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# From the Ashes of the Old: The Old Left and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1957–1965

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## ABSTRACT

How did the “Old Left”—the socialist milieu of the 1930s and 1940s—shape the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s? Focusing on the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), this article examines several mechanisms of Old Left influence: personnel overlap, network ties, and organizational alliances. New findings on the Old Left backgrounds of Rev. Joseph Lowery, C. T. Vivian, and many of Martin Luther King Jr.’s teachers and friends are presented. The support that SCLC received from “red” labor unions is also highlighted. The picture that emerges is not the elaborate Communist conspiracy imagined by J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI but rather a transfer of skills, money, and ideas that strengthened SCLC and influenced its strategic agenda. However, the repression and stigmatization of the Old Left during the Cold War led many SCLC activists to hide or downplay their connections to the socialist movement, which has distorted both popular and scholarly understanding of the civil rights movement.

*The [thing] nobody wants to say . . . or doesn’t know to say, is that the people around Dr. King, and Dr. King himself—we were all left-wingers.*

—Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker

**T**he civil rights movement is universally recognized as one of the great milestones in the history of the United States, with the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. marked by a federal holiday on which politicians of all

I received helpful feedback on drafts from Amy Armenia, Richard Aviles, Geoff Bakken, Paul Heideman, Will Jones, Stacie Kent, Paul LeBlanc, Rahul Mahajan, Amy McClure, Matt Moehr, Jack O’Dell (ipresente!), Pam Oliver, Ed Royce, Bill Sewell Jr., Mike Sweiven, Matt Vidal, Erik Olin Wright (ipresente!), and the anonymous reviewers for this journal.

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persuasions claim to uphold the ideals of the movement's most famous leader. The situation is rather different when it comes to the Old Left: in the minds of many Americans, "communism" and "socialism" are evils roughly on par with cannibalism and Satanism. In this context the claim that the Old Left made vital contributions to the civil rights movement—and hence to American democracy—is potentially inflammatory.

Today's conservatives are trying to revive the paranoia that prevailed during the 1950s and early 1960s, when supporters of Jim Crow insisted that Black protesters were being manipulated by communists as part of an elaborate conspiracy to destroy America. These accusations were absurd, but in the repressive political climate of the Cold War, civil rights activists with ties to the socialist movement were often inclined to hide or downplay them. This culture of secrecy has obscured the Old Left's contributions to the civil rights movement, distorting both popular and scholarly understanding.

The Old Left plays no role whatsoever in Doug McAdam's canonical sociological analysis of the origins of the civil rights movement. McAdam saw the emerging civil rights movement as sustained by human and material resources derived from Black churches, Black colleges, and the NAACP.<sup>1</sup> Aldon Morris advanced our understanding of the civil rights movement by highlighting the contributions of "movement halfway houses" such as the Highlander Folk School, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). Morris also pointed out that Highlander and SCEF had roots in the Old Left.<sup>2</sup> But the movement halfway houses—which lacked a mass base in Black communities and rarely organized protests under their own auspices—were not the only significant conduits between the Old Left and the civil rights movement. As we shall see, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), one of the movement's most prominent direct-action organizations, depended heavily on the Old Left as a source of its leadership cadre and funding. While the analyses of McAdam and Morris remain foundational, this article joins a growing body of sociological research that points to a more diverse range of institutions and protest traditions that helped propel the civil rights movement.<sup>3</sup>

1. Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

2. Aldon Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press 1984). Morris understated the Old Left pedigrees of the movement halfway houses. Fellowship of Reconciliation leader A. J. Muste was a veteran of the labor and socialist movements. Highlander was founded by members of the Socialist Party. Highlander musician Pete Seeger was a former Communist and fixture of the Old Left folk music scene. SCEF staffers Carl and Anne Braden had been active in the Progressive Party and the Civil Rights Congress.

3. Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz, *What a Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle against White Supremacy in the Postwar*

Historians of the African American experience recognize that socialists and communists made important contributions to the struggle for racial equality during the Great Depression and World War II.<sup>4</sup> However, historians also know that the Old Left was decimated by the Red Scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s,<sup>5</sup> which may explain why communist and socialist influence on the civil rights movement of the mid-1950s and 1960s has not received more attention in the historiography. Scattered evidence of such influence has nevertheless begun to accumulate in the secondary literature, appearing in studies of Martin Luther King Jr.'s political development,<sup>6</sup> in biographies of other antiracist activists whose careers spanned mid-century,<sup>7</sup> and in studies of specific mobilizations and local communities.<sup>8</sup> This article incorporates findings from extant scholarship and from my own primary source research to present a detailed case study of Old Left influence on SCLC during the "classical phase" of the civil rights movement, from SCLC's founding in 1957 through the mid-1960s. I document the activist commitments and socialist leanings of many of King's teachers, mentors, friends, and acquaintances whose political views have received little attention in the literature. I also flesh out the biographies of Rev. C. T. Vivian, Rev. Joseph Lowery, and other SCLC leaders whose Old Left backgrounds have been overlooked or underestimated. The general picture that emerges is not the nefarious Communist conspiracy imagined by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI but rather

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*South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Sean Chabot, *Transnational Roots of the Civil Rights Movement: African American Explorations of the Gandhian Repertoire* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

4. Glenda E. Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights* (New York: Norton, 2008); Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1233–63; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

5. Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (New York: Little, Brown, 1998); Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (2007): 265–88.

6. Landmarks in the vast literature on King include David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Morrow, 1986); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); Thomas Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); and the multivolume *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* under the general editorship of Clayborne Carson.

7. Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Nikhil Pal Singh, "Learn Your Horn': Jack O'Dell and the Long Civil Rights Movement," in *Climbin' Jacob's Ladder: The Black Freedom Movement Writings of Jack O'Dell*, ed. Nikhil Pal Singh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 1–68.

8. William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (New York: Norton, 2013); Paul LeBlanc and Michael D. Yates, *A Freedom Budget for All Americans: Recapturing the Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in the Struggle for Economic Justice Today* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013); Anthony Newkirk, "The Long Reach of History: The Lorches and Little Rock, 1955–1959," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2017): 248–67.

a transfer of skills and a flow of financial support from the Old Left that strengthened SCLC's organizing, and a transmission of anti-capitalist ideas that shaped SCLC's strategic agenda. This article also contributes to a broader revisionist trend in the historiography of the New Left, joining studies of the Vietnam antiwar movement,<sup>9</sup> second wave feminism,<sup>10</sup> and gay liberation<sup>11</sup> that have identified significant continuities between each of these movements and their Old Left predecessors.

## RACE, RELIGION, AND REPRESSION

At first blush the prospects for a case study of Old Left influence on SCLC might appear dim.<sup>12</sup> After all, SCLC was a civil rights organization led by Black people; the Old Left was a class-based movement led by white people. SCLC was religious; the Old Left was secular. SCLC was dynamic; the Old Left, hobbled by repression during the McCarthy era, was weak and marginalized. While these objections appear plausible on their face, they rest on simplistic assumptions about both the Old Left and SCLC.

American socialists' concern with class disparity did not imply indifference to matters of race. The Communist Party USA, in particular, devoted enormous energy to protesting racism and to recruiting African Americans.<sup>13</sup> Many Black cultural icons—including Paul Robeson, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and Lorraine Hansberry—joined the Communists or worked closely with them.<sup>14</sup> Between 1930 and 1948, the percentage of African Americans on the CPUSA's highest leadership body rose from 7.4 percent to 15.4 percent.<sup>15</sup>

9. Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Van Gosse, *Where the Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America and the Making of a New Left* (New York: Verso, 1993); Andrew Hunt, "How New Was the New Left?," in *The New Left Revisited*, ed. John McMillan and Paul Buhle (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 139–55.

10. Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of "The Feminine Mystique": The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Dorothy S. Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

11. John D'Emilio, "Dreams Deferred: The Birth and Betrayal of America's First Gay Liberation Movement," in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 17–56.

12. In common parlance the term *Old Left* is somewhat ambiguous. In its narrowest sense, the expression refers to socialists of various stripes, including members of the Communist Party USA and the Socialist Party. Sometimes the term is used more broadly to encompass labor unions and other organizations concerned primarily with mitigating class disadvantage. In this essay I use the term to refer to the socialist *milieu*, which included a wide range of organizations in which socialists played central roles.

13. Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*; Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (New York: Grove, 1983).

14. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997); Imani Perry, *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (Boston: Beacon, 2018).

15. Harvey Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the Communist Party Elite* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 1978), 62.

During the Great Depression and World War II, tens of thousands of African Americans protested against hunger and homelessness, and hundreds of thousands joined the labor movement. Left-led organizations of the unemployed occupied government buildings to demand relief and physically resisted the eviction of indigent renters from their homes.<sup>16</sup> In the South, Communists and Socialists launched sharecroppers' unions to contest landlord power and Jim Crow restrictions.<sup>17</sup> Industrial unions led by Communists stood out in their efforts to combat workplace discrimination and engaged in a variety of community struggles for racial justice.<sup>18</sup>

Old Left activists helped build a formidable array of antiracist organizations during the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s. Among the most dynamic were the International Labor Defense,<sup>19</sup> the Workers Defense League,<sup>20</sup> the National Negro Congress,<sup>21</sup> the Southern Negro Youth Congress,<sup>22</sup> the Southern Conference for Human Welfare,<sup>23</sup> the March on Washington Movement,<sup>24</sup> the Civil Rights Congress,<sup>25</sup> the Progressive Party,<sup>26</sup> and the National Negro Labor Council.<sup>27</sup> Employing a range of tactics, from

16. Anders Skotnes, *A New Deal for All: Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); James J. Lorence, *The Unemployed People's Movement: Leftists, Liberals, and Labor in Georgia, 1929–1941* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

17. Greta de Jong, *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900–1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*; Donald Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

18. Toni Gilpin, *The Long Deep Grudge: A Story of Big Capital, Radical Labor, and Class War in the American Heartland* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020); Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin, *Left Out: Reds and America's Industrial Unions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* 75, no. 3 (1988): 786–811.

19. Charles H. Martin, "The International Labor Defense and Black America," *Labor History* 26, no. 2 (1985): 165–94.

20. Richard B. Sherman, *The Case of Odell Waller and Virginia Justice, 1940–1942* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

21. Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

22. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*.

23. Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

24. Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

25. Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee: A Tragedy of Race, Sex, and Secrets in the Jim Crow South* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010); Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946–1956* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1988).

26. Sullivan, *Days of Hope*; Curtis D. MacDougall, *Gideon's Army* (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1965).

27. Clarence Lang, "Freedom Train Derailed: The National Negro Labor Council and the Nadir of Black Radicalism," in *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement: "Another Side of the Story,"* ed. Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 161–88.

lobbying and petitions to marches and sit-ins, these groups challenged segregated public accommodations, racist hiring policies, suffrage restrictions, police brutality, and wrongful convictions.

Left-led unions, unemployed councils, and civil rights organizations often utilized religious imagery, collaborated with progressive churches, and welcomed the faithful into their ranks during the 1930s and 1940s. Even the Communist Party itself forged alliances with progressive preachers and recruited religious believers. Harlem's most influential Baptist minister, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., proclaimed in 1945 that "there is no group in America, including the Christian church, that practices racial brotherhood one-tenth as much as the Communist Party."<sup>28</sup>

If the Old Left was not strictly secular, nor was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference strictly religious—its moniker notwithstanding. While SCLC's most prominent figures were indeed members of the clergy, a number of SCLC staffers were atheists, several key advisers were Jewish, and many of the organizations with which SCLC collaborated had no religious affiliation.

The repression meted out during the Red Scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s devastated the Old Left. Hundreds of suspected Communists were jailed or deported, thousands were subjected to mob attacks and vigilante violence, and an untold number were blacklisted from their trades and professions. Anti-racist organizations in which Communists were active became targets of state repression, forcing many to disband. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which nullified the bargaining rights of labor unions whose leaders refused to sign affidavits forswearing allegiance to Communism, crippled many of the most racially egalitarian unions.<sup>29</sup> Yet a number of Old Left organizations managed to survive the McCarthy era and continued to press vigorously for racial justice. As important, many individual Old Left activists remained committed to building movements for racial equality, despite the decimation of the organizational milieu in which they had cut their political teeth.<sup>30</sup> Others retreated from activism for a time, only to be galvanized once again by the growth of the civil rights movement.

To be sure, anti-Communism remained a potent weapon in the arsenal of white supremacists during the mid-1950s and 1960s, even after the downfall of Sen. Joseph McCarthy.<sup>31</sup> SCLC took several measures to shield itself from accusations of

28. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 107–8; Korstad and Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost," 791–92; Adam Clayton Powell Jr., *Marching Blacks* (New York: Dial, 1973), 67.

29. Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, *Left Out*.

30. Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

31. Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948–1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

Communist influence. The word *Christian* was added to the group's name primarily for this purpose, and Communists were barred from participation.<sup>32</sup> But *former* Communists were not officially excluded, and the Old Left was considerably broader than the membership of the Communist Party. Moreover, SCLC leaders rarely scrutinized the backgrounds and wider political convictions of individual activists unless pressured to do so by forces external to the organization. In short, while anti-Communism was indeed a barrier to Old Left interaction with SCLC, it was not an insuperable one.

### SOURCES AND METHODS

In what follows, I focus on three mechanisms of interaction between the Old Left and SCLC. *Personnel overlap* refers to SCLC activists with firsthand experience in the Old Left. *Network ties* refer to SCLC activists whose personal acquaintances (friends, parents, teachers, etc.) had such experience. *Organizational alliance* refers to support for SCLC from Old Left organizations that survived the McCarthy era with their radical leadership intact.<sup>33</sup>

To assess the extent and significance of personnel overlap, I gathered biographical information on several groups of SCLC activists. My officers sample consists of all nine SCLC officers in 1961, the middle year of the period under study.<sup>34</sup> My staff sample includes all four executive directors and both program coordinators during this same period. My advisers sample consists of two groups: the three core members of In Friendship, who helped launch SCLC in 1957, and the eleven regular participants in the Research Committee, an advisory body formed in 1964. I also identified several key donors and fundraisers with Old Left backgrounds, though gaps and ambiguities in the archival record make it impossible to quantify their financial

32. SCLC's original bylaws did not expressly prohibit Communist participation, but this subsequently became the organization's official policy. *Constitution and By-laws of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (Atlanta, n.d. [1957]), in *Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954–1970, Part 4: Records of the Program Department*, microfilm, 29 reels (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1995), reel 1; "O'Dell Resigns Place in SCLC," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, November 2, 1962.

33. These were not the only mechanisms through which the Old Left affected SCLC or the civil rights movement more generally. One reason segregationists were inclined to view the civil rights movement as a communist conspiracy was because the Old Left had previously led tumultuous anti-racist struggles in the South. The FBI, which became a nemesis of the civil rights movement, was flush with funding and legitimacy in part because of its prior efforts to repress the Old Left. These examples illustrate how government and countermovement responses to one social movement can shape the political and cultural environment in which subsequent movements arise. David S. Meyer and Nancy Whittier, "Social Movement Spillover," *Social Problems* 41, no. 2 (1994): 277–98.

34. Because a large sample size was impractical, I chose a typical slate of officers rather than risk a "bad draw" that was random but not representative. All nine individuals in the sample had been serving as officers since the formation of SCLC, with the exception of Joseph Lowery and C. O. Simpkins, who sat on the executive board from 1957 until their election as officers in 1959 and 1960, respectively. For a complete list of officers in my sample, see n. 81.



contributions with precision. My discussion of network ties focuses on King, whose preeminence within SCLC and the wider civil rights movement warranted a more comprehensive examination of informal relationships than was feasible for other SCLC leaders. My analysis of organizational alliances focuses on SCLC's relationship with "red" unions, particularly the United Packinghouse Workers of America.

My research was plagued by concerns about source reliability. Given the repressive political context in which they were generated, memoirs and oral histories produced by SCLC activists during the Cold War are likely to understate connections to the Old Left. For their part, supporters of segregation often played fast and loose with the facts in their zeal to discredit SCLC, and therefore allegations of Old Left influence that appeared in government reports and the mainstream press may be hyperbolic or apocryphal. To deal with the problem of activist secrecy, I cast a wide evidentiary net. The findings presented in this article are drawn from thirty-one archival collections; sixty-three mainstream, leftist, and African American periodicals; and more than three dozen oral history interviews, memoirs, and biographies. Many of these sources have never been utilized before, including several FBI files that were declassified in response to requests I filed under the Freedom of Information Act. To deal with the problem of segregationist mudslinging, I treated information originating from hostile sources as *prima facie* unreliable. I was especially skeptical of information supplied by FBI informants, many of whom were under duress and/or received financial compensation for their services.<sup>35</sup> However, in several instances such testimony provided useful clues that enabled me to locate more reliable forms of evidence. In addition, surveillance records sometimes contain newspaper clippings and other documents that have not been preserved elsewhere.

#### MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Martin Luther King Jr. served as president of SCLC from the group's founding until his death in 1968. Although he probably never belonged to an Old Left organization, from his college years onward King was personally acquainted with a wide range of progressive activists and intellectuals, whose dissidence and socialist leanings shaped his political development. By the time he assumed the pastorate of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, King was critical of both capitalism and racism. His collaboration with veterans of the Old Left during the Montgomery bus boycott convinced him that the civil rights movement could benefit from the skills and networks of these experienced activists.

35. Robert M. Lichtman and Ronald D. Cohen, *Deadly Farce: Harvey Matusow and the Informer System in the McCarthy Era* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

King was born and raised in Atlanta, where his father was a prominent Baptist minister and NAACP leader. King's mother was involved in the NAACP as well, and she instilled in her son a strong sense of self-worth despite his early experiences of segregation and prejudice. Although King grew up in a middle-class household, he was disturbed by the ubiquitous breadlines he witnessed throughout the Great Depression, which contributed to his "anticapitalistic feelings" as a young adult.<sup>36</sup>

King attended Morehouse College, where he majored in sociology. Previous scholarship has established that his favorite professors were advocates of bold social reform. But researchers have overlooked the anti-capitalist views of several of King's undergraduate mentors and underestimated the extent of their involvement with Old Left organizations at the time. Morehouse president Benjamin Mays was an exponent of the Social Gospel who held leadership positions in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), and the National Religion and Labor Foundation (NRLF). Mays also endorsed Paul Robeson's American Crusade to End Lynching, the United Negro and Allied Veterans of America, and the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor. In the spring of 1948, he signed a call for peace talks between the United States and USSR circulated by the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship. Mays also criticized the House Un-American Activities Committee and spoke out against repressive legislation aimed at Communists.<sup>37</sup> Walter Chivers, an African American sociologist and *Atlanta Daily World* columnist with whom King took ten classes at Morehouse, was active

36. Martin Luther King Jr., "An Autobiography of Religious Development" (ca. 1950), in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 1, *Called to Serve, January 1929–June 1951*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, Penny A. Russell, and Louis R. Harlan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 359–79.

37. Benjamin E. Mays, "It Must Not Happen Again . . .," *Southern Patriot*, October 1945, 5; "The Southern Negro Youth Congress Summons You to—the Southern Youth Legislature, Columbia, South Carolina, October 18, 19, 20, 1946," folder 9, Junius Irving Scales Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Louis E. Burnham to Dear Friend, March 5, 1948, Junius Irving Scales Papers; "Southern Religion and Labor Conference at Atlanta, Butler Street Y.M.C.A., 22 Butler Street, N. E., February 4–5, 1947," in *The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944–1968*, microfilm, 225 reels (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1983), reel 190; American Crusade to End Lynching, "A Call to the American People," folder 12, box 27, J. B. Matthews Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC; John Hudson Jones, "200 Delegates Open UNAVA Party Here," *Daily Worker*, May 31, 1947; Earl Conrad and Eugene Gordon, *Equal Justice under Law* (n.p.: Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor, n.d. [ca. 1944]); *How to End the Cold War and Build the Peace* (New York: National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, 1948), 10; "Mays Joins Vet in Plea for Ferdinand Smith," *Alabama Tribune*, March 12, 1947; "We Negro Americans . . .," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 26, 1947; Benjamin E. Mays, "It Is Pathetic," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 25, 1947. Mays was named an "honorary co-chairman" of the Civil Rights Congress at its founding conference in 1946 but did not play an active role in the organization. The following year, HUAC chastised him for his association with the CRC, and he quietly resigned from his titular position. "Prominent Negro Leaders Linked with Reds," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 13, 1947; Benjamin Mays to George Marshall, October 8, 1947, in *Papers of the*

in the SNYC and endorsed the Civil Rights Congress. Chivers also served as president of Local 746P of the United Public Workers of America, a “red” union that attempted to organize the faculty of Atlanta University Center and other Black colleges.<sup>38</sup> Brailsford Brazeal, who taught King’s freshman seminar and oversaw the college’s summer work-study program, was the leading scholarly authority on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and a proponent of global labor solidarity. Brazeal served on the executive board of Highlander Folk School, held a regional leadership position in the NRLF, and endorsed both the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor and the Civil Rights Congress.<sup>39</sup> Samuel Williams, with whom King took a two-semester philosophy sequence during his senior year, was a statewide leader of the People’s Progressive Party of Georgia and a supporter of the NRLF.<sup>40</sup> George D. Kelsey, whose year-long course on the Bible revived King’s interest in becoming a minister, believed that “the economic philosophy which has dominated modern western life in general, and American life in particular, is a theoretical contradiction to Christian faith.” Kelsey opined that “the C.I.O. [labor union federation] is doing more toward the creation of democratic, intergroup living than any branch or perhaps all branches of organized religion in America.”<sup>41</sup> King’s religion professor

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*Civil Rights Congress, Part II: Files of William L. Patterson and the National Office*, microfilm, 42 reels (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), reel 10. In late 1948 Mays endorsed the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born. “Call and Program, Fifteenth Anniversary National Conference, American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born,” in *The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois*, microfilm, 89 reels (N.p.: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980), reel 61. On Mays in the early 1950s, see n. 52.

38. “Proceedings, Sixth All-Southern Negro Youth Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, Nov. 30, Dec. 1, 2, 3, 1944,” 11, folder 5, box 3, Edward E. Strong Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC; “The Southern Negro Youth Congress Summons You to—the Southern Youth Legislature”; “Let Freedom Ring, Civil Rights Congress National Conference, November 21–22–23, 1947, Chicago, Illinois,” in *Papers of the Civil Rights Congress, Part II*, reel 11; Walter R. Chivers to Clarence A. Bacote, January 6, 1947, folder 71, box 5, Clarence A. Bacote Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. Chivers was active in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare during the early 1940s and the Southern Conference Educational Fund during the early 1950s. Walter R. Chivers, “The Time Is Not Right,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 28, 1940; Walter R. Chivers, “Trend of Race Relations in the South during War Times,” *Journal of Negro Education* 13, no. 1 (1944): 104–11; *Discrimination in Higher Education* (New Orleans: Southern Conference Educational Fund, n.d. [ca. 1950]), 67.

39. Brailsford R. Brazeal, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters: Its Origin and Development* (New York: Harper, 1946); “Says Labor Should Work against Bias,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 12, 1945; “Joins Labor School Board,” *Chicago Defender*, February 14, 1948; “Southern Religion and Labor Conference at Atlanta”; Conrad and Gordon, *Equal Justice under Law*; “Civil Rights Unit to Meet in Chicago,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 1, 1947.

40. Williams later served as an officer of SCLC. He is the subject of a separate section below.

41. George Kelsey, “Our Bread and Butter Culture,” *Motive*, February 1949, 33–34, 46, and “Protestantism and Democratic Intergroup Living,” *Phylon* 8, no. 1 (1947): 77–82. See also “Christian Faith and Socialism,” n.d., folder 3, box 23, George D. Kelsey Papers, Drew University Archives, Madison, NJ.

Lucius Tobin was a supporter of the NRLF who maintained that “to speak of ‘improving race relations’ within the framework of capitalistic patterns tends toward romanticism.”<sup>42</sup>

While King probably did not join any of the abovementioned organizations, some of his friends and fellow students did, a fact that has been overlooked in the historiography. The Southern Negro Youth Congress established a chapter at Morehouse in the fall of 1947 that remained active through at least the spring of 1948, and King was friends with chapter president Alexander Romeo Horton, who also served on the SNYC national executive board. In the spring of 1948, King and Horton were finalists in an oratorical contest in which Horton argued that Black people should back Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry Wallace.<sup>43</sup>

During summer breaks from college, King picked tobacco and worked in a mattress factory. “I saw economic injustice firsthand, and realized that the poor white was exploited just as much as the Negro,” he later recalled. In his junior year at Morehouse, King was elected membership committee chairman of the Atlanta NAACP youth council. Writing in the Morehouse student newspaper, he complained that too many of his classmates “think that education should equip them with . . . instruments of exploitation so that they can forever trample over the masses.” In the spring of his senior year, King published a journal article titled “The Economic Basis of Cultural Conflict.”<sup>44</sup>

After graduating from Morehouse, King attended Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, where he engaged with the writings of progressive theologians

42. “Southern Religion and Labor Conference at Atlanta”; Lucius M. Tobin, “Judgment and Challenge in Race Relations,” *Phylon* 9, no. 2 (1948): 183–85.

43. Southern Negro Youth Congress, Morehouse College chapter roster, October 14, 1947, folder “Morehouse College,” box 5, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center; “Registration Campaign Opens Full Blast Here,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 13, 1948; “Minutes of the Executive Board of the Southern Negro Youth Congress,” December 7, 1946, folder 13, box 3, Edward E. Strong Papers; “Southern Negro Youth Congress Executive Board Meeting,” January 3, 1948, folder 14, box 3, Edward E. Strong Papers; “Freshman Wins Award in Webb Contest at M’house,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 18, 1948. On King’s friendship with Horton, see L. D. Reddick, *Crusader without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper, 1959), 181; A. Romeo Horton, *For Country, Africa, and My People* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 2004), 257. Wallace spoke on the Morehouse campus and won a mock election there, but it remains unclear whether King supported his presidential campaign. Many years after King’s death, former SCLC staffer Jack O’Dell told interviewers that he recalled a conversation in which King acknowledged having backed Wallace. King’s FBI file—which is heavily redacted and riddled with errors—alleges that he attended Progressive Party meetings in 1948. Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (New York: Norton, 2007), 19, 516; Jack O’Dell, interview by author, August 23, 2009; Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 24, 234.

44. Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958; Boston: Beacon, 2010), 77–78, and “The Purpose of Education” (1947), in Carson et al., *Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 1:123–24; “Atlanta NAACP Youth Map Plans,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 16, 1947; “M.L. King, Jr. Contributes to Sociology Digest,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 29, 1948.

such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Reinhold Niebuhr. He also read *The Communist Manifesto* and Marx's *Capital*. Though King criticized what he saw as Marxism's ethical relativism, he felt that capitalism had "outlived its usefulness" and was now "like a losing football team in the last quarter trying all types of tactics to survive."<sup>45</sup> King's mentor during this period, Rev. J. Pius Barbour, agreed that capitalism was outmoded and must eventually give way to a "new order based on cooperation."<sup>46</sup> George W. Davis, who taught several of King's theology classes at Crozer, wrote: "The Solomons, the Alexanders, the Caesars, the Napoleons, the Medici, the feudalistic overlords, the rugged individualists of our capitalistic economy, and the ruthless dictators of the twentieth century all personify the curse of neurotic individualism having little or no concern for personal values."<sup>47</sup> King studied Gandhi intensively at Crozer, which challenged his belief that "the only way we could solve our problem of segregation was an armed revolt."<sup>48</sup> He participated in his first civil rights lawsuit after a tavern in New Jersey refused to serve him and several classmates. In his final year at Crozer, King was elected president of the student body and delivered the valedictory address to his graduating class.

As a doctoral student at Boston University during the early 1950s, King delved more deeply into Niebuhr and embarked on a study of Hegel. With fellow Black graduate students, he formed a "Dialectical Society" to discuss philosophical issues and their relevance to the plight of African Americans. One of the group's occasional participants, Douglas E. Moore, was a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation who had previously served on the national executive board of the Young Progressives of America.<sup>49</sup> Coretta Scott had been a Progressive as well, and King was impressed by

45. Martin Luther King Jr., "Will Capitalism Survive?" (ca. 1948–50), in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 6, *Advocate of the Social Gospel, September 1948–March 1963*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Susan Carson, Susan Englander, Troy Jackson, and Gerald L. Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 104–5. King studied Marx in a philosophy course he audited at the University of Pennsylvania. His professor, Elizabeth Flower, had been active in the pacifist American Friends Service Committee. Patrick Parr, *The Seminarian: Martin Luther King Jr. Comes of Age* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2018); E. Farquhar Flower, "El 'American Friends Service Committee' en Mexico," *Boletín Indigenista* 6 (March 1946): 58–71.

46. "Injunctions Never Settle Labor Disputes," *New York Times*, April 1, 1946; Eustace Gay, "Facts and Fancies: Three Scapegoats," *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 18, 1948; "World Faces New Social Order, Says Dr. Barbour," *Norfolk (VA) Journal and Guide* (home edition), May 28, 1955. In early 1951 Reverend Barbour's daughter, Almanina Barbour Carnes, was arrested for disorderly conduct after a diner in Chester refused to serve her. The case became a local cause célèbre, and the charges were quickly dropped. "Baptist Editor's Daughter Jailed after Being Refused Service in Diner," *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 20, 1951.

47. George W. Davis, "God and History," *Crozer Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1943): 28.

48. Martin Luther King Jr., "His Influence Speaks to World Conscience" (1958), in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 4, *Symbol of the Movement, January 1957–December 1958*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Susan Carson, Adrienne Clay, Virginia Shadron, and Kieran Taylor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 354–55.

49. "National Council Meeting, Young Progressives of America, in Pittsburgh, November 20–21, 1948, Credentials Report," folder "Youth," box 38, Progressive Party records, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City. Moore helped launch SCLC and served on its early executive board.

her political sophistication. During their courtship she gave him a copy of Edward Bellamy's classic socialist novel, *Looking Backward*. "I would certainly welcome the day to come when there will be a nationalization of industry," King replied.<sup>50</sup>

Several of the most prominent theologians and philosophers at Boston University were outspoken pacifists whose socialist leanings and activist commitments have received little attention in the literature on King. Walter G. Muelder was a leading figure in the theological current known as "Boston personalism," a champion of labor union rights, and a proponent of democratic socialism.<sup>51</sup> A member of the Socialist Party from the late 1920s through the late 1940s, Muelder was active in a plethora of organizations during the early 1950s, including the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Methodist Federation for Social Action, National Religion and Labor Foundation, and the Workers Defense League. In 1950 Muelder helped convene the Mid-Century Conference for Peace, which sought to ban the hydrogen bomb. The following year, he signed a petition demanding repeal of the Subversive Activities Control Act. In 1953, at the height of the Red Scare, Muelder spoke out against the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.<sup>52</sup>

Personalist philosopher Edgar S. Brightman believed that "the form of society which will have the brightest prospects for survival will be . . . some form of socialistic democracy." From 1932 through 1948, Brightman publicly endorsed all five of Norman Thomas's presidential campaigns on the Socialist Party ticket. In his book *The Future of Christianity* (1937), Brightman argued that "Communism . . . with [its] confused theories . . . with all its errors and crimes, seems to have shown more organized practical concern for the poor, to whom the gospel is preached, than has the

50. Coretta Scott King, *My Life, My Love, My Legacy* (New York: Holt, 2017), 28–29; Martin Luther King Jr., "To Coretta Scott" (1952), in Carson et al., *Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 6:123–26.

51. Walter George Muelder, "What about the Methodist Federation?," *Zion's Herald*, April 7, 1948, "Organization of Power for Spiritual Ends," *Motive*, January 1950, *Religion and Economic Responsibility* (New York: Scribner, 1953), "Critical Observations," *Christianity and Society*, Winter 1954–55, "Right to Work Laws Victimize the Worker," *American Federationist*, February 1955, and "The Attack on the Social Gospel," *Socialist Call*, June 1955. On Boston personalism, see Gary Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

52. Walter George Muelder, "Memories, Contexts, and Interpretations," n.d., digital manuscript, series 12, Walter G. Muelder Papers, Theology Library Archives, Boston University; "Life of the Party," *Socialist Call*, January 23, 1948; and Walter G. Muelder, "Mr. Stanley High's Fringe of Conscience," *Zion's Herald*, February 15, 1950; "Call to Mid-Century Conference for Peace, May 29, 30, 1950, Chicago," in *The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois*, reel 64; "America's Spokesmen Condemn the McCarran Act!," n.d. (1951), folder 25, box 18, John M. Weatherwax Collection, Gerth Archives and Special Collections, California State University Dominguez Hills; "Clerics in Growing Numbers Ask Clemency," *Daily Worker*, January 13, 1953. The Mid-Century Conference for Peace was organized under the auspices of the Committee for Peaceful Alternatives. The conference's "initiating sponsors" included Muelder and Morehouse College president Benjamin Mays. Mays also signed the abovementioned petition against the Subversive Activities Control Act. On the Methodist Federation for Social Action, see also n. 56 below.



Christian Church.” In 1941 he signed a public statement opposing attempts to ban the Communist Party USA. During the mid-1940s, Brightman was active in the Methodist Federation for Social Action and endorsed the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship. In 1950 he supported the Mid-Century Conference for Peace and published a scathing critique of US militarism, affirming his sympathy with the struggles of African Americans, Japanese Americans, conscientious objectors, and Soviet dissidents.<sup>53</sup>

Allan Knight Chalmers was a longtime NAACP leader and former head of the Scottsboro Defense Committee, a coalition of liberal and leftist groups committed to freeing nine Black youths falsely accused of raping a white woman in Alabama in 1931. Chalmers held leadership positions in many other organizations during the 1930s and 1940s, including the Fellowship of Reconciliation, National Religion and Labor Foundation, American Civil Liberties Union, National Council for a Permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee, and the War Resisters League. He backed Thomas’s presidential run in 1932 and signed an open letter calling for “nationalization of the basic industries” to alleviate the Great Depression.<sup>54</sup>

Howard Thurman, author of *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), was a longstanding member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation who served as the group’s national vice chairman during World War II. In the 1930s Thurman joined the League for Industrial Democracy, the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, and the National Negro Congress; he also lent his support to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Delta Cooperative Farm. Before joining the Boston University faculty in 1953, Thurman co-pastored an interracial, interdenominational church in San Francisco, where he assisted the left-led Marine Cooks and Stewards union and refused to comply with loyalty oath legislation.<sup>55</sup>

53. Edgar Sheffield Brightman, “Hegel’s Influence in the Contemporary Social Situation,” *Crozer Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1935): 47–56; Mary Fox to Dear Mr. Brightman, September 24, 1932, box 23, folder 10, Edgar Brightman Collection, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University; “John T. Flynn Lauds Thomas,” *Socialist Call*, October 31, 1936; William J. Raymond to Edgar S. Brightman, May 31, 1940, box 23, folder 10, Edgar Brightman Collection; Annette Temin to Edgar S. Brightman, August 1, 1944, Edgar Brightman Collection; Norman Thomas to Dear Friend, Nov. 24, 1948, box 21, folder 2, Edgar Brightman Collection; Edgar Sheffield Brightman, *The Future of Christianity* (New York: Abingdon, 1937), 130–31; “List of Signers of Statement Defending the Communist Party,” *Daily Worker*, March 5, 1941; *Testimony of Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam. Hearing before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Eighty-Third Congress, First Session, July 21, 1953* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1954), 3607; “Call to Mid-Century Conference for Peace”; Edgar Sheffield Brightman, “A Personalistic Philosophy of History,” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 18, no. 1 (1950): 3–10, 88.

54. Allan Knight Chalmers, *They Shall Be Free* (New York: Doubleday, 1951); “Allan Knight Chalmers to Address Michigan Conference Youth,” *Michigan Christian Advocate*, April 21, 1949; “Dr. Allan K. Chalmers Backs Thomas in Pulpit,” *New York Herald Tribune*, October 24, 1932; “Urge Roosevelt to ‘Left’ Course,” *New York Times*, November 30, 1935. *They Shall Be Free* is highly critical of the Communist Party USA.

55. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949), *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979), 145, and *Footprints*

King's dissertation adviser, Harold DeWolf, was not a pacifist or self-described socialist, but he was a persistent critic of segregation, colonialism, and economic inequality. In his book *A Theology of the Living Church* (1953), DeWolf complained:

In our economic institutions we have crystallized the assumptions that everyone will try to get as large a share of wealth for as small a share of work as possible, that materialistic ends are dominant and that individualistic purposes are ultimate. Most of us would deny that these assumptions are true, as Christians we are committed to opposing them, and many do deny them by much generous action in personal relations. Yet when the structure of the economic order is at stake, every deviation from them is resisted as "radical" and "unrealistic."

In an article titled "Was Jesus a Communist?" DeWolf urged his readers not to dismiss socialist ideas out of hand: "Marx held out the hope of . . . a classless society, to be won through the gaining and right use of power by the proletariat or laboring people. In the Beatitudes as given by Luke . . . and many other passages in the Gospels, Jesus similarly identifies the hope of the future with the cause of the poor." In 1950 DeWolf submitted a public statement to the House Un-American Activities Committee denouncing an early version of the Subversive Activities Control Act. That same year he endorsed the Mid-Century Conference for Peace.<sup>56</sup> Paul Schilling, the second reader on King's dissertation committee, was a longstanding member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation who had been active in the unemployed movement and the Socialist Party during the 1930s. In 1953 he criticized HUAC, loyalty oath legislation, and segregation in the United States and South Africa.<sup>57</sup>

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*of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (New York: Harper, 1959), 115; Peter Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell: A Life of Howard Thurman* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021), 165–66, 434 n. 40.

56. L. Harold DeWolf, *A Theology of the Living Church* (New York: Harper, 1953), 304, and "Was Jesus a Communist?," *Motive*, December 1946, 8; *Hearings on Legislation to Outlaw Certain Un-American and Subversive Activities. Hearings before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Eight-First Congress, Second Session, on H.R. 3903 and H.R. 7595, March 21, 22, 23, and 28, 1950* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1950), 2361–62; "Call to Mid-Century Conference for Peace." DeWolf and Muelder resigned from the board of the Methodist Federation for Social Action in 1950 (and DeWolf quit the group altogether) because its president refused to publish a statement disavowing Communism. Walter G. Muelder, *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Abingdon, 1961), 221.

57. S. Paul Schilling, "Developments in My Thought," in *The Boston Personalist Tradition in Philosophy, Social Ethics, and Theology*, ed. Paul Deats and Carol Robb (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 187–207; "Death Knell for the Antebellum Preacher Sounded at Last," *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 21, 1935; Irene Walley, "Readers Rally to Put Socialist Call over the Top," *Socialist Call*, August 19, 1939; S. Paul Schilling, "The Christian Bases of Rights, Freedoms, and Responsibilities," in *The Church and Social Responsibility*, ed. J. Richard Spann (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 11–24. Peter A. Bertocci, who served on King's dissertation committee, generally avoided taking forthright positions on controversial political issues during



King's dissertation compared Paul Tillich's and Henry Nelson Wieman's conceptions of God. Like many of King's own professors, both Tillich and Wieman were scholar-activists with socialist leanings. Tillich had been a prominent leftist academic in Germany until the rise of Nazism forced him into exile. He continued to affirm his socialist beliefs after moving to the United States, though with the onset of the Cold War he concluded that the immediate prospects for progressive social change were dim. Throughout the early 1950s, Tillich supported the National Committee to Repeal the McCarran Act, which sought to overturn the Subversive Activities Control Act of 1950.<sup>58</sup> Neither Tillich nor Wieman were Communists, but in 1941 Wieman claimed that "Russia leads the world in giving equality to all races, nations, and cultures." In *The Source of Human Good* (1946), he argued that organized labor should exercise democratic control over the management of industry. During the 1940s and early 1950s, he endorsed the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born, National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, National Federation for Constitutional Liberties, Mid-Century Conference for Peace, and other organizations and events deemed "subversive" by the federal government. In 1947 Wieman spoke out against a proposed bill to outlaw the Communist Party USA; the following year he signed an open letter calling for the abolition of the House Un-American Activities Committee. In 1953 Wieman was red-baited in the national press and pressured to resign from his teaching position at the University of Houston.<sup>59</sup>

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the late 1940s and early 1950s, but he praised Gandhi and acknowledged that "capitalism . . . has discouraged economic democracy." Peter A. Bertocci, "Ramsey's *Basic Christian Ethics*: A Critique," *Crozer Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (1952): 24–38, and "The Personal and Social Roots of Democracy," *Personalist* 23, no. 3 (1942): 253–66.

58. Paul Tillich, *The Interpretation of History* (New York: Scribner, 1936), and "Beyond Religious Socialism," *Christian Century*, June 15, 1949, 732–33; "America's Spokesmen Condemn the McCarran Act!"; "Open Letter from Initiators to Sponsors and Supporters of the National Committee to Repeal the McCarran Act," n.d. (1953), folder 27, box 18, John M. Weatherwax Collection. During the early 1950s, Tillich also supported the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, but he resigned from the group after it was labeled a Communist front by the American Committee for Cultural Freedom. "2 of 41 Sponsors Quit Liberties Unit," *New York Times*, January 20, 1953.

59. Henry Nelson Wieman, "Join Russia in the War!," *Christian Century*, August 13, 1941, 1002–4, and *The Source of Human Good* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1946), 110, 122–23, 150, 252–57, 307; "Free Sam Darcy, Educators and Writers Urge Olson," *Daily Worker*, December 19, 1940; "The 600 Noted Americans Who Signed the Open Letter," *Daily Worker*, July 19, 1942; "Injunctions Never Settle Labor Disputes"; "Rob Communists of Their Rights? Then Yours Go Out the Window Too," *Washington Post*, May 20, 1947; *Congressional Record. Proceedings and Debates of the 80th Congress, Second Session. House of Representatives, Tuesday, May 18, 1948* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1948), 6042–43; *How to End the Cold War*, 10; "Call to Mid-Century Conference for Peace"; "66 Notables Denounce Hobbs Bill," *Daily Worker*, July 25, 1950; "73 Notables Sponsor Foreign-Born Group," *Daily Worker*, April 4, 1951; "Notables Ask Drive to Unite Germany," *Daily People's World*, August 13, 1952; J. B. Matthews, "Communism and the Colleges," *American Mercury*, May 1953, 111–44; unsigned (Henry Nelson Wieman) to J. L. Adams, March 7, 1954, box 6, folder 7, Henry Nelson Wieman Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Throughout the Montgomery bus boycott, King leaned on the skills and networks of more experienced activists, several of whom had been involved in the Old Left, at least peripherally. Some—including Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, and Stanley Levison—were northerners.<sup>60</sup> Others, like E. D. Nixon, Rosa Parks, and Virginia and Clifford Durr, lived in Montgomery. Nixon was a devotee of A. Philip Randolph who headed both the Montgomery NAACP chapter and the city's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union local. An activist since the 1920s, Nixon worked with the Highlander Folk School, March on Washington Movement, Southern Negro Youth Congress, and many other organizations over the course of his long career. Parks, who served as secretary of the Montgomery NAACP and adviser to its youth council, also assisted Nixon with his union duties. She was first drawn into political activism during the 1930s, when her husband collaborated with local Communists to raise funds for the Scottsboro Boys. In 1944 Parks and Nixon helped investigate and expose the gang rape of a Black woman by white assailants in Abbeville, Alabama, which led to the formation of the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor, a national umbrella organization whose leadership included members of the SNYC, Southern Conference for Human Welfare, and Communist Party.<sup>61</sup> Shortly before her bus arrest in 1955, Parks attended a two-week retreat at Highlander, on the recommendation of her friend Virginia Durr. One of the few openly anti-racist white people in Montgomery, Durr had been a leading figure in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, the Southern Conference Educational Fund, and the Progressive Party during the 1940s. Her husband, Clifford Durr, a past president of the National Lawyers Guild, provided vital legal assistance to the Montgomery Improvement Association throughout the bus boycott.<sup>62</sup>

60. Rustin, Baker, and Levison are each the subject of a separate section below.

61. On Nixon, see Lewis V. Baldwin and Aprille V. Woodson, *Freedom Is Never Free: A Biographical Portrait of Edgar Daniel Nixon* (Nashville: Office of Minority Affairs, Tennessee General Assembly and United Parcel Service, 1992), 28; Bates, *Pullman Porters*, 155; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 150. On Parks, see Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon, 2015), 14–16; Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).

62. Virginia Foster Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr*, ed. Hollinger F. Barnard (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986); John A. Salmond, *The Conscience of a Lawyer: Clifford J. Durr and American Civil Liberties, 1899–1975* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990). The small network of white anti-racist activists in Montgomery included SCEF national president Aubrey Williams and SCEF supporters Clara Rutledge and Juliette Morgan. Mary Stanton, *Journey toward Justice: Juliette Hampton Morgan and the Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006). Reverend Robert Graetz, who served on the board of the Montgomery Improvement Association, was the only white preacher in the city to openly support the bus boycott. In a 1956 interview, Graetz acknowledged having socialist leanings in college but dismissed this as a youthful dalliance. During the boycott he liaised with the FBI to screen organizations offering financial support to the MIA. Tom Johnson, "The Mechanics of the Boycott," *Montgomery Advertiser*, January 10, 1956; Robert S. Graetz, *A White Preacher's Memoir: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Montgomery, AL: Black Belt, 1998), 118–19.

King's personal relationships with radical activists and his attraction to socialist ideas strengthened his resolve in the face of attempts by segregationists to discredit the civil rights movement. He refused to distance himself from Highlander, despite a vicious publicity campaign that denounced him for attending a "Communist Training School." He signed petitions calling for the abolition of the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, and he supported campaigns to free Carl Braden and other imprisoned leftists.<sup>63</sup> Faced with accusations of communist influence within SCLC, King went to great lengths to retain the services of his colleagues with Old Left backgrounds. When the Kennedy administration pressured him to cut ties with Stanley Levison and Jack O'Dell—the FBI insisted that both men were undercover Communist Party operatives—King lied to the press about O'Dell's status as an employee and secretly maintained communication with Levison through go-betweens.<sup>64</sup>

From the mid-1950s onward, King repeatedly called for an alliance between the civil rights movement and organized labor.<sup>65</sup> In an article published in the *Socialist Call* during the Montgomery bus boycott, he condemned "the inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes." In 1965 he wrote a paean to Norman Thomas titled "The Bravest Man I Ever Met."<sup>66</sup> As urban riots became regular occurrences and the Vietnam War intensified, King became increasingly explicit in his belief that a "democratic socialist economy" and a corresponding "revolution in values" were necessary in order to eliminate the "triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism."<sup>67</sup> As he explained to his SCLC colleagues in 1967:

63. Martin Luther King Jr., "To Anne Braden" (1959), in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 5, *Threshold of a New Decade, January 1959–December 1960*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Tenisha Armstrong, Susan Carson, Adrienne Clay, and Kieran Taylor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 306–7, and "To Benjamin J. Davis" (1960), in Carson et al., *Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 5:442–43; "1,200 Clerics Urge Ike Free Sobell," *Worker*, November 27, 1960; "Abolish the Un-Americans," *National Guardian*, January 16, 1961; "Southern Leaders Hit UnAmericans," *Worker*, May 14, 1961; "Prominent Americans Seek Pardon for Junius Scales," *New America*, August 25, 1961; "Britons in Appeal for Braden and Wilkinson," *National Guardian*, October 2, 1961.

64. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*; Branch, *Parting the Waters*; Jack O'Dell, "The FBI's Southern Strategies," in *It Did Happen Here: Recollections of Political Repression in America*, ed. Bud Schultz and Ruth Schultz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 279–88.

65. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 196–99; Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 142, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967; Boston: Beacon, 2010), 148–51, and "All Labor Has Dignity," ed. Michael K. Honey (Boston: Beacon, 2011).

66. Martin Luther King Jr., "The 'New Negro' of the South: Behind the Montgomery Story," *Socialist Call*, June 1956, 16–19, and "The Bravest Man I Ever Met," *Pageant*, June 1965, 23–29.

67. "Dr. King's Speech, Frogmore—November 14, 1966," in *Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954–1970, Part 1: Records of the President's Office*, microfilm, 21 reels (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1996), reel 20; Martin Luther King Jr., *Why I Oppose the War in Vietnam*, LP record (Motown Record Corp., 1970); Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2000); Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*.

We must ask the question, “Why are there forty million poor people in America?” And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I’m simply saying that more and more, we’ve got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life’s marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, “Who owns the oil?” You begin to ask the question, “Who owns the iron ore?” You begin to ask the question, “Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that’s two-thirds water?”<sup>68</sup>

King’s last major undertaking was an interracial Poor People’s Campaign demanding full employment, a guaranteed annual income, and the construction of 500,000 low-income housing units per year until homelessness was eradicated. He was assassinated in Memphis while supporting a strike for union recognition by the city’s sanitation workers.<sup>69</sup>

#### IN FRIENDSHIP AND THE ORIGINS OF SCLC

Though King had already been meeting informally with activist ministers from across the South for some time, SCLC was formed in early 1957 largely through the persistence and foresight of three northerners. Bayard Rustin, Stanley Levison, and Ella Baker cofounded the organization In Friendship in New York City in early 1956 to raise funds for southern civil rights activists facing economic reprisals. Launched during the early weeks of the Montgomery bus boycott, In Friendship made support for that struggle one of its top priorities. The group solicited donations from local unions, churches, and liberal organizations and raised thousands of dollars at its gala concerts in New York. In Friendship initially used office space donated by the Workers Defense League and counted several prominent labor leaders among its sponsors, including longtime socialist A. Philip Randolph.<sup>70</sup> Rustin, Levison, and Baker were convinced that the burgeoning church-based direct-action movement needed to establish its autonomy from the more cautious, legalistic

68. Martin Luther King Jr., “Where Do We Go from Here?” (1967), in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Hachette, 2001), 165–200.

69. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*.

70. Workers Defense League, National Action Committee minutes, February 24, 1956, in *The Papers of A. Philip Randolph*, microfilm, 35 reels (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1990), reel 19. The Workers Defense League was closely associated with the Socialist Party.

NAACP. At the same time, the trio strongly believed that southern activists could benefit from the financial assistance and organizing savvy of sympathetic northerners. King agreed. Rustin drafted a series of short papers that clarified the group's *raison d'être*, and these documents formed the basis for discussions at SCLC's initial meetings. "It is difficult to overestimate the contribution of Rustin, Levison, and Baker to SCLC's early development," observes historian Adam Fairclough. Indeed all three were master organizers—and veterans of the Old Left.<sup>71</sup>

#### BAYARD RUSTIN

Bayard Rustin's conversations with King during the early weeks of the Montgomery bus boycott helped solidify the young minister's commitment to the philosophy and practice of nonviolence. Rustin ghostwrote the first article that King published about the boycott and quickly became one of King's most trusted advisers. Rustin was also the main behind-the-scenes organizer of the 1963 March on Washington and numerous other national protests.<sup>72</sup>

Rustin was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and raised by his maternal grandparents, who were active in the NAACP. He attended Wilberforce University before moving to Harlem in 1937 to attend City College of New York. Rustin joined the Young Communist League (YCL) during this period and became an organizer for the group in 1939. "I discovered . . . during the Depression that when Tom Mooney was in trouble, it was the Communists who came to his assistance. When it was the Scottsboro boys, it was the Communists. When it came to speaking out against Jim Crow, it was the Communists. Every black who got into trouble, the Communists made a great deal of fuss about. So I got involved in the Young Communist League."<sup>73</sup> During the New York City bus boycott of 1941, Rustin and his comrades engaged in mass picketing to force the hiring of Black bus drivers. It may have been through the YCL that Rustin first met Stanley Levison.

Rustin broke with the Communists when they suddenly abandoned their opposition to US participation in World War II. He joined the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation shortly thereafter. Rustin also became a youth organizer for the March on Washington Movement, a national campaign against discrimination in hiring led by A. Philip Randolph with the backing of his union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car

71. Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 38.

72. Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: The Troubles I've Seen* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Daniel Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000); D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*.

73. Milton Viorst, *Fire in the Streets: America in the 1960s* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 201.

Porters. Rustin refused to fight in World War II, for which he served two years in a federal penitentiary. After his release he participated in the Congress of Racial Equality's 1947 "Journey of Reconciliation," a freedom ride through the upper South, for which he was sentenced to hard labor on a North Carolina chain gang. Rustin also helped Randolph launch the League for Non-Violent Civil Disobedience against Military Segregation in 1948.

Despite his break with the Communists, Rustin continued to move within Marxist circles during the 1950s and eagerly recruited members of Old Left youth groups to work alongside him in the civil rights movement. In the spring of 1956, on the recommendation of Michael Harrington, Rustin hired Young Socialist League activists Tom Kahn and Rachelle Horowitz to work at the In Friendship office. Kahn and Horowitz helped organize a massive Madison Square Garden rally that raised \$20,000. The pair also helped Rustin and Ella Baker plan the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom. Rustin's organizing staff for the 1958 and 1959 Youth Marches for Integrated Schools likewise included a core of socialist youth, among them Kahn, Horowitz, and Norman Hill. In the months leading up to the 1963 March on Washington, Horowitz served as national transportation coordinator and Kahn as Rustin's unofficial chief of staff.<sup>74</sup>

#### ELLA BAKER

Ella Baker was SCLC's first full-time employee, and she served as the organization's acting director for part of 1959 and 1960. In addition to establishing the SCLC office in Atlanta, she helped coordinate the Crusade for Citizenship voter registration drive.

Baker was born in Virginia and grew up in North Carolina, but she came of age politically in New York City during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Her early intellectual mentor was African American journalist George Schuyler, then a sharp critic of both American capitalism and Soviet Communism. Baker helped Schuyler launch the Young Negroes Cooperative League in 1930. "From economic planning must spring our second emancipation," she argued. Baker identified with the struggles of the unemployed, which provided her with object lessons in the power of direct-action tactics. In early 1936 she helped organize the founding conference of the National Negro Congress, an alliance of political, fraternal, and church groups that helped cement Black support for union drives in steel and other industries. That same year Baker began working at the leftist Rand School for Social Science. She relished debating with her coworkers, many of whom were members of radical political parties. Though Baker considered the Communist Party "the most articulate

74. Juan Williams, *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience* (New York: AARP/Sterling, 2004), 114–15; Rachelle Horowitz, "Tom Kahn and the Fight for Democracy: A Political Portrait and Personal Recollection," *Democratiya* 11 (Winter 2007): 204–51.

group for social action," she was especially sympathetic to the Communist Party (Opposition), a small revolutionary group whose Harlem branch attracted a cadre of Black activists. She also supported the American Labor Party, an electoral third party backed by New York's progressive unions.<sup>75</sup>

Baker was hired as an NAACP field organizer in 1940, at the beginning of a period of explosive growth for the association. NAACP membership increased ninefold between 1940 and 1946, and Baker helped establish scores of branches in the South. She also assisted with several union drives among Black workers in the region. Convinced that opportunities for mass action existed across the country, Baker chafed at the elitist, bureaucratic outlook of the NAACP's national leadership. In 1946 she resigned from her post as NAACP director of branches. During the 1950s Baker struggled to reconcile her radical views with her recognition that the NAACP was the only civil rights group that enjoyed mass support among Black people. As president of the New York NAACP, she helped implement a national mandate to purge known Communists from the branch. She joined the Liberal Party, an anti-Communist split from the American Labor Party. Yet Baker also spoke out against McCarthyism and worked closely with alleged Communists on a number of issues. In the early 1950s, she collaborated with Stanley Levison to protest the passage of federal anti-Communist legislation. In 1956, as *In Friendship* was being formed, Baker organized a rally in solidarity with Louisville civil rights activist Carl Braden, an alleged Communist imprisoned on sedition charges.<sup>76</sup>

Baker's tenure in the SCLC office was rocky, in part because the ministers whose activities she was trying to coordinate were dismissive of female leadership. Shortly before leaving SCLC in 1960, she organized the conference at Shaw University that gave birth to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

#### STANLEY LEVISON

Rustin introduced Stanley Levison to King in the summer of 1956, and Levison quickly became one of King's most trusted advisers. He edited or ghostwrote many of King's speeches, articles, and book manuscripts.<sup>77</sup>

Born and raised in New York City, Levison was a Jewish attorney and businessman who served as a highly effective fundraiser for several organizations during the

75. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 87; "Negro Congress Plans Advanced," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 28, 1935; Ella Baker interview by John Britton, June 19, 1968, transcript, 80–81, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center; Ella Baker interview by Sue Thrasher and Casey Hayden, April 19, 1977, transcript, 51, Southern Oral History Program, Southern Historical Collection; "Stone, Ruddock at Giant Rally," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 5, 1938.

76. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*.

77. Garrow, *FBI and Martin Luther King*.



1940s and 1950s, including the American Jewish Congress and the Communist Party. At the height of the Red Scare, he secretly advised Communist leaders on financial matters and helped oversee various small businesses that provided the party with a revenue stream.<sup>78</sup>

Levison's fundraising skills helped place SCLC on a solid financial footing. In 1961 he persuaded the SCLC board to hire former Communist Jack O'Dell to help oversee an experimental direct-mail solicitation effort. The project proved fantastically successful, netting \$80,000 in its first year, which covered roughly half of SCLC's operating expenses. "There is no way to calculate what Stanley Levison and Jack O'Dell have meant to the SCLC in this regard," beamed executive director Wyatt Walker.<sup>79</sup>

Levison and O'Dell's ties to the Communist Party served as the main justification for FBI surveillance of King. While the bureau's bugs and wiretaps failed to reveal a vast communist conspiracy, they did furnish information about King's political associates and sexual activities that J. Edgar Hoover and his staff strategically disseminated with the aim of discrediting SCLC's most visible leader.<sup>80</sup>

### SCLC OFFICERS

SCLC was governed by an executive board that varied in size from roughly two dozen members in the late 1950s to more than three dozen by the mid-1960s. A subset of board members also served as officers of the organization (president, secretary, etc.). To keep the scope of my biographical research within manageable limits, I chose to focus on the organization's officers in 1961 (the middle year of the period under study), of which there were nine total.<sup>81</sup> At least three of those nine<sup>82</sup>—Joseph

78. Levison never publicly acknowledged his ties to the Communist Party, but the evidence—which includes the recollections of relatives and acquaintances in addition to FBI surveillance records—is overwhelming. Branch, *Parting the Waters*; David J. Garrow, "The FBI and Martin Luther King," *Atlantic Monthly*, July–August 2002, 80–88; Nick Kotz, *Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Laws That Changed America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005); Ben Kamin, *Dangerous Friendship: Stanley Levison, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Kennedy Brothers* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014).

79. Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 574–75; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 168. Joseph Filner, a business associate of Levison's who helped raise funds for SCLC, had been a Communist Party leader in Pittsburgh during the 1930s and 1940s. Stan (Levison), Tom (Kahn), and Joe (Filner) to Dear Bayard (Rustin), November 1, 1959, in *The Bayard Rustin Papers*, microfilm, 23 reels (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), reel 20; Richard Lamb, "Communists Get Go-By on Defense Oath," *Pittsburgh Press*, July 12, 1942.

80. Beverly Gage, "I Have a [Redacted]," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, November 16, 2014.

81. The officers of SCLC in mid-1961 were Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (president), Rev. C. K. Steele (first vice president), Rev. Joseph E. Lowery (second vice president), Rev. Samuel W. Williams (third vice president), C. O. Simpkins (fourth vice president), Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth (secretary), Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy (financial secretary-treasurer), Rev. Kelly Miller Smith (chaplain), and Lawrence D. Reddick (historian).

82. I say "at least" for three reasons. First, there is evidence that suggests that Ralph Abernathy may have joined the Southern Negro Youth Congress as an undergraduate at Alabama State Teachers College.



Lowery, Samuel Williams, and Lawrence Reddick—participated in Old Left groups prior to the formation of SCLC.<sup>83</sup>

#### JOSEPH LOWERY

Rev. Joseph E. Lowery helped cofound SCLC and was elected its second vice president in 1959. Born in Huntsville, Alabama, Lowery spent part of his youth in Chicago before returning to Huntsville for high school. He attended Knoxville College in Tennessee, where he worked on the student newspaper and became acquainted with crusading editor Vernon Jarrett. Lowery also joined the campus NAACP chapter, which Jarrett headed.<sup>84</sup> During the mid-1940s, Lowery studied at Daniel Payne College and edited the *Birmingham Informer*. When Alabama legislators attempted to circumvent the Supreme Court's 1944 ban on all-white primary elections, Lowery and other Black journalists formed the Alabama Newspaper Association to coordinate their efforts to prevent the imposition of new suffrage restrictions. Lowery thus became part of a network of Black activists around *Birmingham World* editor and state NAACP leader Emory O. Jackson.<sup>85</sup>

Lowery and Jackson also participated in the Southern Negro Youth Congress, a regional civil rights organization in which Communists played leading roles. Birmingham was the group's stronghold in the years following World War II, and local SNYC activists initiated campaigns to integrate rail travel, prevent evictions from public housing, and register African American voters. In the winter of 1946–47, Lowery headed a SNYC recruitment drive in the predominantly Black suburb of

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During the mid- to late 1940s, an FBI informant furnished what appears to be a master list of SNYC members that includes Abernathy's name, college, and address. Many other names on the list match those found on official SNYC chapter rosters in the organization's archived records, which suggests that the list is authentic. FBI Birmingham field office report, "Southern Negro Youth Congress," May 4, 1948, 43, FBI Headquarters file no. 100–6548 (Subject: Southern Negro Youth Congress), Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Record Group 65, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD; compare chapter rosters in box 5, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers. Second, C. K. Steele helped organize a statewide voter registration drive in Alabama in 1944 that involved several organizations, including the SNYC. The extent of Steele's collaboration with the SNYC remains unclear, however. "Ala. Voters Organize, Fight Ban at Polls," *Chicago Defender*, September 2, 1944; "Ala. Citizens Launch Registration Campaign," *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 10, 1944. Third, there is evidence—admittedly inconclusive—that suggests that Martin Luther King Jr. may have supported Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry Wallace in 1948; see n. 43 above.

83. Fred Shuttlesworth and C. K. Steele began working with the Southern Conference Educational Fund after SCLC was formed. Shuttlesworth was elected president of the group in 1963.

84. "Vernon Jarrett Named Editor of Aurora Staff," *Aurora* (Knoxville College), June 11, 1940; "N.A.A.C.P. Presents Triple Feature," *Aurora*, January 30, 1941, 3; "N.A.A.C.P. Sponsors Essay Contest," *Aurora*, February 27, 1941; J. L. (Joseph Lowery), "The Defense of Principles," *Aurora*, October 24, 1940.

85. "Ala. Editors, Publishers against Boswell Amendment," *Birmingham World*, September 27, 1946; "Alabama Newspaper Association Delegates Confer with Gov. Folsom," *Birmingham World*, April 4, 1947.

Smithfield. He also helped the SNYC investigate the fatal shooting of a Black miner by a white security guard in Westfield, Alabama.<sup>86</sup>

Lowery ministered to Methodist congregations in Alexander City and Mobile, Alabama, during the 1950s. He established himself as one of Mobile's most prominent civil rights advocates, working closely with local NAACP leader John LeFlore. When the NAACP was outlawed in Alabama, Lowery and LeFlore formed the Alabama Civic Affairs Association to help fill the political vacuum. During the Montgomery bus boycott, Lowery and activists from several other cities began meeting regularly with King to discuss strategy and solidarity actions, thus forming the nucleus of what eventually became SCLC.<sup>87</sup>

#### SAMUEL WILLIAMS

Rev. Samuel W. Williams served as third vice president of SCLC from the organization's founding through the mid-1960s. He taught philosophy at Morehouse College and ministered at Atlanta's historic Friendship Baptist Church throughout this period and served several terms as president of the Atlanta NAACP. A friend of the King family, Williams was one of King's undergraduate professors at Morehouse.

Born in 1912, Williams was a decade older than most of SCLC's other early officers. During the early 1940s, he served on the executive board of the National Negro Congress. In the spring of 1941, he participated in a student strike at Howard University demanding reduced tuition, affordable housing, and lower prices at university cafeterias. The walkout was timed to correspond with a national day of action against US involvement in World War II and culminated with an antiwar rally addressed by Williams and National Negro Congress head John P. Davis.<sup>88</sup>

Williams joined the Morehouse faculty in 1946. He participated in the National Religion and Labor Foundation's southern regional conference in 1947. The following year he helped launch the People's Progressive Party of Georgia, serving as a

86. "Southern Youth Congress Ends Meet on Sunday," *Birmingham World*, December 13, 1946; "Case of Willie Daniels [sic]," n.d. (1947), folder "William Daniel case 1947," box 1, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers; Lin Allen affidavit, February 18, 1947, folder "William Daniel case 1947"; Henry Bradley affidavit, n.d. (1947), folder "William Daniel case 1947"; Harrison Hamilton affidavit, February 18, 1947, folder "William Daniel case 1947."

87. J. L. LeFlore to J. Echols Lowery, December 1, 1953, folder 26, box 2, John L. LeFlore Papers, Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Southern Alabama, Mobile; Fred Atwater, "Groups Back Bias Foe in Purge," *Chicago Defender*, October 1, 1955; Joseph Lowery, *Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011).

88. John P. Davis to Samuel Williams, May 14, 1941, in *Papers of the National Negro Congress, Part 1: Records and Correspondence, 1933–1942*, microfilm, 30 reels (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), reel 23; Samuel W. Williams to George B. Murphy Jr., September 26, 1942, in *Papers of the National Negro Congress, Part 1*, reel 27; "200 Howardites Stage Anti-war Demonstration," *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 29, 1941.

vice-chairman of its statewide leadership body and cochair of the Atlanta Wallace for President committee. Comprising staunch liberals and Communists, the Progressives opposed the Truman doctrine, condemned racial segregation, and sponsored Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign. According to one observer, the Progressive effort in Georgia was "closer to guerrilla warfare than an American political campaign." Party activists faced cross burnings, arbitrary arrest, and physical attacks as they boldly pursued both Black and white votes in Ku Klux Klan strongholds.<sup>89</sup>

Williams resigned from the Progressive Party in the summer of 1949. In an article analyzing the party's electoral failings, he argued that growing anti-Communist sentiment necessitated a more forthright explanation of the differences between the Progressive platform and that of the Communist Party. As the Cold War intensified, Williams warned that "the biggest mistake in the world is for this country to believe that an idea can be stopped with the dropping of an atom bomb." The only way to stop the spread of Communism, Williams argued, was to ensure that all citizens enjoyed democratic rights and economic security.<sup>90</sup>

#### LAWRENCE REDDICK

Lawrence Reddick was an African American academic who joined the SCLC executive board at the group's inception and served as its official historian. He wrote *Crusader without Violence* (1959), an authorized biography of King, and helped King produce *Stride toward Freedom*, an account of the Montgomery bus boycott. Reddick also edited the *SCLC Newsletter* during the early 1960s.<sup>91</sup>

Reddick was born in Florida, attended Fisk University, and received his PhD from the University of Chicago. In 1936 he served on the presiding committee of the National Negro Congress at its founding convention. While teaching at Dillard University, Reddick and two colleagues disrupted a parade celebrating Italy's conquest of Ethiopia. The professors "haunted the paraders throughout their march by trailing and sometimes cutting in front of them with an automobile bearing a placard, 'We Protest Against This Celebration of Aggressive War and Fascism.' Police, after several futile attempts to frighten the professors away, finally surrounded the car

89. "Southern Religion and Labor Conference at Atlanta"; "Election Freedom to Be Discussed," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 7, 1948; Larkin Marshall to Samuel W. Williams, June 29, 1949, folder 19, box 11, Samuel W. Williams Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Robert W. Woodruff Library; MacDougall, *Gideon's Army*, 741–44.

90. "Williams Quits Ga. Progressives," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 30, 1949; Samuel W. Williams, "The People's Progressive Party of Georgia," *Phylon* 10, no. 3 (1949): 226–30; "Believe in Democracy, Dr. Williams Asserts," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 31, 1954.

91. David A. Varel, *The Scholar and the Struggle: Lawrence Reddick's Crusade for Black History and Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

and hurled threats while a group of angry Italians tore off the sign," one newspaper reported. Reddick also supported efforts to unionize Louisiana's sugar cane cutters during the Depression.<sup>92</sup> In 1939 he moved to Harlem to become curator of the New York Public Library's Division of Negro History, Literature, and Prints. An independent radical, Reddick published in leftist periodicals<sup>93</sup> and collaborated with a variety of leftist groups during the 1940s and early 1950s, including the National Negro Congress, American Labor Party, Council of African Affairs, Southern Negro Youth Congress, Stage for Action, and the Southern Conference Educational Fund.<sup>94</sup>

In early 1948 Reddick left New York to become head librarian at Atlanta University. He remained a supporter of the labor movement and an outspoken critic of segregation, colonialism, and McCarthyism, which drew the ire of Georgia's white elite. In 1953 Gov. Herman Talmadge accused Reddick of being a Communist, citing the scholar's participation in a rally sponsored by the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship in late 1946. "I am not nor have I ever been a member of the Communist Party," Reddick shot back. "Over the past ten or fifteen years I have done quite a bit of public speaking. . . . It has never occurred to me that in appearing on the same platform that the views of all the speakers must be the same. I hope some day to appear on the same platform with Governor Talmadge. Will this mean that he will agree with my views against race segregation?"<sup>95</sup>

92. *The Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress* (Washington, DC: National Negro Congress, 1936), 5; "Protest New Orleans Italian Victory Parade," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 6, 1936; Thomas Bechel, *Labor, Church, and the Sugar Establishment: Louisiana, 1887–1976* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 36.

93. L. D. Reddick, "The Folklore of White Historians," *Equality* 2, no. 2 (1940): 19–20, 33, "Anti-Semitism among Negroes," *Negro Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1942): 112–22, "What about Africa?," *New Masses*, March 16, 1943, review of *An American Dilemma* by Gunnar Myrdal, *Race and Rumors of Race* by Howard Odum, and *Brothers under the Skin* by Carey McWilliams, *Science and Society* 8, no. 3 (1944): 283–86, and "Books of the Day," *People's Voice* (New York), March 27, 1948.

94. "Sunday Parley to Consider Negro's Place in the Arts," *Daily Worker*, March 14, 1947; "If Your Neighbors' House Were Burning," n.d. (1946), fiche #004,226, *Schomburg Clipping File, Part I, 1924–1975*, microfiche, 9,673 fiche (Alexandria, VA: Chadwyck-Healey, 1986); *Proceedings of the Conference on Africa—New Perspectives* (New York: Council on African Affairs, 1944), 37; "Negro Youth Fighting for America, Fifth All-Southern Negro Youth Conference, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, April 17, 18, 19, 1942," folder 3, box 3, Edward E. Strong Papers; *Stage for Action Is the Answer!*, n.d. (ca. 1946), folder 3, box 104, *National Republic Records*, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University; "The Southern Conference for Human Welfare Cordially Invites You to Attend a Dinner in Honor of Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Tuesday, March 6, 1945," folder 123, box 1523, Stetson Kennedy Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta; *Discrimination in Higher Education*, 3; "The George Washington Carver School," *Daily Worker*, October 26, 1943; "The Jefferson School of Social Science Invites You to Attend a Forum," *Daily Worker*, May 22, 1945.

95. "Support Teachers under Attack, Prof. Asks District 2," *Packinghouse Worker*, May 1953; "Not a Communist' Declares AU Prof Stressing Loyalty," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 26, 1953.

Reddick joined the faculty of Alabama State Teachers College in the summer of 1955. Like many of his colleagues, he was active in the Montgomery bus boycott from the outset. He analyzed the movement in an article published in the socialist magazine *Dissent* in the spring of 1956. After student sit-ins erupted on the Alabama State campus in 1960, Reddick was red-baited by Alabama governor John Patterson and fired from his teaching position.<sup>96</sup>

#### SCLC STAFF

SCLC's paid staff remained small during the late 1950s but expanded rapidly during the 1960s as the organization's revenue base grew. In order to keep data collection manageable, I chose to focus on top-level staff, ignoring secretaries and field organizers. I found that half of the executive directors (two of four) and half of the program directors (one of two) during the period under study had Old Left backgrounds. Ella Baker and Wyatt Tee Walker held the position of executive director for a combined total of approximately three-quarters of the period from 1958 (when the position was created) through 1965, and Randolph Blackwell served as program director for approximately one-third of the period from 1961 (when the position was created) to 1965.<sup>97</sup> The Old Left backgrounds of staffers C. T. Vivian and Jack O'Dell are also addressed below.

#### WYATT WALKER

Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker became executive director of SCLC in mid-1960. The son of a Baptist preacher who idolized Frederick Douglass, Walker grew up in the segregated town of Merchantville, New Jersey, near Camden. He joined the Young Communist League as a teenager after hearing a speech by Paul Robeson. "My senior paper at Merchantville High School in 1946—you would never dream what it was about: the five-year plan of the Soviet Union. In a town with two thousand people, that's where my mind was." To his parents' dismay, Walker declared himself an agnostic. "Then I worked downtown in [New York's] garment district. Eighteenth Street and Fourth Avenue. I used to go to Union Square Park to eat my lunch. And I heard the Trotskyites and those folks over there. . . . It just further radicalized me."<sup>98</sup>

96. L. D. Reddick, "The Bus Boycott in Montgomery," *Dissent*, spring 1956, 111–17; Varel, *Scholar and the Struggle*.

97. During the period under study, the position of executive director was held by Rev. John Tilley, Ella Baker, Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, and Rev. Andrew Young. The position of program director was held by Rev. Andrew Young and Randolph Blackwell.

98. Fred Powledge, *Free at Last? The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), 108–9. This is also the source of the epigraph at the beginning of this article.

Walker attended Virginia Union University, where he was active in the NAACP. During his senior year, he took an ethics class taught by Rev. Samuel DeWitt Proctor, who challenged Walker to envision the pulpit as a platform for social change. Walker decided to enroll in seminary, and in 1953 he was called to pastor Gillfield Baptist Church in Petersburg, Virginia. There he apprenticed himself to activist minister Vernon Johns, who had recently moved to Virginia from Montgomery, Alabama. Over the next several years, Walker emerged as a leading figure in the local civil rights movement. He was elected president of the city's NAACP chapter, helped found the Petersburg Improvement Association, and became state director of the Congress of Racial Equality. In 1958 Martin Luther King Jr. invited Walker to join the SCLC board. The following year Walker led a march on the Virginia state capitol demanding integrated schools.<sup>99</sup>

Walker's first major undertaking as SCLC director was the adoption of a voter education program developed by Highlander Folk School. Highlander was reeling under charges of communist infiltration at the time, but Walker was not easily intimidated by red-baiting. As he later explained, he had a left-wing background of his own, and he was "proud" of it. In a 1963 television interview, Walker argued that "granting to the Negro full emancipation means a readjustment of the entire economy. . . . I think it's an inevitable move toward some kind of socialism."<sup>100</sup>

#### RANDOLPH BLACKWELL

Randolph Blackwell became SCLC's program director in August 1964. In this capacity he supervised all of the organization's main departments, including voter registration and political education. Though his role was largely invisible, he helped coordinate and publicize the Selma demonstrations in early 1965. Blackwell was also instrumental in establishing SCLC's Department of Economic Affairs, which promoted economic development projects, and the Dialogue Department, which sought to attract working-class white people to the movement.<sup>101</sup>

Born and raised in Greensboro, North Carolina, Blackwell attended meetings of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association with his father as a young boy. In high school he heard a speech by Ella Baker that inspired him to found a local

99. Wyatt T. Walker interview by Renee Poussaint, August 30, 2005, digital transcript, National Visionary Leadership Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC; Wyatt Tee Walker interview by John Britton, October 11, 1967, Ralph J. Bunche Collection.

100. Powledge, *Free at Last?*, 108; "Open Mind: Race Relations in America," June 11, 1963, WNET-TV New York, videorecording, <https://www.thirteen.org/programs/the-open-mind/the-open-mind-race-relations-in-crisis/>.

101. Alec F. Hickmott, "Randolph Blackwell and the Economics of Civil Rights" (PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2010).

NAACP youth council. After serving in the army during World War II, Blackwell enrolled at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College.<sup>102</sup> While still an undergraduate, he ran for state legislature on the Progressive Party ticket. The party's motto in North Carolina was "Jim Crow Must Go!" "While I was not elected . . . we were able, through house-to-house canvassing and using a sound truck and other techniques, to register more Negro citizens than at any other similar period in the history of Guilford County," he recalled. Blackwell identified so strongly with the Progressives that he traveled to Georgia to help gain ballot access in that state. He was "constantly threatened by members of the Ku Klux Klan" while canvassing in Macon. Though the Progressives were trounced at the polls, Blackwell considered the campaign a success: "I think it set the stages for . . . integrated activities and an attack on discrimination and segregation."<sup>103</sup>

After graduating from college in 1949, Blackwell moved to Washington, DC, to attend law school at Howard University. He quickly gravitated to Washington's small but vibrant leftist milieu, becoming a fixture of the Coordinating Committee to Enforce the D.C. Anti-Discrimination Laws (CCEAD). Led by African American clubwoman Mary Church Terrell and white Communist Annie Stein, CCEAD combined litigation with direct-action protest in a successful multiyear campaign to integrate the city's department store restaurants and dime-store lunch counters. Blackwell sat on the CCEAD executive board, served as a picket captain, and produced much of the group's literature.<sup>104</sup>

After graduating from law school, Blackwell taught at southern Black colleges for the better part of a decade. In 1962, while teaching at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College, he helped lead sit-ins in nearby Huntsville. The following year Blackwell quit his job as an associate professor to work full-time in the civil rights

102. Randolph Blackwell interview by William Chafe, March 5, 1973, transcript, box 2, William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

103. National Youth for Wallace Committee, "Call to a National Founding Convention of a Youth Organization," n.d. (1948), folder 14, box 426, J. B. Matthews Papers; "Executive Committee of Progressive Party of North Carolina as of November 23, 1948," folder 10, box 107, M. H. Ross Papers, Southern Labor Archives; Blackwell interview by Chafe; Randolph Blackwell interview by Patricia Sullivan, March 22, 1979, transcript, 3, 5, folder 7, box 4, Progressive Party Oral History Interviews, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta.

104. "New Horizons," *Chicago Defender*, January 27, 1951; Mary Church Terrell and Randolph T. Blackwell to Dear Friends, January 15, 1951, in *Mary Church Terrell Papers*, microfilm, 34 reels (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1977), reel 14; "Members of the Executive Board Elected Mar. 26, 1952," in *Mary Church Terrell Papers*, reel 14; "An Autobiographical resume of Randolph T. Blackwell," November 3, 1962, in *Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954–1970, Part 3: Records of the Public Relations Department*, microfilm, 10 reels (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1995), reel 4. On the CCEAD, see Thai Jones, *A Radical Line: From the Labor Movement to the Weather Underground, One Family's Century of Conscience* (New York: Free Press, 2004). On Blackwell's milieu, see also "Czech Embassy Holds Reception," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 8, 1949.



movement. Before joining the SCLC staff, he served as field director of the Voter Education Project, a joint effort between SCLC and other civil rights organizations.

#### C. T. VIVIAN

Rev. C. T. Vivian cofounded the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference, helped lead the Nashville student protests in 1960, and was among the first arrested during the Freedom Rides into Jackson, Mississippi, in 1961. He became SCLC's director of affiliates in 1963 and played a central role in the Birmingham, Saint Augustine, and Selma campaigns.

Vivian grew up in Macomb, Illinois, and briefly attended Western Illinois University before moving to Peoria, Illinois, in the early 1940s. In Peoria he was drawn into two distinct activist networks. One was composed mainly of students and professionals; inspired by the ideas of the Congress of Racial Equality, they staged sit-ins that desegregated several area restaurants. The second group was more working class in composition and focused heavily on workplace issues: "I was one of those who helped open Caterpillar tractor company to African Americans," Vivian recalled.<sup>105</sup>

Within the working-class activist circle, Vivian became particularly close to African American union leader Ajay Martin, who was affiliated with the left-led United Farm Equipment and Metal Workers of America. Martin was an "organizer of Caterpillar, and one of the greatest guys I've ever met. [He] was very important in my life. . . . I called him a triple threat man: he could write, he could speak, he could organize, alright? He had it all. He could do it. He gave management HELL daily."<sup>106</sup> "I was a Christian. Ajay wasn't. Ajay didn't care anything about church, because it was a bunch of hypocrites as far as he was concerned. But the point is, he was a better Christian than ninety percent of them, white or black, because he was really laying down his life for other people," Vivian explained. "They called him a communist, they called him pinko, see, because all those were terms they used to try to destroy people you couldn't control. . . . Here was a man that couldn't be bought. Here was a man who had integrity. Here was a man who stood up."<sup>107</sup>

105. C. T. Vivian, preface to Felix L. Armfield, *Black Life in West Central Illinois* (Chicago: Arcadia, 2001), 6–7.

106. C. T. Vivian, interview by Anne Braden, n.d. (ca. 1982), transcript, 157, 162, box 9, Anne Braden Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY. Martin was elected president of the Peoria NAACP and an international vice president of the United Farm Equipment and Metal Workers (FE) in the summer of 1946. He resigned from the FE executive board in 1948 because he refused to sign a non-Communist affidavit in accordance with the Taft-Hartley Act. Gilpin, *Long Deep Grudge*.

107. Pam Adams, "Believing in the Fight," *Peoria Journal-Star*, October 24, 1999.



Vivian met Paul Robeson in April 1947 during the radical singer's controversial visit to Peoria. When Robeson's concert plans were announced, Peoria's white American Legion posts organized a successful campaign to deny him a public venue. In a show of defiance, Robeson insisted on coming to Peoria anyway. Vivian and Ajay Martin arranged to meet Robeson at a remote train station, in order to avoid a confrontation with armed legionnaires massed downtown. The three men drove to Martin's house, where Robeson addressed a small group of activists.<sup>108</sup>

After a brief move to Chicago, Vivian returned to Peoria, where he was elected vice president of the local NAACP. He was called to the ministry in 1954, and the following year he moved to Nashville to attend American Baptist Theological Seminary. After completing his course of study, Vivian chose to remain in Nashville, where he participated in James Lawson's workshops on nonviolent civil disobedience and became a leading figure in the local civil rights movement.

#### JACK O'DELL

As noted earlier, Jack O'Dell and Stanley Levison devised a direct-mail fundraising operation that stabilized SCLC's financial situation in 1961. For much of the following year, O'Dell directed SCLC's voter registration projects in the South. According to Wyatt Walker, O'Dell was the most efficient and reliable member of the SCLC staff during this period.<sup>109</sup>

Hunter Pitts "Jack" O'Dell was an African American who grew up in Detroit and attended Xavier University. During World War II, O'Dell served in the merchant marine and joined the National Maritime Union (NMU), a left-led CIO affiliate renowned for its racial egalitarianism. He read voraciously at sea and had intense political discussions with his crewmates, many of whom were Communists. After the war O'Dell helped organize restaurant workers for the CIO in Miami, Florida; joined the interracial American Veterans Committee; and served as education director of the Miami chapter of the Southern Negro Youth Congress.<sup>110</sup>

O'Dell remained a member of the NMU throughout the late 1940s and was active in Seamen for Wallace. As part of a union contingent, he helped defend Robeson from attack during the infamous Peekskill riots in upstate New York in 1949. The

108. Pam Adams, "Forever Tied to His Ministry: C.T. Vivian First Heard His 'Cry to Lord' while Working Here in 1954," *Peoria Journal-Star*, October 24, 1999; Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 317–19.

109. Singh, "Learn Your Horn"; Walker interview by Britton, 79.

110. Jack O'Dell interview by author, August 18, 2009; "The Miami Southern Negro Youth Congress Presents Langston Hughes," May 30, 1947, folder 9, Junius Irving Scales Papers. On the NMU see Gerald Horne, *Red Seas: Ferdinand Smith and Radical Black Sailors in the United States and Jamaica* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

following year O'Dell joined the Communist Party. "I did it as much in defiance of the climate as anything," he recalled. "I understood that the Communists were being made . . . the big scapegoat, and that these were decent people that were being jammed. And I respected them . . . enough to join their ranks. . . . I've never taken a census, but I never met a black person who was in the Communist Party because of the Soviet Union. We joined the Communist Party because they fought against racism [in the United States] and they were dependable in that fight. And they were union builders. They were mass movement organized builders."<sup>111</sup>

As the Red Scare intensified, the NMU purged its left wing, and O'Dell was expelled from the union. He spent the next several years working in the construction and restaurant industries while trying to strengthen the Communist Party in the South. In the spring of 1956, O'Dell was subpoenaed by the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee. Refusing to answer questions about his political activity, O'Dell instead criticized subcommittee chairman Sen. James Eastland of Mississippi for his racism and opposition to the labor movement.<sup>112</sup>

Blacklisted as a result of the Senate hearing, O'Dell moved from New Orleans to Birmingham, Alabama, where he was offered a job with an insurance company owned by a supporter of the defunct SNYC. In Birmingham, O'Dell joined the newly formed Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, led by Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth. Several months later he was assigned to the insurance company's branch in Montgomery. With the bus boycott still in progress, he joined the Montgomery Improvement Association.

O'Dell was called before HUAC in the summer of 1958, and once again refused to comply with his inquisitors, whom he castigated for ignoring the "un-American activities" of white supremacists across the South. To protect his employer from government harassment, he resigned from his insurance job and moved to New York City.<sup>113</sup>

In the spring of 1959, O'Dell assisted Bayard Rustin with preparations for the second Youth March for Integrated Schools. Using his credentials as a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, O'Dell toured Black colleges across the South, gathering signatures on a petition supporting the march's demands. Throughout early 1960 he served on the Committee to Defend Martin Luther King, which raised money to defray King's legal expenses.

111. Griffin Fariello, *Red Scare: Memories of the American Inquisition* (New York: Norton, 1995), 413–18; Jack O'Dell, interview by Sam Sills, August 5, 1993, digital transcript, 8, 22, copy in author's possession.

112. "Texas NMU Ousts Seaman for Circulating Peace Plan," *Daily Worker*, July 5, 1950; Hunter O'Dell, "The Political Scene in Louisiana," *Political Affairs*, August 1956, 13–23; "La. Red Suspect, Eastland Clash," *Chicago Defender*, April 21, 1956.

113. "Red Hunters Accused of Trying to Stall Integration in the South," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 31, 1958.

Called before HUAC for a second time in February 1960, O'Dell again refused to answer questions about his political affiliations, even though his Communist Party membership had lapsed since moving to New York. In light of the growing direct-action movement in the South, O'Dell had concluded that "we were likely to get civil rights before we got socialism" and that all efforts should be bent toward this goal. He would have no truck with government attempts to incriminate his former comrades, but O'Dell recognized that continued membership in the Communist Party would severely limit his ability to participate in the civil rights movement, given the prevailing climate of anti-Communism. Moreover, the party was severely disoriented by Nikita Khrushchev's revelations of human rights abuses committed under Josef Stalin and by the Soviet invasion of Hungary.<sup>114</sup>

O'Dell helped organize a successful fundraiser in Harlem for the southern sit-ins in the spring of 1960. He also worked on the Kennedy campaign in the Bronx and helped Rustin plan protests outside the Democratic and Republican national conventions. In early 1961 he headed a team that staged a successful benefit concert for SCLC at Carnegie Hall. Shortly afterward, on the recommendation of Stanley Levison, SCLC hired O'Dell to work in its New York office as director of fundraising.

O'Dell's stint with SCLC lasted just two years, during which the FBI repeatedly leaked information and allegations about him to the press. Under mounting pressure from the Kennedy administration, SCLC leaders concluded in early summer 1963 that despite O'Dell's many talents and "unselfish service," his continued employment could potentially jeopardize the passage of federal civil rights legislation. Although King was convinced that O'Dell was no longer a Communist, he regretted that "the situation in the country is such that any allusion to the left brings forth an emotional response which would seem to indicate that SCLC and the Southern Freedom Movement are Communist inspired. In these critical times we cannot afford to risk any such impressions."<sup>115</sup>

## FUNDRAISING NETWORK

### UNITED PACKINGHOUSE WORKERS OF AMERICA

SCLC received financial support from a variety of institutional donors, including churches and synagogues, NAACP chapters, fraternal organizations, charitable foundations, and labor unions. Among the most reliable sources of funding were a handful

114. Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 165; O'Dell interview by Sills, 36–39.

115. Martin Luther King Jr. to Jack O'Dell, July 3, 1963, folder "King, Martin Luther," box 8, Burke Marshall Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston.

of left-led unions that managed to survive the Red Scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s with their radical leadership largely intact. The most important of these was the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), headquartered in Chicago.<sup>116</sup>

Martin Luther King Jr. met with leaders of the UPWA for the first time in mid-February 1956. The following month approximately 17,000 Chicago packinghouse workers walked off their jobs for five minutes in solidarity with the Montgomery bus boycott. UPWA locals around the country raised money for the Montgomery Improvement Association, and by June 1956 the union's contributions to the MIA totaled \$3,350. UPWA executive board members Charles Hayes and Russell Lasley and southern field organizer John Henry Hall attended the initial SCLC meeting in Atlanta, where Lasley served as secretary of a working group. A donation of \$11,000 from the UPWA helped SCLC survive its first year, when income from all sources totaled just \$13,000. "Your generous gift was really the means by which our then infant organization was able to begin its work," King acknowledged.<sup>117</sup>

#### HARRY BELAFONTE

It was not unusual for African American entertainers to lend their support to protest movements during the mid-1940s, but the practice became riskier during the McCarthy era, when outspoken performers such as Paul Robeson and Canada Lee were blacklisted from their professions. In this context it is significant that singer and actor Harry Belafonte—who reached the height of his popularity in the mid-1950s—publicly championed SCLC, donated large sums to the organization, and encouraged his friends and acquaintances to do the same. In addition to playing a key role in SCLC fundraising, Belafonte also became one of King's confidants.

The son of Caribbean immigrants, Belafonte was raised in Harlem by his mother, who regaled him with stories of Marcus Garvey and urged him to "be like Paul Robeson." During navy service in World War II, Belafonte was politicized by his conversations with fellow Black soldiers. After the war he joined the American Negro Theater and befriended left-wing actors Ossie Davis and Sidney Poitier. He also met Robeson

116. Clarence B. Jones and Stuart Connelly, *Behind the Dream: The Making of the Speech That Transformed a Nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 25. Other highly supportive left-led unions included District 65 of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union; Retail Drug Employees Union Local 1199; the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers; and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union. On District 65 see the section on Cleveland Robinson below. On Local 1199 see Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989). On Mine-Mill see Bill Shipp, "Red-Linked Labor Union Gives Free Rent to Crusade," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 22, 1963; "Vote \$500 for Rights Fight," *Mine-Mill Union*, August 1963. On the ILWU see Peter Cole, *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 107–8.

117. Matthew F. Nichter, "Did Emmett Till Die in Vain? Organized Labor Says No!": The United Packinghouse Workers and Civil Rights Unionism in the Mid-1950s," *Labor* 18, no. 1 (2021): 8–40.

during this period, and the two developed a lifelong friendship. “It was Robeson who gave me the backbone to use my art to reach people,” Belafonte explained.<sup>118</sup>

Before becoming the “King of Calypso” in the mid-1950s, Belafonte honed his singing skills at Progressive Party rallies, labor union gatherings, and left-wing folk music venues. His career was nearly ruined in 1954 when the far-right magazine *Counterattack* labeled him a Communist fellow traveler. The FBI interrogated his wife, which contributed to their marital difficulties. In an attempt to clear his name, Belafonte proclaimed his opposition to Communism and disavowed many of the organizations with which he had previously been associated.<sup>119</sup>

Belafonte first met King in New York City during the Montgomery bus boycott and was deeply moved by the encounter. He endorsed the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in 1957 and the Youth March for Integrated Schools in 1958. In late 1959 he decided to take a hiatus from acting and filmmaking in order to devote more time to the movement. When Belafonte expressed uncertainty about whether to prioritize his conscience over his career, his friend Ossie Davis wrote him, “It is in the very center of this movement that you belong, Harry, as do the rest of us. . . . Whatever the red flag stood for yesterday, it is the black flag [of Negro Liberation] under which mankind will take its next step forward.”<sup>120</sup>

#### HARRY WACHTEL

Harry H. Wachtel was a Jewish attorney and corporate executive who helped establish the Gandhi Society for Human Rights, SCLC’s tax-exempt fundraising arm, in 1962. He also played a key role in the legal defense of SCLC leaders charged with libel by Alabama authorities. Wachtel developed a close friendship with King, assisted King with speechwriting, and participated in high-level SCLC strategy discussions.<sup>121</sup>

A Brooklyn native, Wachtel attended City College of New York during the mid-1930s, when the campus was a hub of radical activism. For several years he worked in the law firm of Charles Abrams, a prominent public housing advocate and critic of residential segregation. Wachtel graduated from Columbia University’s law school and served in the Army Signal Corps during World War II.<sup>122</sup> Returning to Brooklyn after the war, Wachtel helped establish a local chapter of the American Veterans

118. Steven Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 190.

119. Harry Belafonte with Michael Shnayerson, *My Song: A Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 225; “Harry Belafonte States His Case,” *Counterattack*, February 12, 1954.

120. Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right*, 208–9.

121. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*.

122. FBI New York field office report, “Harry Herzhaft Wachtel,” May 25, 1962, in FBI Headquarters file no. 100–437828 (Subject: Harry Herzhaft Wachtel), Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Committee (AVC), the first racially integrated national veterans' organization formed in the United States since the Civil War era. The chapter was one of the largest in the country, and Wachtel was elected to the AVC's statewide leadership body. In the summer of 1946, he helped coordinate a citywide "buyers' strike" to protest rising food prices.<sup>123</sup>

When the Red Scare began, Wachtel spoke out against the persecution of Communists, but as the curtain descended on the Old Left in the early 1950s, he withdrew from movement activity.<sup>124</sup> The rise of the civil rights movement stirred his conscience once again, however. After meeting King in early 1962, Wachtel resolved to use his legal expertise and business contacts to assist King's work.

#### KING'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE

In June 1964 King began meeting with an informal advisory circle every few weeks to discuss current events and their implications for movement strategy and tactics. The Research Committee, as it came to be known, brought together leading figures from SCLC and allies from outside the organization. Of the eleven individuals that historian Adam Fairclough has identified as regular participants in these meetings in 1964 and 1965, at least seven had Old Left backgrounds.<sup>125</sup> In addition to Rustin, Levison, Reddick, and Wachtel, their number included attorney Clarence Jones and union leaders Cleveland Robinson and Ralph Helstein (president of the United Packinghouse Workers of America).

#### CLARENCE JONES

African American attorney Clarence B. Jones first met King in the spring of 1960 and quickly became one of his closest advisers. Jones helped write or edit many of King's most celebrated speeches—including "I Have a Dream"—and helped smuggle the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" out of King's cell in 1963.<sup>126</sup>

123. Julian Ross, "A.V.C. Notes," *Brooklyn Eagle*, December 22, 1946; "31 New Groups Give Support to Buyers' Strike," *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 19, 1946.

124. "Foes of Communism Assailed by Melish," *Brooklyn Eagle*, January 22, 1948; "Wachtel, Harry H.," drawer F, cabinet 3, Card File Series, J. B. Matthews Papers.

125. According to Fairclough, the regular participants in the Research Committee were King, Bayard Rustin, Stanley Levison, Lawrence Reddick, Harry Wachtel, Clarence Jones, Cleveland Robinson, Ralph Helstein, Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, and Walter Fauntroy. Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 170–71. I say "at least" because oral history interviews with Reverend Fauntroy allude to his participation in protests against restaurant segregation in downtown Washington, DC, during the early 1950s. However, the extent of Fauntroy's involvement in this movement (the CCEAD, described in the section on Randolph Blackwell) remains unclear. Walter Fauntroy, interview by Renee Poussaint, February 19, 2004, transcript, 19, National Visionary Leadership Project; Walter E. Fauntroy, interview by Edward Thompson III, February 23, 1973, transcript, 5–6, Ralph J. Bunche Collection.

126. Jones and Connelly, *Behind the Dream*.

Born to a poor family in Philadelphia, Jones earned a scholarship to attend Columbia University, where he played football, ran track, and led the campus chapter of the Young Progressives of America, the youth wing of the Progressive Party. Jones met Paul Robeson during this period and attended Camp Wo-Chi-Ca, a leftist summer camp. Jones provoked a controversy within his campus NAACP chapter when he proposed cosponsoring a meeting about the impending execution of Willie McGee, a Black man accused of raping a white woman in Mississippi; some students balked because the McGee case had become a rallying point for the Civil Rights Congress, an organization branded a Communist front by the US attorney general. At the height of the Red Scare, Jones was the principal organizer of a National Student Conference for Academic Freedom, Equality, and Peace held in Madison, Wisconsin, in the spring of 1952.<sup>127</sup>

Jones was drafted into the army the following year. An opponent of the Korean War, he refused to sign a loyalty oath and received a dishonorable discharge. He succeeded in getting the designation changed on appeal, which enabled him to attend law school on the GI Bill. After completing his law degree at Boston University in 1959, he took a lucrative job with an entertainment law firm in Southern California. A few months later, radical New York attorney Arthur Kinoy recommended Jones as someone who might be willing to help King's legal team prepare for his tax evasion case. Jones was hesitant to abandon his new job, but King shamed him into coming to Alabama.<sup>128</sup>

#### CLEVELAND ROBINSON

Cleveland Robinson served as secretary-treasurer of District 65 of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU), one of the largest labor unions in New York City. Born in Jamaica, he worked as a constable and schoolteacher before immigrating to the United States during World War II. Robinson was hired as an organizer by left-led Local 65 of the United Retail and Wholesale Employees after leading a successful union drive among his coworkers at a Manhattan dry goods shop. He quickly

127. Clarence B. Jones, "Hails Negro History Week on Its Twenty-Fifth Anniversary," *Columbia Spectator*, February 17, 1950; "Wo-Chi-Ca Reunion Newsletter," n.d. (ca. 1976), Camp Wo-Chi-Ca Papers, Tamiment Library, Bobst Library, New York University; "NAACP Splits on Sponsoring Speech at CU," *Columbia Spectator*, March 2, 1951; "Chapter Prexy Nixes Reported NAACP Split," *Columbia Spectator*, March 6, 1951; Clarence B. Jones, "Protests McGee Conviction," *Columbia Spectator*, March 9, 1951; "Call to a National Student Conference for Academic Freedom, Equality, and Peace," April 25–27, 1952, in *Papers of the NAACP, Part 19, Series C*, microfilm, 27 reels (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1995), reel 14; Clarence B. Jones, "Blasts Senate Inquisition," *Columbia Spectator*, September 30, 1952.

128. Douglas Brinkley, "The Man Who Kept King's Secrets," *Vanity Fair*, April 2006, 156–71; Evan J. Charkes, "A Wintertime Soldier," *Columbia College Today*, January–February 2008, 16–23.



rose through the ranks of the union, which went through several splits and mergers due to its leaders' reluctance to sign the non-Communist affidavits required by the Taft-Hartley Act. During the early 1950s, Robinson also helped launch the National Negro Labor Council, an organization of Black union militants that fought for equality on the job and greater Black representation on union leadership bodies.<sup>129</sup>

Robinson was an early sponsor of In Friendship. He began corresponding with Martin Luther King Jr. during the Montgomery bus boycott, and District 65 RWDSU donated \$3,500 to the Montgomery Improvement Association in the spring of 1956. Over the next decade, District 65 proved a consistent financial backer of SCLC, and King spoke at several of the union's conventions. In 1960 Robinson was elected vice president of the Negro American Labor Council, a national organization of Black labor activists that spearheaded the 1963 March on Washington. Robinson chaired the administrative committee for the march, which was attended by more than 5,000 RWDSU members, the vast majority of them from District 65.<sup>130</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, I have focused on three main mechanisms through which the Old Left influenced SCLC: personnel overlap, network ties, and organizational alliances. I have demonstrated that a surprising number of SCLC leaders had Old Left backgrounds, including all three cofounders of In Friendship; at least three of nine SCLC officers in 1961; two of four executive directors during the period 1957 through 1965; one of two program directors during that same period; and roughly two-thirds of the Research Committee during the years 1964 and 1965. I have shown that King was personally acquainted with a wide range of Old Left activists and intellectuals from his college years onward. Aldon Morris established that SCLC worked closely with "movement halfway houses" such as the Highlander Folk School and Southern Conference Educational Fund, many of whose leaders were veterans of the Old Left. As we have seen, SCLC also collaborated with left-led unions such as the United Packinghouse Workers of America.

These three mechanisms of interaction facilitated the transfer of a variety of human and material resources, including skills, ideology, and money. Sociologists have observed that skills acquired in one movement may prove useful in subsequent

129. Cleveland Robinson, interview by Joseph Wilson, April 11, 1985, audiotape, Columbia Center for Oral History, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York; Lisa Phillips, *A Renegade Union: Interracial Organizing and Labor Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

130. David R. Paskin, "References to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in District 65 History," folder 3, box 4, Cleveland Robinson Papers, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Bobst Library, New York University; "UPWA Has Hefty Contribution for Bus Boycotters," *Packinghouse Worker*, June 1956; Jones, *March on Washington*; Harry Conn, "5,000 of RWDSU in Huge Freedom March," *RWDSU Record*, September 3, 1963.



movements.<sup>131</sup> Bayard Rustin acknowledged the significance of such skill diffusion: “I learned many of the most important things I learned about organization and detail and writing clearly and the like from my experience as a communist. . . . I’m happy I had it. It taught me a great deal, and I presume that if I had to do it over again, I’d do the same thing.”<sup>132</sup>

The transmission of skills and money was clearly a boon to SCLC. In fact, this flow of resources may have been critical at various points in the organization’s development, particularly in the early years. Without the assistance of Rustin, Ella Baker, and Stanley Levison, SCLC might not have coalesced as a permanent organization. And without the financial backing of the United Packinghouse Workers of America, it is doubtful that SCLC would have survived its first year.

Ideology was transmitted from the Old Left to SCLC as well. This was clearly apparent in mobilizations like the 1963 March on Washington, which combined demands for civil rights, guaranteed employment, and a living wage.<sup>133</sup> The Old Left impacted the strategic thinking of not only longtime socialists like Rustin but also those who never considered themselves socialists or who no longer openly identified as such by the time they became involved in SCLC. For example, during a 1966 debate with Stokely Carmichael, SCLC leader Randolph Blackwell defended the feasibility of building an interracial movement of the poor by recalling his experiences in the Progressive Party a generation earlier: “Back in 1947 [*sic*], I came down to Georgia to work on a voter registration drive as a college student and found in the back woods . . . a very broken down, extremely rural, white congregation that had over its pulpit—and to get some picture of how poor the church was, they had split a bed sheet and had made two signs—something about the supremacy of God and the brotherhood of mankind without regard to race. . . . So that I approach the conclusion that the poor white . . . is the most racist with some degree of trepidation.”<sup>134</sup> As separatist sentiment became prevalent in the broader freedom movement during the mid-to-late 1960s, SCLC maintained a commitment to interracial coalition building and intensified its efforts to forge an alliance with progressive labor unions.<sup>135</sup> This strategic orientation arguably reflected the fact that many SCLC leaders were veterans of the Old Left and retained key elements of its worldview.

Of course, connections to the Old Left were also a liability for SCLC. Supporters of segregation never tired of denouncing the civil rights movement as a tool of communist

131. Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman, “Breaking the Iron Law of Oligarchy: Union Revitalization in the American Labor Movement,” *American Journal of Sociology* 106, no. 2 (2000): 303–49.

132. D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 36.

133. Jones, *March on Washington*.

134. “Black Power: The Widening Dialogue,” *New South*, Summer 1966, 72.

135. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*; Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*.

subversion. This claim was demonstrably false, but the red label threatened to alienate potential supporters and provided a rationale for government repression. Cognizant of these risks, SCLC leaders devoted considerable time and mental energy to debating how to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of interaction with the Old Left. For the most part, civil rights activists who had passed through the Communist Party and other stigmatized organizations hid or downplayed their past associations, in order to insulate themselves, SCLC, and the wider movement from attack. This culture of secrecy helps explain why scholars have failed to recognize the Old Left backgrounds of many leading civil rights activists.

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The murder of George Floyd in 2020 sparked the largest street protests in modern US history, reinvigorating the struggle for racial justice and galvanizing millions of Americans to seek a deeper understanding of the historical roots and systemic perpetuation of African American oppression. This ongoing reckoning is occurring against a backdrop of widespread anti-capitalist sentiment, especially among young people. The Great Recession of 2007–9, and the Occupy movement to which it gave rise, punctured the free-market verities that dominated the political landscape for a generation, paving the way for the emergence of Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as political icons and fueling the rapid growth of the Democratic Socialists of America. These two broad trends—anti-racist militancy and socialist sensibility—are not merely concurrent; they inform one another. Calls to reallocate funding from policing to social programs and the rediscovery of “racial capitalism” by scholars and activists who view profit making and African American oppression as intertwined exemplify the socialist inflection of much contemporary anti-racist discourse. Perhaps the time is ripe for a reassessment of the Old Left’s contributions to the civil rights movement.

As the final stanza of the song “Solidarity Forever” proclaims, Old Left activists sought to “bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old.” Their hopes for a socialist transformation in the United States remain unrealized. Nevertheless, as we have seen in the case of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the ashes of the Old Left helped fertilize the soil from which the civil rights movement sprang.