt that a militant, national protest organization could fill an important need. "With all due respect," Charles Houston wrote Walter White, "we have not worked out a solution, nor has any of the other organizations best known in the field. The YW has not done so. Nothing but the Socialist and Communists left. . . ."[33]

In Harlem, Communists made the congress an important focal point of their organizing and worked closely with others on the National Sponsoring Committee in popularizing congress objectives. On May 29, 1935, James Ford, Lester Granger, and John P. Davis jointly conducted a panel discussion on Negro labor sponsored by Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity at Abyssinian Baptist Church. While Ford spoke of the plight of sharecroppers and farmers under the New Deal, Davis and Granger told the audience that the key to the "betterment of the race" lay in the organization of black workers in mixed unions in their industries.[34] Similar meetings took place in Harlem throughout the summer and fall, during which Communists consciously limited their role to the elaboration of a few principles of unity and allowed Randolph and Davis to serve as the congress's major spokesmen. When the National Sponsoring Committee set February, 1936, as the date of the congress's founding convention, a large and diverse group of Harlemites joined to organize the New York contingent. Important members of the New York sponsoring committee for the congress, organized at a December 10 meeting at the Harlem YMCA, included Lester Granger of the Urban League, Benjamin McLaurin of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Roi Ottley of the *Amsterdam News,* Roy Wilkins and Charles Houston of the NAACP, Revs. William Lloyd Imes and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Democratic Assemblyman William T. Andrews, Building Service Employees Union organizer Clifford McLoed, Communists James Ford, Benjamin Davis, and Louise Thompson—a cross-section of Harlemites who expressed support for organized labor.[35]

Once a New York Sponsoring Committee was formed, the Communist

Party concentrated its efforts on winning political and financial support for the congress. Every Communist organization in Harlem, from the Young Liberators, to the Unemployed Council to the ILD sent representatives to the Sponsoring Committee, and the Communist-influenced unions helped pay some of the group's expenses. But Communists in the movement tried to keep their contribution as unobtrusive as possible. While people like McLoed, Imes, and Granger served as spokesmen for the New York Committee, Communists arranged meetings, handled correspondence and organized fund raising.[36]

The low-keyed Party presence helped define the congress, at least initially, as considerably more than a Communist front. A small number of churches and fraternal organizations (among them Abyssinian Baptist, St. James Presbyterian, and Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity) agreed to send delegates to the congress, and the movement received endorsements from Harlem leaders of the YMCA, the NAACP, the Urban League, and the UNIA.[37] But the most enthusiastic response to the congress came from black intellectuals and professionals who viewed trade unionism and mass protest as keys to black advancement and were attracted by the vision of a united front against fascism. The New York delegation to the congress convention included relief workers, teachers, doctors, musicians, writers, and artists, many of them representing unions in their fields. Some were Communists, but many more functioned as part of an amorphous Harlem "left wing," which provided critical support for the Party's activities. To people in the latter group, which included clergymen like Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., artists like Augusta Savage, and much of the staff of the *Amsterdam News,* the congress provided an opportunity to join with Communists in fighting "lynching, discrimination, and inequality of social and economic opportunity," without identifying themselves as Communists or subjecting themselves to Party discipline.[38]

Not all Harlem activists supported the congress movement. Most black nationalists refused to participate, and the National Board of the NAACP, acting in December, 1935, voted against endorsing the congress or participating in its founding convention on the grounds that "the NAACP does not know the objective of the proposed National Negro Congress and does not see how anything can possibly be gained by such superficial discussion as is indicated by the pamphlet advertising the Congress."[39] This action, taken despite the presence of two association officers on sponsoring committees for the congress (Assistant Secretary Roy Wilkins and Special Counsel Charles Houston) bore the imprimatur of association Secretary Walter White, who feared that the congress might come under Communist influence and be used to undermine the NAACP.[40] Despite some support for the congress within the association—among some

branch leaders and a few national officers—White persistently turned down personal invitations from John P. Davis and A. Philip Randolph to speak at the congress convention or lend association sponsorship to the movement.[41] "Do hope Congress is not permitted to be 'sold down the river' to any political group," White replied to one Randolph letter. "Have heard many disturbing rumors." The NAACP board assigned Roy Wilkins to attend the convention as an observer, but remained highly skeptical of the congress's purposes. "It is my impression," Walter White wrote *Baltimore Afro-American* publisher Carl Murphy, "that the Board action is final unless there should be some very good reason for reopening the matter."[42]

In addition, the small, but influential group of black Socialists who ran the Harlem Labor Center, an organization financed by the city's needle-trades unions to familiarize blacks with the labor movement, withheld their endorsement of the congress. Harlem Labor Center Chairman Frank Crosswaith, though willing to work with Communists on an issue-by-issue basis, regarded them as too politically and intellectually corrupt to entrust with leadership in black organizations, and judged their role in the congress too large for his taste. Officers of the New York Sponsoring Committee tried to win Crosswaith over by promising to "prevent political domination by any Party," and offering him a place in the congress leadership, but the most he would agree to was to send observers to the convention. In addition, Crosswaith advised key trade unions that he worked with, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union and the International Garment Workers Union, not to endorse the congress and to reject the congress's plea for financial support. As a result, two of the city's largest and most influential unions, with sizable black membership, refused to cooperate in a major effort to link black protest with organized labor.[43]

The congress's trade union support in New York came in large part from unions in which Communists played a role—the Teachers Union, the Musicians Union, the Newspaper Guild, the Relief Workers Association, the Fur Workers Union. In addition, the congress nationally won the endorsement of John L. Lewis and John Brophy of the Committee on Industrial Organization, the coalition of AFL unions committed to breaking down craft barriers and "organizing the unorganized." But the most forceful trade union voice for the congress was that of A. Philip Randolph, President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Randolph applied the full force of his personal prestige to persuading blacks in "church, lodge . . . business and labor" organizations to send delegates to the congress convention.[44] "While the hydra-headed monster of fascism is threatening our rather weak democratic institutions in America,"

one of his press releases stated, "it is . . . imperative that the mass voice of Negroes and all their common allies be spoken through a National Negro Congress."[45]

The congress's founding convention had some of the breadth that Randolph hoped for: 817 delegates came to the convention, and its plenary sessions drew 3,000 to 5,000 people. "Negroes in every walk of life were there," Lester Granger reported, "ministers, labor leaders, businessmen, mechanics, farmers, musicians, housewives, missionaries, social workers. . . . There were representatives of New Deal departments and agencies; old line Republican wheel horses and ambitious young Democrats exchanged arguments; Communists held heated altercations with proponents of the Forty Ninth State Movement, and Garveyites signed the registration books immediately after the Baha'ists."[46] Despite the diverse background of those attending, Roy Wilkins was struck by the youth of key participants. "The Congress at Chicago . . . enlisted great sections of young colored and white people under thirty five years of age"; he wrote in a report to the NAACP Board, "the delegates were from the so-called working class and mass organizations, who came at great personal sacrifice and who owed their allegiance only to organizations committed to a militant fight for the Negro."[47]

The tone of the gathering, by intention and default, was set by the left. Because several moderate speakers turned down invitations to appear, among them NAACP Secretary Walter White, *Chicago Defender* editor Robert Abbott, and the mayor of Chicago, advocates of labor organization and militant protest tactics dominated the plenary sessions.[48] The keynote speaker, A. Philip Randolph, whose speech was read in his absence, devoted much of his attention to attacks on the "profit system" and called upon blacks to unify their ranks and join with white sympathizers in a "common attack upon the forces of reaction." Such a movement, Randolph claimed, had to use different tactics than blacks traditionally employed, depending on "parades, picketing, boycotting, mass protest (and) the mass distribution of propaganda as well as legal action."[49] In addition, radicals played a dominant role in most of the workshops and small group discussions where the congress's program was forged. "There are key Communists in every discussion, such as Richard B. Moore, Louise Thompson, Ben Davis," Roy Wilkins wrote to Charles Houston, ". . . not actually leading, but always with their hands in."[50]

The atmosphere of the convention troubled black conservatives. Three bishops who had signed the original call—James A. Bray, R. A. Carter, and W. J. Walls—denounced congress organizers for limiting the clergy's role to "making invocations and pronouncing benedictions" and Kelly Miller complained that "religion, philanthropy, and patriotism, the three pillars upon which the life and hope of the race have built, were either

ruthlessly flouted or tepidly tolerated. . . ."[51] But most of the delegates seemed to welcome the convention's break with traditional tactics and leadership. "Never have I seen any group of people as serious and stern and willing as the delegates to the National Negro Congress," Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., wrote. Lester Granger attributed the enthusiasm of convention delegates to a "deep rooted and nationwide dissatisfaction of Negroes" that was rapidly mounting "into flaming resentment."[52]

Communists played an important role in handling the administrative work of the convention and in shaping its political outlook, but they were careful not to express views that might offend moderate delegates. The presence of white Communist secretaries in Davis's Chicago office aroused more controversy than the content of remarks by Party representatives in speeches and discussions.[53] In all their presentations, Communists emphasized their desire to work "equally and cooperatively" with other black organizations and projected a program of minimum demands that evoked little controversy—"the fight for unionism, for adequate relief, for civil and political rights, for equality in economic opportunity, for the suppression of lynching, and the abolition of Jim Crowism." In addition, Communists filled their speeches with references to American history and proclaimed their respect for the American political tradition. "It was not Marx, Lenin and Stalin" whom Communists cited in their addresses, the *Amsterdam News* reported. "Rather it was Douglass, Lincoln and the heroes of the American Revolution from whom they drew their inspiration."[54]

When the convention ended, Communists declined to push any of their acknowledged leaders for important congress positions. A. Philip Randolph was elected president of the new organization, John P. Davis as secretary, and Ms. Marion Cuthbert, a YWCA official and a member of the NAACP national board, as treasurer. Three leading Harlem Communists, Abner Berry, Ben Davis, and James Ford, were elected to the congress executive committee, but Communists composed a small number of its seventy-five members. The Party's main influence on the congress's direction came through its relationship with Davis, who represented the new organization's only paid, full-time staff member (Randolph and Cuthbert served as volunteers). Set up to function as a federation of organizations, the congress created two major centers of initiative: Davis's Washington office, which handled the congress's national affairs, and the congress's regional councils, which tried to create coalitions of organizations which shared congress objectives and to develop programs of action on local and national issues. At least initially, this structure seemed too democratic—too cumbersome—to be easily dominated by Communists, or any other political group.[55]

The Party's circumspect behavior at the convention helped consolidate

its ties with many black activists and intellectuals who supported the congress movement. "Negroes who elect to be Communists need make no apology for it," A. Philip Randolph wrote in a reply to congress critics, "that is their right. It is guaranteed by the Federal Constitution. Communists are not criminals. The Communist Party is a legitimate political party and has city, state and national tickets like Republicans and Democrats."[56] Historian Carter G. Woodson, long skeptical of Communist philosophy, argued that the black Communists he met at the congress seemed more interested in fighting for equal rights than in overthrowing the government. "I have talked with any number of Negroes who call themselves Communists," Woodson wrote in the *New York Age*, "and I have never heard one express a desire to destroy anyone or anything but oppression. . . . Negroes who are charged with being Communists advocate the stoppage of lynching, the abrogation of the laws of disfranchisement, the abolition of peonage, equality in the employment of labor. . . . If this makes a man a 'Red,' the world's greatest reformers belong to this class, and we shall have to condemn our greatest statesmen, some of whom have attained the presidency of the United States."[57]

Significantly, the national leadership of the NAACP did not echo these sentiments; despite repeated overtures from Davis, it refrained from any formal endorsement of the congress, or of the "united front" strategy. But enough members of the association board and staff—among them Roy Wilkins, Marion Cuthbert, Charles Houston, and William H. Hastie (a Washington-based lawyer on the NAACP board)—supported an association presence in the congress to prevent the NAACP from condemning the congress, or discouraging local branch officers from participating in congress activities. Wilkins and Houston both argued forcefully that the NAACP, to avoid being outflanked by the Negro congress, had to either formally participate in its governing structure, or generate initiatives of its own in fields where the congress displayed special strength—especially youth work and labor education. ". . . the very fact that there was such a wide representation at the Congress," Houston wrote Walter White, "shows that the NAACP must re-analyze its program."[58]

Harlem Communists, who played an important role in the congress convention as speakers and workshop leaders, viewed the event as a decisive sign of their Party's movement into the black political mainstream. The convention marked a "definite break with the narrow 'stew in your own juice' attitude of Communists," Ben Davis wrote. "Communists found themselves at home among Negroes in all walks of life." James Ford boasted of a "significant development toward the Left" among black organizations in the congress movement, as well as a "better understanding on the part of Negro Communists of how to work among the Negro masses."[59] When the New York Regional office of the congress opened in late February, the Party made it a focal point of activity, working closely with regional chairmen Lester Granger and Clifford McLoed to coordinate community support for trade unions conducting strikes in the Harlem area.[60]

Shortly after the congress ended, the Central Committee ordered a reorganization of the Harlem section to help accommodate the rapid growth of its membership and the expansion of its political activities. The Harlem section now became a Harlem division composed of three separate sections coinciding with the major ethnic divisions in the area: a Lower Harlem section covering Italian and Puerto Rican neighborhoods, an Upper Harlem section, covering black neighborhoods, and a Washington Heights section, covering Irish and Jewish neighborhoods. The Central Committee appointed James Ford organizer of the entire division, and Abner Berry organizer of the Upper Harlem section.[61]

This reorganization marked the beginning of a new stage in which electoral politics and trade union work became major foci of Party activity. Between the spring of 1936 and the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Communists concentrated their attention on building broad coalitions for "independent political action" and helping to win black support for the organizing drive of the CIO. Active in numerous movements to improve Harlem conditions—in housing, employment, education, health care, and relief—the Party approached these issues with a new sophistication, using lobbying and electoral bargaining as well as direct action tactics.

To facilitate their implementation of these new policies, Party neighborhood organizations in Harlem gradually assumed a totally different persona than they had in the early '30s, when Communists made contact with Harlemites largely through soapbox rallies or protests the Party organized. Protest activity remained a central feature of the Party's work, but the Party also assumed community-service functions that it had once disdained as reformist. Neighborhood branches in Harlem, replacing the much smaller "street units," stopped meeting in apartments and opened up storefronts and meeting halls to which Harlemites were encouraged to come when they had a grievance, much in the manner of a local Democratic club. Named after martyred black Communists and black revolutionary heroes, the branches sponsored forums and classes, organized tenants groups and PTA's, and in one instance, ran a day care center using WPA teachers. Seeking recruits from all classes, Party organizers took great pains to emphasize that the Party did not confine itself to the angry and disillusioned.[62] A *Daily Worker* article on Harlem's Milton Herndon branch (entitled "Swell People, the Kind You Meet Any Day in Harlem") suggested the kind of ambience the Party tried to project:

The people composing this unit are ordinary people . . . domestic workers, drill workers, truck drivers, carpenters, social workers, unemployed persons.

The branch is composed of 100 people, 95 of whom are Negro. . . . they are fast making their center a place where people in the neighborhood visit. Their headquarters are simple and attractive. Three posters adorn their walls. A large picture of Milton Herndon, with an American flag draped over it, a poster of Abraham Lincoln which says, "Give Aid to Spain," and a *Daily Worker* poster which says, "It Gives Us a New Outlook."[63]

Communists also sought to increase popular acceptance by trying to "incorporate into branch meetings the cultural forms of struggle of the Negro people." Defining the struggle for cultural recognition as a central feature of the Party's program, Communists organized choral societies, dance groups, and sports clubs, sponsored community theatres, and played an active role in PTA's and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. In addition, Communists enthusiastically promoted black arts within their publications and organizations and tried to draw black artists, musicians, writers, and theatrical people into the Party and its affiliated organizations. In their writings and public pronouncements, Communists extolled the contribution of black artists, particularly musicians, as a democratizing force, the source of much within the nation's culture which was distinctively "American."[64]

In addition to an emphasis on cultural questions, Americanization in Harlem brought about a relaxation of Party discipline, especially among intellectuals. In its quest for prestigious members, the Party allowed prominent blacks who joined almost complete freedom from routine Party duties such as distributing leaflets and canvassing for votes, or even from attending meetings regularly. If they were writers, the Party interfered little with what they wrote so long as they defended the Party line in public appearances and did not raise troubling questions about issues like the purge trials and the campaign against Trotskyism. Such a "double standard" had always existed in the Party—for trade-union leaders as well as intellectuals—but it became more explicit in the Popular Front, when the Party sought to win a large portion of the American intelligentsia and the labor movement over to an antifascist and pro-Soviet stance.[65]

Despite its appeal to black intellectuals, the loosening of discipline for "influentials" had some troubling implications for Party work in Black America. The imperative to expand the Party's practical influence, and adapt its activity to local customs, exposed individual Communists to strong pressures to dilute their racial militancy. For Communists in positions of influence—union leaders, politicians, Hollywood writers—whose position rested on the support of people not always distinguished by racial liberalism, the temptation to avoid an aggressive fight for black interests proved particularly strong, yet it was precisely such individuals who experienced the greatest freedom from Party discipline. From the standpoint of the black community, therefore, liberalization was a two-edged sword: While it made the Party more sensitive to black culture and the demands of its black constituency, it removed a key mechanism that had prevented white Communists from falling prey, however subtly, to the racial conservatism of the surrounding society.

Moreover, liberalization raised difficult questions about the nature—and ultimate appeal—of Party membership. If the public face of "Communism" differed little from that of black liberalism, what did the Party have to offer black recruits? True, the Party did have a distinctive set of concerns that it pressed upon its members (as opposed to the general public): its commitment to socialism as a long-term goal, its militant defense of the Soviet Union, its quest for a "scientific" view of human events, and its architectonic vision of strategy that linked events in Spain and China with trade union and electoral tactics in the United States. But those features of Party life appealed largely to people with an intellectual bent, whether formally educated or not.

Communists also distributed a certain amount of patronage through the unions they controlled, through their power in the WPA and the relief system, and through the Party apparatus and Party-controlled businesses. But since the Popular Front placed such a premium on alliances—the Party tried to conduct most of its Harlem organizing within coalitions—fellow travellers as well as members benefited from the Party's good graces.

In the Popular Front Party, the boundaries separating Communists from Party sympathizers became increasingly vague. Party functionaries remained a tightly knit and disciplined group, functioning in a highly charged and insular political milieu, but the rank-and-file membership, who went in and out of the Party at a rapid rate, found that the organization no longer sought to organize their every waking hour into purposeful activity. Party branches, especially among privileged strata—such as those on the WPA Negro Theatre and the staff of the *Amsterdam News*—came to resemble discussion groups more than units of a disciplined revolutionary army, and it became difficult to distinguish card-carrying members from sympathizers on the basis of either their life-styles or their intellectual work.[66]

When analyzing Popular Front Communism, it is important to discard the "totalitarian" model that dominates Party historiography: the image of an obedient and docile membership that jumps up and down in unison when the leadership snaps its fingers. The Party remained "bolshevik" at the core, making most of its key decisions without consulting the mem-

bers; but it lost the power, and even the will, to reshape the total lives of its more prominent adherents, and much of its rank and file. The Party was run by a professional staff, but in other respects, it came to resemble a movement, with a free-floating group of members and sympathizers who publicly endorsed its basic objectives and agreed to follow the Party line—but displayed considerable diversity, and even division in areas where the line did not apply. This fluidity must be kept in mind in assessing the Party in the Popular Front, for its power derived not so much from its actual membership as from the much larger group of people who regarded it as a center of initiative and voluntarily identified with its policies. To the Party's enemies in Harlem, this sometimes made it seem that the Party was everywhere, controlling and manipulating everything from the jobs movement to the WPA, but it was a power that rested largely on consent, and was extremely vulnerable to shifts in the international Communist movement, and the political climate in the United States.

NOTES

1. Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), pp. 128–32; "Concluding Speech of Comrade Dmitrov," *International Press Correspondence,* 15 (Aug. 31, 1935), 1098; *Daily Worker,* Aug. 5, 1935; Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform* (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 184–95.

2. *Ibid.,* p. 187; George Charney, *A Long Journey* (New York: Quadrangle, 1968), p. 60; Al Richmond, *A Long View From the Left* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), p. 254; Joseph Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943–1957* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 29; Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 339; "Comrade Browder (U. S. A.)." *International Press Correspondence,* 15 (Aug. 23, 1935), 1062; Earl Browder, "The United Front—The Key to Our New Tactical Orientation," *Communist,* 14 (Dec., 1935), 1075–1129. The Togliatti quote is taken from Claudin; the Browder quote about American revolutionary traditions from *International Press Correspondence.*

3. Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis,* p. 39; Charney, *A Long Journey,* pp. 94–97; Robert Jay Alperin, "Organization in the Communist Party, U.S.A., 1931–1938," (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1959), pp. 45, 74–75; Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party,* pp. 332–35; Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 135–36; F. Brown, "New Forms of Party Organization Help Us Win the Masses," *Party Organizer,* 10 (July-Aug., 1936), 11.

4. Earl Browder, *The People's Front* (New York: International Publishers, 193, pp. 105, 145–49, 167–72, 266–69.

5. *Ibid.,* p. 147; "Outline for New Members Class," *Party Organizer,* 10 (Dec., 1936), 24–30.

6. Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis,* preface, pp. 28–47; Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party,* pp. 336–39; Charney, *A Long Journey,* pp. 30–31; Arthur Leibman, *Jews and the Left* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), pp. 30–31; Maurice Isserman, "The 1956 Generation: An Alternative Approach to the History of American Communism," *Radical America,* 14 (Mar.–Apr., 1980), 47–48.

7. Claude McKay, *Harlem, Negro Metropolis* (1940; rpt. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968), p. 239; Stanley High, "Black Omens," *Saturday Evening Post* (June 4, 1938), 38.

8. *New York Amsterdam News,* May 8, 1937; Lester B. Granger, "Along the Party Line," *Opportunity,* 17 (Mar., 1939), 90–91; "As Youth Sees It," *Interracial Review,* 10 (Aug., 1937), 126.

9. Browder, "The United Front," 1119–20; Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party,* p. 113; James W. Ford, *The Negro and the Democratic Front* (New York: International Publishers, 1938), pp. 83–84; James W. Ford, "The Negro People and the Farmer-Labor Party," *Communist,* 14 (Dec., 1935), 1136–37; interview with Abner Berry, Nov. 20, 1973.

10. *New York Amsterdam News,* Sept. 28, 1935.

11. The term "respectable American organization" comes from Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party,* p. 337.

12. *New York Amsterdam News,* Aug. 17, 1935.

13. *New York Times,* Sept. 8, 1935; George W. Baer, *The Coming of the Italian-Ethiopian War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 316–17; *New York Age,* Oct. 5, 1935; "Soviet Russia Aids Italy," *Crisis,* 42 (Oct., 1935), 305.

14. *Daily Worker,* Sept. 6, 1935, Sept. 7, 1935, Sept. 9, 1935; Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party,* pp. 139–40; interview with Abner Berry, Dec. 2, 1973; Max Steinberg, "Problems of Party Growth in the New York District," *Communist,* 15 (July, 1936), 647. Mackawain was the only Harlem Communist in a leadership position to leave as a result of Soviet Ethiopian policy. However, Party leaders felt that the Ethiopian controversy did slow the growth of the Party's black membership.

15. *Daily Worker,* Oct. 6, 1935); "Earl Browder Replies," *Crisis,* 42 (Dec., 1935), 372.

16. *New York Age,* Oct. 5, 1935; *Negro Liberator,* Oct. 1, 1935; *New York Amsterdam News,* Nov. 2, 1935; *Daily Worker,* Oct. 24, 1935; *New York Times,* Sept. 26, 1935.

17. *New York Age,* Oct. 5, 1935.

18. *Ibid.,* Aug. 10 , 1935; Ford, "The Negro People and the Farmer-Labor Party," 1137; *Daily Worker,* Sept. 25, 1935; *New York Amsterdam News,* Sept. 28, 1935; leaflet, "Ethiopia Calls to Us. 'We Need Your Help,'" UNIA Papers, Reel 5, Box 12; leaflet, "Answer the Fascist Murderers, Send a Hospital to Ethiopia," *ibid.*

19. *Daily Worker,* Dec. 26, 1935; *New York Amsterdam News,* Feb. 1, 1936;