

FOUR

**TO FULFILL
YESTERDAY'S PROMISE**

Anticommunism and the Demise
of the Early Civil Rights Community

Our great city of over two million people made a mighty contribution during the war years, as the arsenal of democracy, toward the defeat of mankind's enemies. Today the anxious hope of our citizenry is that our fond city will show the way of fulfillment of yesterday's promise to the people of economic security, expanding prosperity, cultural enrichment and strengthened democracy.

—Rev. Charles A. Hill (1945)

Detroit's civil rights community entered the immediate post-World War II period as a well-organized, if not always successful, center of social protest. The war had provided a context in which demands for civil rights and social justice, particularly for African Americans, could be framed within a language of national defense, antifascism, and the spread of democratic principles. The war years had also presented a number of practical challenges that had helped to solidify a movement culture, deepening the community's resolve to continue to work for meaningful social change. Like most Americans, members of the city's civil rights community mourned the death of President Roosevelt and joined in the celebrations on V-E Day and V-J Day. They welcomed home sons and husbands, friends, comrades, and lovers.

They were, again like most Americans, apprehensive about the

future—about the new president, Harry S. Truman; about the possibilities of a return to depression and unemployment; and about the new world emerging from the death and destruction of a war ended by the unleashing of atomic power. But these apprehensions were mixed with hope and determination that the promise of American democracy could now, perhaps, finally be fulfilled, especially since the evils of European racism had been exposed and discredited. If a fascist regime premised on notions of racial superiority and domination could be defeated abroad, then its counterpart in the United States could likewise be dismantled.¹

The Detroit Council of the National Negro Congress reflected the general tone of postwar activism in the city in the summer of 1945. The 112 delegates attending the NNC's "Plan for Victory and Peace" conference discussed and supported resolutions on full employment during and after reconversion, on integration of the armed forces, on abolishing the poll tax, and on the advantages of an even stronger Black-union alliance to achieve greater representation in municipal government.² Throughout the immediate postwar period, Detroit's civil rights community fought against a gathering storm of conservatism and repression. Both the institutions and individual members of the city's Left engaged in various efforts to save the New Deal coalition and, as the Rev. Charles A. Hill put it during his first campaign for a seat on the city's Common Council, "to show the way of the fulfillment of yesterday's promise."³ To do so meant a struggle, both locally and nationally, against the forces arrayed against them. Nationally, congressional electoral gains by conservative Republicans and Democrats had created a powerful coalition that was vocally opposed to extending the more progressive measures of the New Deal and acting on the demands of cultural and political minorities. By 1948, most communists and fellow travelers within the CIO's member unions would be purged (the process was nearly complete by 1952); the Progressive Party, which backed Henry Wallace against Truman in the politically decisive—and divisive—presidential campaign of 1948, had suffered a stunning defeat; and organizations such as the NAACP, the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), and the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists had promulgated a series of explicitly anticommunist policies.

The split between liberals and leftists had become irreversible.⁴ On one side stood liberal anticommunists, who supported Truman and his cold war policies of containment; on the other side stood a much-beleaguered Communist Party accompanied by activists, such as Reverend Hill, who were for various reasons unwilling to denounce the party and

its front organizations. Stanley Nowak, whose support for Wallace gave the government yet another reason to try to deport him, articulated the Left's domestic- and foreign-policy critiques of Truman and the emerging anticommunist status quo when he pointed out that "just two years after the close of the war which was to defeat fascism and clear the road for social progress . . . we find reaction sweeping our land, the rights of labor being destroyed, civil and democratic rights trampled upon, and an alarming clamor for war against our allies and friends, the Slav nations."⁵

Rejected by liberals, the city's Far Left was rendered all the more vulnerable to McCarthyism.⁶ Under these circumstances, leftists redoubled their efforts to protect civil liberties, especially their own, and extend civil rights, attempting throughout to shore up their depleted numbers. The NNC, for example, had merged with the International Defense League, the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties, and in Detroit the Civil Rights Federation to form the national Civil Rights Congress, whose Detroit chapter was among the strongest in the nation. "The Civil Rights Congress shall be broadly based on the people of the United States," stated the resolution of incorporation adopted at the group's initial meeting, which was held in Detroit in May 1946, "and to that end shall take into membership all individuals willing to support its program, shall establish branches throughout the country and arrange for unification, affiliation or cooperation with existing groups and organizations to achieve maximum unity and effectiveness in carrying out its programs." Although its executive board included such well-known liberals as Mary McLeod Bethune and Dr. Benjamin Mays, the president of Morehouse College, the government wasted little time in branding this new organization as "one of the most dangerous front groups in the nation."⁷

Through the CRC and other groups, such as the Michigan Progressive Party, the Left carried on its battles for a permanent Fair Employment Practice Commission on the federal level and a state FEPC within Michigan. It sought guarantees for fair housing and battled anti-civil-liberties legislation such as the Taft-Hartley Act, the Smith Act, and a proliferation of municipal loyalty oaths. It also fought an impressive number of individual cases of police brutality and misconduct. These measures offered a significant but ultimately temporary bulwark against the destructive forces of anticommunism. By the early 1950s, the city's Left community was forced to adopt an almost wholly defensive posture. The processes through which the city's Left went from a dynamic local movement to an increasingly marginalized collectivity make for a complex and often dramatic story of national, state, and local repression, as well

as liberal anticommunism—all of which narrowed political alternatives not just in Detroit but throughout the nation.

It is also a story of the personal toll that the cold war took on the public and private lives, on the friendships and loyalties, of activists who were forced to defend themselves and their politics. Indeed, friendship played a large role in the decline of the Detroit Left. What a party, a union, or a civil rights agency says publicly does not always correspond to the actions of its individual members; interpersonal relationships are always more fluid and complicated than a party line. That is to say, individuals active in the city's civil rights struggles did not necessarily end long-standing friendships because of political differences. The warm ties of comradeship, affection, and in some cases love were a source of comfort for the men and women who found themselves increasingly under attack. Equally important was the sustaining political faith of local activists who, faced with public accusations of betrayal and perfidy, stuck to their convictions and principles. Finally, it is the story of a liberal-labor coalition that guided much of the city's civil rights activism in the late 1950s and early 1960s when the nation witnessed the dramatic appearance of a southern-based movement.

CANDIDATE HILL

The tragic events that culminated in the racially motivated riot of 1943 continued to shape the context of political activism in the postwar period. The problems of inadequate housing, employment discrimination, police brutality, and de facto racial segregation were as pressing as ever. As a result, "intelligent political action" was widely deemed to be the "next step" for the city's civil rights community. "We must not merely defeat those bigots in office," urged Louis Martin in a *Michigan Chronicle* editorial, but

we must take positive action on behalf of candidates who are dedicated to the welfare of the whole community, candidates who will stand up and fight for justice for all regardless of color. Neither the housing issue nor any other political issue will be justly resolved until the overall majority of Detroit organizes its political strength and takes affirmative action in behalf of good government for all the people.⁸

Although Martin alluded to coalition politics as good government for all people, Black Detroiters viewed gaining representation, particularly on the city's Common Council, as an especially pressing political necessity.

There were hopes of re-creating the success of activists in New York, where Black communist Benjamin Davis had been elected councilman in 1943—the same year in which Adam Clayton Powell Jr. left the council to run for Congress—and where in March 1945 Governor Thomas Dewey signed a state FEPC law, the first U.S. law prohibiting employment discrimination in the private sector. Black Detroiters could also look to nearby Cleveland, where an African American city councilman had recently been elected.⁹ In urban communities across the nation, the goal was to secure a voice in local decision making. This was an even more difficult task in Detroit than in most places, with the exception of the South, because Progressive reformers in the early twentieth century had eliminated the city's ward system and replaced it with nonpartisan, citywide elections. Instead of a system in which each ward elected its own councilman, Detroit's Common Council was reduced to nine members elected at large.

Although this reform had been initiated in the interests of "good government," African Americans had long suspected that its real purpose was to diffuse their potential political power. Hill, believing that these changes had been made because "the Negro was becoming so well organized," worked for the resumption of the ward system, "just like we have districts for Congress or in the Legislature." "We worked to get re-districting, and to go back to the ward system," Snow Grigsby, founder of the protest-oriented Civic Rights Committee in the early 1930s, concurred, "because we found, in an election, that councilmen lived way out in areas too far away from the people . . . [and there was] no councilman down in the inner city where one is needed. . . . We tried for many years to get this set up in wards, but people [in power] didn't go for it. . . . [I]f we had the ward system, we would have enough in there who would have some voice in the Common Council."¹⁰

Hill, Grigsby, and others who were critical of the at-large council did have a point. While the Black vote was largely responsible for the election of Charles C. Diggs to the state Senate in 1934, and the Rev. Horace A. White in 1944, they had been unable to place an African American candidate on the city's council. While the percentage of Blacks in the city's population had risen from 9.2 percent in 1940 to 12.9 percent by 1944, even if every eligible Black voter supported a single Black candidate under the at-large system, that candidate would still have needed an additional eighty thousand votes to secure ninth place—the cutoff for election to the council. Hence, the only way African Americans could achieve an electoral victory was through an alliance with other political forces.¹¹ The 1943 mayoral race, in which Blacks and unionists

attempted to defeat the incumbent, Edward Jeffries Jr., had already laid the foundation for a Black-labor alliance in electoral politics, and in 1945 both groups sought to build on this foundation to promote a strong labor slate.

The 1943 municipal elections were a turning point in local politics. They were nastier than any local electoral battle previously waged in the city and were tainted with a level of racism not seen since the mayoral election of 1924, when Klansman Charles Bowles narrowly missed being elected as a write-in candidate.¹² The way the 1943 elections devolved was also surprising. Mayor Jeffries had been elected in 1939 with a sizable portion of the African American vote in part based on the popularity of his father, Judge Edward Jeffries Sr., within the city's Black communities. Regarded as "an old-time liberal and a friend of Negroes and labor," the senior Jeffries was known for his fair treatment of Black defendants, including James Victory, the African American World War I veteran whom Maurice Sugar defended in 1935. The younger Jeffries retained the fairly high level of Black support that flowed from his father's goodwill until he announced a policy that left intact the "racial characteristics" of any neighborhood where wartime housing projects were to be built. The "white paper" he issued after the 1943 race riot, which blamed the violence on Black leaders and victims, only made matters worse.¹³

Jeffries was thus regarded as weak and ineffectual in 1943, and he trailed his chief opponent, Judge Frank Fitzgerald, in the primary by over thirty-eight thousand votes. Remarkably, Jeffries even lost the districts around the Sojourner Truth housing project, as he was seen as being "too friendly" toward the project's Black residents, who had begun to occupy homes there despite violent efforts to keep them out. Facing what looked like the end of his political career, Jeffries launched a vicious campaign of race and labor baiting unparalleled in the city's history and successfully rode a wave of fear and resentment back into office.

It was in the wake of this still superheated environment that Reverend Hill announced his candidacy for the Common Council in 1945. A series of March "caucus" meetings were held among select Black leaders and their white allies, including businessman Fred Allen; Fr. Malcolm C. Dade of St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church; the Rev. Horace A. White, the pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church and a member of the Detroit Housing Commission; Josephine Belford of the Democratic Federated Clubs; Louis C. Blount, general manager of the Great Lakes Insurance Company and president of the Booker T. Washington Trade Association; Gloster Current and Dr. J. J. McClendon of the NAACP;

attorney C. LeBron Simmons of the NNC; Snow Grigsby; deputy labor commissioner and former Garveyite Joseph Craigen; Jack Raskin of the CRC; the Rev. John Miles, by then copastor of the Detroit Council of Applied Religion; and Reverend Hill.

For the most part, Hill's support was based in the same intergenerational and inter-ideological group that frequented the noontime "roundtable" at the Lucy Thurman branch of the YWCA. His wider constituency, however, was probably the most diverse to come together in Detroit any time before or since. All agreed that the stakes were high enough to call for an expedient alliance, but finding one candidate on whom everyone could agree was not easy. Charles C. Diggs would have been ideal, but a 1944 graft conviction precluded this possibility. Two other likely candidates, Reverend White and L. C. Blount, both declined to run. There was a good deal of support for Hill before the meeting, especially among unionists, and he gradually emerged as a consensus candidate. Although there were worries that Hill's "communistic leanings and association with the left-wingers" would lose him the support of the more conservative wing of organized labor, most agreed that his "integrity and leadership" endowed him with the potential to appeal to all Detroiters. "We've heard the familiar charges of communism," one of Hill's advocates declared. "We've heard that label so often that it is meaningless. We aren't interested in a Negro who is too conservative. We want Hill."¹⁴

The only significant challenge to Hill's candidacy came from Edward A. Simmons, an attorney who had run reasonably well in the 1943 primaries. Seeking a second bite of the apple, Simmons had been drafted to run in early April by a small group of supporters led by prominent local Democratic Party operatives Joseph Cole and Emmett Cunningham—the same group that had previously called for Reverend White's removal from the Detroit Housing Commission. Simmons attracted only lukewarm support, however. He was seen as too friendly with Jeffries, who had appointed him to (and ousted Hill from) the Mayor's Interracial Committee after the 1943 elections, and too uninvolved in the campaigns against police brutality and for open housing. Editorials in both the *Michigan Chronicle* and the *Detroit Tribune* urged Simmons to withdraw. Finally, on May 5, the *Chronicle* published an open letter from Simmons, throwing his support behind Hill "in the interest of racial unity."

"Last week," the *Chronicle* subsequently editorialized, "community leaders representing different schools of political thought buried their differences and dedicated their energies to the Councilmanic campaign of the Reverend Charles A. Hill."

Considering the personal ambitions and the variety of views of the local leaders, this is no mean achievement. The leadership squabbles among Negroes are always a little ridiculous when you consider the common contempt in which the leadership is held by the night-shirt crowd across the color line. Now that the tempest in the tea-pot has subsided a major job awaits.”¹⁵

It was indeed a major job. Reverend Hill’s participation in the 1941 Ford strike, along with his involvement in the Citizens Committee for Jobs in War Industry and the Sojourner Truth Citizens Committee, gave him standing as a committed activist and community leader. It also helped that he was then vice president of the Metropolitan Council on Fair Employment, a broad interracial coalition.¹⁶

Hill aspired to be “The People’s Candidate.” His platform was designed to appeal to Blacks and members of the working classes. He promised, for example, to act on fair employment legislation and to cut the “red tape” and derogatory “hounding” of welfare recipients. He attacked the city’s transportation and sanitation services as a “shame to our great city” and vowed to improve these services in all areas of Detroit, “especially the low income neighborhoods.” In Hill’s campaign literature and speeches, he often introduced a class—as opposed to a race—dynamic, constantly stressing the need for improvement for people in all neighborhoods, “not only the privilege [*sic*] group.”¹⁷

Of course, Hill’s very presence made race even more of an issue in the city’s already racially divisive elections. Not only was he the only Black candidate in the council race, but he continuously raised the issues of police brutality and segregated public housing—the third rail of Detroit politics. Hill and his supporters felt that a Black presence on the council would help break the stalemate on the housing question, which they saw as the root cause of many difficulties for the city’s minority population. They looked again to the example of Benjamin Davis, a New York politician who had recently introduced a measure denying tax exemptions to projects sponsored by any housing, insurance, or redevelopment company that directly or indirectly discriminated on the basis of race, color, or creed.¹⁸

Hill’s platform was made up of a mixture of contentious issues, and there is every reason to believe that his supporters hoped that his being a man of the cloth would give his candidacy an extra boost. At the close of World War II, Hill’s church, Hartford Avenue Baptist, had the largest Black Baptist congregation on the city’s west side, and ground had recently been broken with much fanfare for an extension of its physical

plant. For most ministers the primary sign of success were an acknowledged ability to preach well, attract a good choir, and build up one's church. Hill was, accordingly, extraordinarily popular with his congregants and the church's deacons and trustees.¹⁹ Hartford's size and reputation, coupled with its members' loyalty to their pastor, endowed Hill with a strong base of personal and institutional influence. His involvement in professional associations, particularly the Detroit Council of Churches and the interracial Baptists' Ministerial Alliance, which represented over 198 Baptist congregations in the area, was of equal importance: Hill's three-year stint as chair of the DCC's Interracial Committee, in conjunction with his alliance membership, increased his chances of gaining much needed interracial support in the city's religious communities.

Ministerial supporters opened their churches to Hill and members of his campaign committee and plugged his campaign during Sunday services. "For the first time in 9 or 10 years," remarked a prominent clergyman at a Hill campaign meeting, "I prefaced my sermon to the congregation asking them to get out the vote." "I believe," he continued, that "we have the greatest opportunity for the issues are clear and the time and tide in our favor."

The first thing we did was to try and get the people to register before saying anything about personalities. We don't tell them how to vote but we tell them how we are going to vote. We are behind the slate you are putting out.²⁰

The slate in question was the result of the Black-labor alliance. At the same time that the Black leadership was working behind the scenes to select a candidate, the CIO's Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC) was haggling over its own endorsements. It was rumored that the committee was considering a deal with Mayor Jeffries, whom the UAW had opposed since 1943 and whom African American leaders refused to support.²¹ It was not until May, when Richard T. Frankenstein, a handsome and athletic vice president of the UAW, announced his candidacy, that the Black-labor alliance regained its stride. By the end of the month, the CIO-PAC, with the backing of the Hill for Council Committee, endorsed Frankenstein for mayor along with three candidates for the Common Council: George Edwards, an incumbent; Tracy Doll, executive secretary of the CIO-PAC, and Reverend Hill.²²

Once the endorsements were locked in, both groups turned to the practical matters of registering voters and devising strategies to combat

the race and labor baiting that had defeated the emergent coalition in 1943. The CIO-PAC spent more than one hundred thousand dollars and organized nearly five hundred precincts throughout the city in the third attempt by unionists to elect a mayor and the first to elect one of their own. The CIO-PAC also loaned four international representatives to the Hill committee and set up four campaign offices in African American neighborhoods in order to get out the crucial Black vote.

In order to help defray the cost of Hill's campaign, the CIO-PAC published joint campaign literature urging residents to support the entire labor slate. The Hill committee also received donations of time and money from most segments of the civil rights community, including Ford Local 600; the Michigan Citizen's Committee, a liberal organization formed in 1944 to reelect Roosevelt; the Wayne County Democratic Committee (even though the election was nominally nonpartisan); the CRF; the NAACP; the NNC; and the Michigan Division of the Communist Party. Neither Frankenstein nor Hill openly welcomed the CP's support, but the existence of a Left coalition that included the CP attests to the lingering influence of Popular Front politics in postwar Detroit; such a coalition would be nearly impossible just three or four years later.²³

In addition to running a campaign, Hill and his supporters were forced to take the ideological offensive against the expected race and Red baiting. The Hill committee and the CIO-PAC planned for the worst. Strategy sessions were held nearly every day at Lucy Thurman, and both the Hill committee and the CIO-PAC endorsed a resolution from the Detroit Council of Churches urging candidates to refrain from inflammatory campaign rhetoric about race, religion, and nationality. The Hill committee was especially careful to stress the breadth of its candidate's platform. Under the slogan, "Elect a Man Who Will Represent All of the People," Hill's campaign focused on jobs, police brutality, housing, transportation, sanitation, and union rights.

Hill's campaign continuously emphasized the interracial nature of the candidate's support by highlighting endorsements from prominent white figures such as the Rev. Henry Hitt Crane. "Hill's campaign is assuming the proportion of a gigantic community-sponsored movement," Fred Allen, Hill's campaign manager, stated. "It is interracial in character and bids fair to place the first Negro in the Common Council in the history of Detroit."²⁴ This evident interracialness was not a uniform phenomenon, however. "What I found out in most cases," recalled Reverend Hill, "was that when [a white cocandidate] came to Negro groups, he would lift me very high; but he was very, very quiet when we

went to white groups. That happened in so many cases.”²⁵ This was clearly the case with Frankenstein, who was hardly a fiery radical. As a writer for the leftist magazine *PM* noted, the mayoral candidate’s strategy was to “placate any fears of householders and other solid citizens that he is not a safe man to be mayor.” This was especially true with regard to the issue of open housing.²⁶

In the end, all this careful emphasis on racial cooperation could not prevent the general election campaign from taking a nasty turn. Both Hill and Frankenstein did well in the first round of voting in August, and the entire labor slate advanced to the second and final round in November. Frankenstein led in the August primary, with 41 percent of the vote to Jeffries’s 34 percent, while Hill ran a strong ninth in the council race. The *Michigan Chronicle* celebrated Hill’s unprecedented victory with a banner headline: “Hill Sets an Election Record.” But with his position once again threatened, Mayor Jeffries went on the offensive.²⁷ He branded Frankenstein a hostage to “alien” powers that wanted to use Detroit as “a spring-board, as a jumping-off place—for their revolutionary crusade.” “If they can seize Detroit,” Jeffries warned, “the industrial metropolis of the nation, they figure all other industrial communities will follow suit. Thus, they reason, they can in time knit together a political empire that will rule the United States.” He even went so far as to read from an issue of *Political Affairs*, a publication of the Communist Party, attempting to show that Frankenstein’s campaign had used the text as a political manual.²⁸

Local newspapers, particularly those serving small communities in and around Detroit, picked up this theme in pro-Jeffries editorials and advertisements. “Communism has entered this political campaign,” stated an advertisement in the *Detroit News*. “November 6th is not just another date on the calendar,” warned the *Home Gazette*, a paper catering to the city’s northwest side: “It is a date with destiny. Voters who want to see the hands of Russian Quislings kept out of managing Detroit will be aroused to help get out the American vote . . . to defeat all Quislings and Communist Fronters.”²⁹ Hill, who was branded as one of the “most active Communist front figures in all America,” was implicated along with the rest of the labor slate. “Exposing Rev. Hill” was the banner headline of an article that listed Hill’s political “offenses”: his chairmanship of the local NNC, his membership in the old Civil Rights Federation, and his defense of members of the Young Communist League who were expelled from the University of Michigan for “subversive” activities in 1940. Hill was also accused of being a “fellow plotter” with the CP’s Ben Davis. Overall, the *Home Gazette* felt its readers had been duped in the

August primaries: “[M]any whites voted for him on the assumption that he would be a reliable and responsible representative of the negro population. HIS COMMUNISTIC ASSOCIATIONS THROW A NEW LIGHT ON HIS QUALIFICATIONS.”³⁰

Despite all efforts to prevent the use of Hill’s presence on the labor slate to ignite racial fears, the Jeffries forces organized a concerted effort to label the labor slate as overly friendly to the campaign for fair and interracial housing—even though Frankenstein attempted to keep this troublesome issue at arm’s length. Anonymous cards appealing to Black voters and supposedly printed by the Frankenstein campaign were circulated to convince voters that “White Neighborhoods are again in Peril.” In another representative instance, Jeffries blatantly asked listeners at a rally whether they “want a Sojourner Truth housing project in their neighborhood.” As far back as the 1920s, Detroit had a housing shortage. No additional housing was built during the Depression, and a brief building spurt in the late 1930s was cut short by World War II. Seen in light of the city’s nonintegration policy and the existence of some 150 white “improvement associations,” the housing shortage among Detroit’s African Americans seemed intractable. Hill’s support for integrated housing was treated by Jeffries’s allies as a problem of cosmic proportions. Any mention of open-occupancy laws was greeted with so much contempt and hostility in white neighborhoods that this issue, more than any other, probably accounted for the labor slate’s defeat at the polls.³¹

Religion was also used to divide the labor coalition. While religion and politics had always overlapped in Detroit, faith became an issue in the 1945 campaign in new and troubling ways. Frankenstein was accused, alternatively and ironically, of being a radical Jew, an anti-Semite, and an ally of Fr. Charles Coughlin. On the one hand, Frankenstein fell victim to a well-organized “whisper campaign,” particularly in the city’s Polish neighborhoods, suggesting that the candidate, a native-born white Episcopalian whose name was misspelled and mispronounced as *Frankenstein* in the rumor mongering—was Jewish. At the same time another local paper published Frankenstein’s favorable comments about Father Coughlin—made in the early 1930s when Coughlin the populist was influential in drumming up support for Frankenstein’s fledgling union, the Automotive Industrial Workers’ Association (AIWA)—alongside Coughlin’s later anti-Semitic editorials. The effect of this dishonest juxtaposition was to suggest that Frankenstein was a “disciple” of the present-day, reactionary Coughlin.³²

Hill experienced problems of his own. While few seemed to question the merits of having a clergyman on the Common Council, Hill’s minis-

terial credentials were questioned because of his radical politics. There is little doubt that at least part of the animus against Hill issued from Gerald L. K. Smith and his followers. Hill had had a run-in with Smith in 1943 over Hill's association with Claude Williams, who had left Detroit and returned to the South at the end of 1944, and they had denounced each other in a private exchange of letters about Williams's "communist" leanings. The disagreement had gone public in the form of a dispute over how to interpret a Langston Hughes poem entitled "Goodbye Christ." Hughes's poem opens:

"Listen, Christ
 You did all right in your day, I reckon—
 But that day's gone now"
 They ghosted you up on a swell story, too
 Called it Bible—
 But it's dead now.
 The popes and the preachers've
 Made too much money from it.
 They've sold you to too many

 Kings, generals, robbers, and killers—
 Even to the Tzar and the Cossacks,
 Even to Rockefeller's Church,
 Even to the SATURDAY EVENING POST.
 You ain't no good no more.
 They've pawned you
 Till you've done wore out.

 Goodbye,
 Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova,
 Beat it on away from here now.
 Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—
 A real guy named
 Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME—

 I said, ME!

Originally published in the *Negro Worker* in 1932 while Hughes was in Russia, it was republished in Smith's *The Cross and the Flag* and widely circulated as part of his Christian nationalist crusade. The poem, which Hughes sought to repudiate years later, would haunt him for the rest of his life, as figures such as Smith used it for their own designs.³³

In an exchange of letters carried in the *Michigan Chronicle*, Smith challenged Hill, “as a minister of the gospel,” to make anything “good out of the poem.” Insisting that the issue had nothing to do with race, he warned Hill about the “bootlicking politicians and patronizers of the Negro” who simply flatter Blacks because it is “smart politics.” Smith, on the other hand, promised only the unvarnished truth. In his reply, Hill never really dealt with the implications of Hughes’s poem. Instead, he defended Hughes by insisting that he was no more a communist than Smith himself and that the Christ Hughes was saying goodbye to is “the Christ held up by the white supremists” and those who have “no concern for the brotherhood of man.” Hill concluded his letter by hoping for the day when Smith and others like him would come to challenge the “anti-Christian, anti-democratic forces by insisting that all barriers that divide men because of race, creed or national origin be broken down, and that the Kingdom of God shall become a reality here and now.”³⁴

That day did not come in 1943, nor did it come in 1945, when Smith joined the forces arrayed against Hill to discredit him and the rest of the labor slate. Always an avid anti-Semite, and even using Judaism as an indictment of non-Jewish targets, Smith insisted to a crowd of listeners that his endorsement of Jeffries had nothing to do with Frankenstein’s “Jewish” background. An editorial in the ACTU’s *Wage Earner* quoted Smith conflating Judaism and communism by instructing his followers to oppose Frankenstein and the labor slate on the grounds that “Stalin should not name the mayor of Detroit.” In the end, negative campaigning about the dangers of Blacks, Jews, communists, and radical unionist political power won the day. Jeffries was reelected with a margin of sixty-five thousand votes, and three of the CIO-backed candidates for the council, including Reverend Hill, were defeated. But the news was not all bad. Frankenstein garnered 44 percent of the total ballots cast, including 61 percent in Polish working-class neighborhoods and 75 percent in Italian precincts, and over 90 percent of African American votes. The wards dominated by Irish and southern whites proved to be the toughest nuts to crack, with the CIO winning less than half of the votes cast in these areas.³⁵

Although the defeat was that much more painful after the great promise of the primaries, neither the UAW nor Hill withdrew from the political arena. Despite repeated accusations of communist sympathies, Hill rode a wave of popularity in the Black community to the presidency of the Detroit NAACP. It was a personal triumph. He had worked with

the local NAACP for close to two decades, and his relationship with the organization had often been strained. His 1942 attempt to win the presidency, with the backing of Black labor radicals who wanted to push the organization in a more democratic and militant direction, had not gone well. While some saw the election as a mere clash of personalities, it also represented a clash of political orientations.³⁶ Although Hill won the NAACP elections in 1945, the old divisions and tensions persisted.

Hill appointed left-wing unionists such as Sam Sage of the Wayne County CIO Council to the NAACP Executive Board and attempted to give the branch's working-class base more input. He also insisted that the branch undertake more direct-action protests rather than relying solely on legal tactics. This is not to say that the group's legislative strategy was neglected, however. Hill was careful to monitor the branch's four ongoing restrictive covenant cases. The first, *Sipes v. McGhee*, was argued all the way to the Supreme Court under his watch, and the four cases would all be consolidated, along with cases from other parts of the country, in the court's 1948 landmark *Shelley v. Kramer* decision, which found discriminatory covenants unconstitutional.³⁷ But Hill's connections to the Left hampered his effectiveness at the NAACP. "Rev. Hill had come in for criticism by leaders in the NAACP for his apparently close liaison with leftwing elements," reported the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists' *Wage Earner*, and his defeat for reelection at the end of the year was regarded as an important part of the national office's attempts to save local branches from being "captured" by communists.³⁸

Although he held the presidency for only one year, Reverend Hill mentioned his position proudly on all of his campaign literature when he again ran, unsuccessfully, for Common Council in 1947, 1948, and 1949. Hill was never elected to the Common Council and was never again able to put together as broad a coalition as he had in 1945, although future Detroit mayor Coleman Young, who frequently served as his campaign manager, certainly tried. With Young often at his side Hill became a perennial candidate for whom the act of campaigning was as important as the increasingly remote possibility of winning. Following the precedents set by local politicians such as Stanley Nowak and Charles Diggs Sr. (and by his son, Charles Diggs Jr., with his 1951 election to the state House) Hill made his campaigns part of the larger struggle for rights and social justice. At various times, he promised to work for general improvements such as slum clearance and low-income housing; at others, he explicitly focused on minority issues such as discrimination in life and automobile insurance and "the reign of fascist-like and police

terror” in the city, during which Hill demanded the removal of police chief “‘shoot first’ Harry Toy.”³⁹

Although Hill did not engage as often in cultural politics, at least in the contemporary sense of the term, he did campaign for the signing of Black baseball players to the Detroit Tigers.⁴⁰ Detroit had a considerable number of Black baseball fans, many of whom supported the Brown Bombers, a Negro League team financially backed by Joe Louis, but the Detroit Tigers’ racist hiring policies were a sore spot. When the major leagues finally began integrating in 1946, the Tigers were the second-to-last team to sign African American players. Both the team and the stadium became symbols of racism. Hill and others fought long and hard against the owner’s discriminatory policies, and when the Tigers’ first Black player, Ozzie Virgil, stepped onto the field in June 1958, Blacks turned out in large numbers for the occasion. Virgil, who was also the first Dominican player in the major leagues, was generally described as a “mediocre” player, but that day, to the surprise of everyone, he went five for five.⁴¹

His advocacy for integration of professional baseball didn’t place Hill too far outside the liberal political mainstream. Yet some of the positions he adopted reveal the extent to which he remained involved in Left politics. When the city first proposed a Loyalty Amendment, which would require all city employees to sign a noncommunist oath, Hill worked for its defeat as part of his 1949 Council campaign. Arguing that those “forces who use violence to blot out democracy are the very ones who yell loudest for pledges of ‘loyalty,’” he denounced the measure as part of Detroit’s “witch-hunt.”⁴² More broadly, Hill also campaigned for the banning of the atom bomb and for the promotion of world peace. A man of the cloth urging peace was not unusual. But the specifics of Hill’s position placed him in direct opposition to the Truman administration’s foreign policy and in line with the pro-Soviet Left.⁴³

Recalling his close friend Stanley Nowak’s criticism of Truman’s fight against international communism, Hill signed a 1949 petition to ban the use of militarized atomic power without the authorization of the United Nations. The reverend was apparently unconcerned that both the Soviet Union and the American Communist Party supported the measure. Hill also joined Nowak and others in their campaign to stop the rearming of West Germany because “the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and Albania stated jointly that they will not tolerate the re-arming.”⁴⁴ He also continued his association with the Detroit branch of the Civil Rights Congress, which was among the most active and important CP front groups of the late 1940s and 1950s.⁴⁵

RED BAITING THE FEPC TO DEATH

The Communist Party's support of Hill and his bids for Common Council was subjected to thorough scrutiny in the press and was thus certainly common knowledge. It is difficult to know what effect, if any, this fact had on Hill's standing within the Black community. Surely it helped that Reverend Hill linked his various Common Council campaigns to what became the last major mobilization initiated by the city's early civil rights community, namely, the demand for a city and state fair employment practice act. The idea of fair employment as a civil right was born out of the work of A. Philip Randolph and the March on Washington movement, which had prompted Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 8802. The federal Fair Employment Practice Commission established by that order had always been limited in its scope to industries contracting with the federal government for wartime production. Once the war ended, the FEPC, like many other New Deal agencies, was attacked by a conservative coalition of Republican and southern Democratic congressmen. Nationally, activists coordinated a campaign to "Save the Federal FEPC," but once Congress discontinued its appropriation, many activists turned their attention to efforts on the local and state levels.

The initial campaign for a Michigan FEPC was spearheaded by the state branch of the Civil Rights Congress. Hill devoted a great deal of time to the cause. In 1945 and 1946, several FEPC bills were introduced into the Michigan legislature by pro-labor politicians, including Stanley Nowak. Although these bills faced no open opposition from either party, they were all killed in committee, largely as a result of lobbying efforts by the conservative Michigan Manufacturers Association. In the fall of 1946, the Michigan CRC turned instead to the use of initiating petitions as a political strategy. Attorneys Ernest Goodman and C. LeBron Simmons, who were associated with both the CRC and the National Lawyers Guild, discovered a provision in the Michigan Constitution that mandated legislative action within forty days on any petition signed by 8 percent of all those casting votes in the most recent (in this case 1946) election for governor. If the legislature were to reject, amend, or fail to act on the measure, it would automatically be placed on the ballot.⁴⁶

There were certain risks attendant on the use of this loophole. On the one hand, activists could use the drive to collect petition signatures as a way to pursue their goal of educating people about employment discrimination. This approach called for a top-down planning strategy that then had to be implemented on the grassroots level and was seen by its supporters as the only way, however slim the chances for success, of forc-

ing the state to adopt fair employment legislation. On the other hand, naysayers warned that, even if enough signatures could be collected within the limited time allotted, voters might still choose to kill the model bill when it appeared on the ballot. Even the sympathetic *Gloster Current* considered such a strategy to be “ill-timed, ill-considered and dangerous.”⁴⁷

Obviously, no one could guarantee the outcome. Although the initiating-petition provision had been on the books since 1913, it had never been used. “It [the initiative petition for a state FEPC] will be the first time in the history of Michigan,” stated an editorial in the *Plymouth Beacon*, “that the people will seek to enact legislation over the heads of the representatives.”⁴⁸ It was, agreed the Rev. Charles A. Hill, a “highly democratic procedure,” one rooted in “the great traditions of our nation.” In a rhetorical flourish, Hill insisted that the ideals for which “the Revolution, the Civil War and the Second World War were fought” were all embodied in the campaign for equal job opportunities.⁴⁹ Armed with this new strategy, the CRC sought the cooperation of over three hundred Michigan-based organizations, “embracing every sector of the people.”

In an article for *Jewish Life* assessing the aftermath of the petition drive, Reverend Hill wrote:

The idea for the petition campaign had originated with the Civil Rights Congress, and a conference prior to the collection of signatures had been under the exclusive sponsorship of the Congress. But it was agreed that the issue of FEPC was so broad, and the possibilities for united action so great, that it was essential to include all organizations in the state in the circulation of petitions. At the conference, therefore, the committee was broadened to include all interested organizations. All groups in the community, political, religious, labor and radical, became active in the campaign. The Jewish people, the Negro people, Protestants, Catholics, professionals and workers entered the competition to turn in the most signatures. It was a demonstration of the unity of the people.⁵⁰

Unity, or at least cooperation, was necessary to collect the 133,328 signatures needed (the goal was set at 200,000, just to be on the safe side) in the short weeks from early September to December 15, 1946, which was designated as Bill of Rights Day.

Hill was appointed chairman of the Committee for a State FEPC,

which helped orchestrate the massive effort. His own participation tended to emphasize the duty and responsibility of the religious. "You couldn't go to church on Sunday," recalled one member of Hill's congregation, "without having signed one of those forms for fair employment." Under Hill's supervision, Hartford was established, along with the offices of organizations such as the NAACP, Local 600, the American Jewish Congress, and the Masonic Lodge (St. John's), as an official Petition Collection Center.⁵¹ Attempting to capitalize further on the moral authority of the pulpit, Hill organized a group of more than twenty leading clergymen, including Fr. Malcolm Dade of St. Cyprian's, the Rev. T. T. Timberlake of the Detroit Council of Churches, and the Rev. J. H. Howell of St. Stephen AME, to issue a "Thanksgiving Statement for the Committee for a State FEPC." Connecting "our Pilgrim Fathers" and the freedom to worship with the "freedom for men of all races, tongues, and kindred to work according to their skills," the group urged every citizen to "take seriously the meaning of this national day of Thanksgiving [and] to sign one of the FEPC petitions as a positive act of faith in the future of our country as a bulwark of freedom."⁵² The committee also managed to secure the support of prominent political figures, including Mayor Jeffries, who declared an "FEPC Day" during the petition drive, and Walter Reuther, who was in the process of solidifying his position at the top of the UAW.⁵³

High-minded ideals, religious commitment, and seemingly broad-based support did not prevent internal tensions and fissures from emerging within the FEPC coalition. The coalition could not escape the factionalism that was becoming more and more pervasive within the Left in general. The Communist Party's active and open participation was the central source of contention. Early on in the petition drive, the *Wage Earner* warned that communists and communist sympathizers were trying to "capture" the campaign.⁵⁴ Local activist Geraldine Bledsoe recalls that before this time anticommunism "was a sort of muted thing." She assigned the breakup of the FEPC coalition, however, to the increasingly vocal "struggle over the ideology of communism."⁵⁵ More specifically, the presence of communists in the coalition hastened a divergence of opinions regarding the most appropriate course of action once the petitions had been gathered and submitted.

The CP, along with Hill and other CRC activists, viewed the initiative petition as a way to force the legislature to act, or, barring that, to place their FEPC proposal on the ballot and let the voting public have the final say. According to the more moderate factions, particularly those associ-

ated with the NAACP, the Jewish Community Council, and the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, such “faith in the people” was sheer folly. Instead of pressing for a vote—a daring plan considering the beating that the labor slate had taken in recent elections—the moderates preferred to use the petitions as leverage in the state legislature, an equally daring move, considering the strength of antilabor voices in the state House and the intense lobbying of the Michigan Manufacturers’ Association.⁵⁶

There was nothing necessarily communistic about the petition, but it was soon defined as such by liberals. As a result, the formerly inclusive Committee for a State FEPC was split in two as the campaign moved from the collection of signatures to the building of legislative support. Thus, in early January 1947, the Michigan Council for Fair Employment Legislation was formed “to rally the widest possible . . . liberal support” as opposed to the “narrow sponsorship” of the committee. The CRC and CP were pointedly excluded from the new group, and Bishop Francis J. Haas, a former chairman of the federal FEPC, was selected as honorary chair. Headed by George Schermer, director of the Mayor’s Interracial Committee, and Oscar Cohen of the Jewish Community Council, the Michigan Council immediately voted to pull out of the CRC-backed committee. More dramatically, it decided to openly denounce the rival group. The campaign ended with the city’s civil rights activists divided and the petition nullified on a legal technicality.⁵⁷

Reverend Hill and others could still hope that “the people will finally wield unity that will result in the establishment of FEPC in Michigan and elsewhere.” But unity—a concept to which much of the Left continued to cling—was becoming ever more difficult to achieve. The groundwork had already been laid for the final round of factional fights within the civil rights community, fights that would influence the direction of civil rights activism for the next decade. Calls for “unity among all progressive forces” fell on increasingly suspicious, and even hostile, ears.

By the end of 1947, the liberal Michigan Council for Fair Employment Legislation was still fighting for a Michigan FEPC. In response to the “tremendous impact” of the release of a report by Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights, entitled *To Secure These Rights*, the group decided to broaden its agenda and change its name to the Michigan Committee on Civil Rights just in time for the messy election season of 1948, in which civil rights activists would become embroiled in factional fights between and among Democrats, Progressives, Republicans, Dixiecrats, liberals, conservatives, and Communists.⁵⁸

PROGRESSIVE ACTS OF FAITH

Henry Wallace and the 1948 Campaign Season

I have stated elsewhere that red-baiting has paid and is paying great dividends. While masses of the people have been distracted by carefully manufactured "red menaces" the reactionaries have taken control of the government, inflation has continued its spirals upwards, and our major economic and social problems have intensified.⁵⁹

—Henry A. Wallace, 1948

The internal difficulties hampering Detroit's civil rights community have to be seen in a broad national (and international) context. The national mood that made the original federal Fair Employment Practice Act and Commission possible was in retreat as a new conservatism enveloped American political culture. Businessmen and industrialists, who had lost the faith of working people during the Depression, were restored to a position of respect during World War II, and the Republican Party was increasingly successful at the polls as the nation set about the task of restoring "normalcy" and enjoying prosperity. That this quest for normalcy included a seemingly reactionary desire to curb the power of labor unions and silence the Left—particularly those organizations with actual or supposed ties to the Communist Party—was one of the tragedies of the postwar period.

The consequences of this new conservatism for Detroit's civil rights community were extreme, as each of its major institutional components—labor unions, civil rights organizations, and the Communist Party—came under attack from the government and cold war liberals. Normalcy dictated not only that labor unions enter into a cooperative association with the government bureaucracy—a process begun during World War II—but also that any area of potentially "subversive" opinion or action be contained and eventually destroyed. This "domestic containment," the counterpart of President Harry S. Truman's foreign policy to isolate and limit the threat of international communism, created a climate in which any "inappropriate" (i.e., communistic) demand for civil rights was regarded with circumspection.⁶⁰

With postwar strikes sweeping the nation, labor unions were viewed as increasingly unmanageable. The no-strike pledge enacted during World War II was effectively nullified by a restless workforce. In 1946, nearly 4.5 million people in various industries and occupations went on strike, demanding wage increases to compensate for wartime sacrifices and inflation. Some 116 million workdays were lost—four times as many

as during the 1937 sit-down strikes—and the long-standing ties between the CIO and the Democratic administration were strained to the breaking point.⁶¹ The bitter 103-day strike led by Walter Reuther against General Motors was, at the time, part of the largest strike wave (1945–46) in the nation’s history.

The GM strike began nearly three weeks after Richard Frankensteen’s defeat in the mayoral elections, and, because the UAW demanded a pay increase without a corresponding increase in the price of automobiles, it was an assault on the status quo. (Reuther’s “anti-inflation” strategy had the full backing of neither the CIO nor the government, and the UAW was forced to settle for a lower pay increase than it had initially sought with no mention of automobile prices.) Overall, the strike wave ran counter to the administration’s policy of domestic containment. Truman took drastic steps in response, temporarily nationalizing packinghouses, railroads, and coal mines in order to forcibly end strikes. He also threatened to draft defiant railroad workers into the army and fined the coal miners’ union 3.5 million dollars for refusing to abide by the government’s back-to-work order. By reviving the old tactic of blaming worker activism on the unhealthy influence of the Communist Party and its sympathizers, conservative politicians refashioned their battle against the postwar strike wave into a new front in the war against domestic subversion.⁶²

The Labor-Management Relations Act of 1947, better known as the Taft-Hartley Act, was Congress’s response to the nation’s “labor problems.” Designed to “emancipate union and non-union workers from the tyranny of racketeers and the treason of Communist labor leaders” and to avoid or at least minimize “industrial strife,” Taft-Hartley, passed over President Truman’s veto in June 1947, was above all a congressional attempt to keep the peace and domesticate unions. The law outlawed the closed shop and granted other favorable advantages to management. Moreover, the National Labor Relations Board was prohibited from dealing with any union whose local, national, or international officers had not submitted an affidavit swearing that he or she was not “a member of the Communist Party or affiliated with such party, and that he does not believe in, and is not a member of or supports any organization that believes in or teaches, the overthrow of the United States Government by force or by any illegal or unconstitutional methods.”⁶³

Although progressive unionists opposed Taft-Hartley, most labor leaders eventually capitulated and signed the anticommunist affidavits. Walter Reuther, for example, was critical of the law’s ability to undermine the power of unions but used the anticommunist provisions to rid

the UAW of communists and sympathizers, many of whom happened to be his rivals. Reuther's high-profile role in the GM strike, coupled with his attacks on communists associated with his rival, George Addes, and the left-of-center caucus, secured his election to the UAW presidency in 1946. Over the next three years, anticommunist sentiment, and particularly its manifestation in the Taft-Hartley Act, facilitated Reuther's assault on the Far Left.⁶⁴ Reuther's rise to power influenced not only the course of labor activism in the city but also the nature of the relationship between African Americans and the UAW. Ironically, many of his actions reinforced the government's desire to contain the radicalism of Blacks and workers. They also hardened the split in the city's civil rights community.

Reuther's anticommunism, which was supported by the UAW's right-of-center coalition—including socialists, Trotskyists, and the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists—won him a decisive victory. Although Reuther was a socialist who had once harbored some sympathy toward the CP and the Soviet Union, he was willing to engage in Red baiting as a means to an end.⁶⁵ As a result, dozens of union officials who had been central to the Left-labor community in Detroit were expelled. Maurice Sugar, a member of the International Labor Defense and the National Lawyers Guild and the union's legal counsel since 1936, was fired, as was Black attorney George Crockett, director of the UAW's first Fair Practice Committee and one of the most outspoken critics of discrimination inside the union. Crockett and Sugar later joined with Ernest Goodman to form the city's first integrated law firm, one of the first in the nation, which defended many within the Left community during the Smith Act trials and the period before HUAC. (Years later, augmented by younger attorneys, the firm would also come to the defense of the New Left.⁶⁶)

Within Local 600, activists such as Shelton Tappes, who lost his 1945 campaign for reelection as recording secretary, adapted to the confines of liberal anticommunism and signed a loyalty affidavit. Christopher Alston, Arthur McPhaul, Dave Moore, and others with strong ties to the CP lost their positions altogether. The Reutherites' efforts to control Local 600 did not end there, however. Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, Reuther and his supporters took dramatic measures to keep Local 600 in check, including placing it under the administrative control of the UAW's Executive Board.⁶⁷

Many activists remained within the union and continued the struggle for union democracy and racial equality as best they could. Black unionists such as Horace Sheffield, Robert "Buddy" Battle, and Nelson Jack Edwards had been more or less loyal Reutherites for years. They had

always opposed the “manipulation of the left-wing” and the “yoke” of the CP and would form a key contingent in the liberal-labor coalition that emerged to carry on the struggle in the late 1950s.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, others who were ousted from the UAW and the CIO sought alternative avenues for their civil rights activism. It was in this environment that the Progressive Party was organized as a third-party challenge to the Democrats (and liberal anticommunism) and the Republicans (and conservative anti-communism). Leftists within the civil rights community in Detroit supported the Progressive Party and its presidential candidate, Henry Wallace, from the start. Reverend Hill, who had closely followed the reversal of fortune experienced by his friends and political allies in the left-of-center UAW coalition, attended the Progressive Party’s founding convention in Philadelphia in 1948 as a member of the party’s National Committee; subsequently, he also became a cochair of the party’s Michigan Division.⁶⁹

Hill was among the “60 leading [African American] ministers” who traveled to Philadelphia to express their support for Wallace’s candidacy, and he was duly named to the nominations committee. Hill predicted that “the Progressives’ forthright stand on segregation will win the overwhelming majority of the Negro vote” and justified his support of Wallace in both racial and religious terms. Agreeing with the other clergymen in attendance that religion “does not exist in a vacuum” and that one’s stand on pressing issues such as “peace, democracy and abundance” was the test of a “truly moral and devout man,” Hill insisted that neither the Democrats nor the Republicans “afford the church-goer any hope.” Both, he continued, advocated “pro-fascist standards” and “violate[d] all the precepts of the believer.”⁷⁰

The Progressive Party was in a sense the last major attempt to save the New Deal coalition. Wallace had been both Roosevelt’s vice president and his secretary of agriculture. Although he was wary of Communist Party support, both Wallace and the party felt that he, not Truman, had the right to the mantle of the New Deal. To Hill and others, Wallace seemed just the sort of morally devout man the nation needed.

Progressive strategists sought to make their party a grassroots movement with broad appeal; dubbed “Gideon’s Army,” it took on a pronounced religious tinge. The platform that emerged out of the 1948 convention, for instance, concluded: “Under the guidance of Divine Providence, the Progressive Party, with strong and active faith, moves forward to peace, freedom, and abundance.” Wallace himself borrowed freely from the texts of the Old Testament prophets in speaking, for example, of the day when men shall “beat their swords into plowshares

and their spears into pruning hooks." Along with an appeal to Providence, the party's platform also included a strongly worded critique of Truman's policy toward international communism, a promise to use the power of government to create sixty million new jobs, an attack on discrimination in all areas of social life, and support for fair employment practices.⁷¹

Born in 1888 on a farm in central Iowa, Henry Wallace was the progeny of hardworking farmers and devout Presbyterians; his father was a United Presbyterian minister. Wallace was also imbued with a touch of mysticism and wore the markings of a man engaged in a lifelong spiritual quest. Having been raised in the United Presbyterian church, Wallace passed through a skeptical phase during college, attended Roman Catholic services for a time, and finally found a spiritual home in the high Episcopal church. Throughout, he honed a political philosophy as informed by scientific rationalism as by the social gospel and midwestern populism. In a series of addresses delivered at the Chicago Theological Seminary and the Federal Council of Churches in the early 1930s while he was still Roosevelt's secretary of agriculture, Wallace demonstrated his talent for mixing politics, economics, and religion and his understanding of the necessarily cooperative relationship between church and state. "It is the job of Government, as I see it," he proclaimed, "to devise and develop the social machinery which will work out the implications of the social message of the old prophets and of the Sermon on the Mount; but it remains the opportunity of the Church to fill men's hearts and minds with the spirit and meaning of great visions."⁷²

Hill certainly shared these sentiments and stuck with the Wallace camp even after the Democratic Party adopted its own civil rights plank—in part out of fear that Wallace would otherwise capture the Black vote—and even after Strom Thurmond led his renegade Dixiecrats out of the Democratic Party to create a third-party challenge from the right. Although Wallace and Hill had much in common when it came to political theology, as well as foreign and domestic policy, it is difficult to know exactly why Hill continued to support Wallace even after it was clear that the Progressive Party's campaign was a lost cause.

Hill obviously believed that Wallace would be better for the Black population, the working class, and the Left than either Truman or Thomas Dewey, who ran on the Republican ticket. But he never explained what he meant by his statement that both the Republicans and the Democrats advocated profascist standards. Still, a number of possibilities can be inferred. First, it may have been the case that Hill had been preaching unity of all progressive forces for so long that unity,

which implied the inclusion of communists, took precedence over everything else. Second, it may have been the case that Hill was, like the CP, truly concerned about Truman's policies toward the Eastern Bloc on the foreign stage and the containment of labor at home. In his own 1948 campaign for Common Council, Hill stated that he was pro-Wallace and against the Marshall Plan. As Stanley Nowak, who was running on the 1948 Progressive Party's ticket for the state Senate, put it during a joint appearance with Hill, "The issue in this campaign, of war or peace, fascism or democracy, free labor or slave labor under the Taft-Hartleyites, an end to Jim Crowism, reduction of prices and return to price control, seemingly do not interest the back-room shufflers of the state Democratic party clique."⁷³ In Nowak's telling, the issues are merged and inseparable, and only an untainted third party could properly address them. The threat of Thurmond and the Dixiecrats—and what, after all, would have been so new about such virulent forms of southern racism?—was an insufficient reason to return to the Democratic fold.

Finally, Hill might have felt not only the pull of politics but, once again, of friendship as well. He had accepted the chairmanship of a political organization, the Michigan Progressive Party, to which most of his closest friends belonged, including Nowak and Coleman Young. At least initially, the new party's platform and its presidential candidate were attractive to workers and minorities. All of the "good people" appeared to be pro-Wallace. When Wallace made an appearance in Detroit soon after he announced his candidacy in December, 1947, some thirteen thousand people paid to hear him speak. The advance ticket sales were so great that his local sponsors had to move the affair to the city's Olympia Stadium. Presidents of local unions and units in the area formed an Auto Workers National Committee for Wallace, and pro-Wallace committees were convened in a number of local unions, including Ford Local 600.⁷⁴

Local activists such as Hill, Nowak, and Young, who had been recently elected director of organizing in the ideologically divided Wayne County CIO, all ran for local office on the Progressive Party ticket, and activists associated with the Civil Rights Congress created Wallace for President Committees throughout the city's communities. Yet on Wallace's second campaign visit to Detroit in the late summer of 1948 the city's pro-Wallace groups couldn't even muster 450 people to attend. In the months between Wallace's two visits, anti-Wallace forces had managed to isolate the Progressive Party outside of the political mainstream. The liberal attack was spearheaded by the CIO, Americans for Democratic Action, and the NAACP, which joined forces to frame

Wallace as “soft on communism,” and the Progressive Party as the latest “communist front” bent on destroying the American way of life. The CIO urged its members not to support Wallace because such support threatened to divide the Democratic Party and facilitate a Republican victory. The CIO-PAC, which had been so supportive of Hill’s candidacy in 1945, now went to great pains to ensure that all member unions and their locals understood the dangers represented by Wallace and the Progressives.⁷⁵

The UAW’s Executive Board denounced the Progressive Party as “a Communist Party maneuver designed to advance the foreign policy interests of the Soviet Union at the expense of democracy and freedom throughout the world.” The ADA, for its part, released a four-hundred-page “exposé” of Wallace and his supporters. Worrying about Black Wallace supporters, or indeed anyone sympathetic to his brand of “communism,” the NAACP also joined the anti-Wallace crusade. In Detroit, the ADA forces, which included Fr. Malcolm Dade, Rabbi Leo Fram, the Rev. Robert Bradby Jr. (who in many ways followed in the footsteps of his father, Robert Bradby Sr., who had died in 1946), Walter Reuther, Dr. James J. McClendon, Edward Swan (a former chief FEPC examiner for Michigan and the new executive secretary of the NAACP), and Paul Weber of the ACTU, as well as former members of the Left community such as George Edwards, organized around anticommunism and the defeat of the Progressives.⁷⁶

This division in the Left community, which had been growing ever since the campaign for a state FEPC, broke wide open during the annual Labor Day parade in 1948. The remnants of the once vital left wing of the civil rights community was led down Woodward Avenue by Wallace, but his presence was overshadowed by President Truman, who chose Detroit’s Cadillac Square as the site to kick off his reelection campaign. “The breach within the CIO was on public display that afternoon,” recalled Coleman Young, “as the Reuther caucus paraded on the square behind Truman while the leftists and Progressives peeled off in another direction to rally on behalf of Henry Wallace.” The Wallace campaign and the Progressive Party were, according to Young and others, ill-fated from the start. Young’s own attempt to run for the state Senate on the party’s ticket was, he stated, “the biggest mistake of my life . . . [for] it took me fifteen years to rehabilitate my position with the Democratic Party.”⁷⁷

At least Young, who would become not only a state senator but also the first Black mayor of Detroit, was able to eventually “rehabilitate” himself politically. Many of his associates were not so fortunate. Reverend

Hill's support of the Progressive Party—even after Wallace's defeat—cost him any chance, however slim, of winning a long-desired seat on the city's Common Council; it also seriously damaged his 1951 bid for Congress.⁷⁸ Within the Black community, Hill's church, Hartford Avenue Baptist, was known as “that Red church,” although the majority of his congregation remained devoted. Hill continued to work around the Red label, but it did tarnish his hard-earned status as a tireless fighter for civil rights and social justice.

The anti-Wallace crusade could be seen as a foundational moment in the solidification of a liberal-labor coalition. This coalition had its basis in the old labor–civil rights community, but it pointedly excluded those, such as Reverend Hill, who remained in the CP's orbit. In a sense, anti-communism served the same unifying function for liberals as antifascism had for leftists during the Popular Front years. Furthermore, anticommunism probably hardened the identity of interests on both sides of the ideological divide. As members of the liberal coalition grew together, politically and ideologically, local members of the Progressive Party and the old Left community were wedded to one another by even stronger ties—ties formed not only through long-standing relationships but also through the shared experience of defeat. Responding to the negative publicity that Wallace supporters received at the hands of the conservative *Detroit News*, which published a list of “Reds for Wallace,” Wallace himself called it “an honor list, with my good friend the Rev. Charles A. Hill; that progressive union leader George Addes; and that outspoken worker for the people, State Senator Stanley Nowak.”⁷⁹ That must have offered some comfort. It is worth remembering, however, that the publicly drawn ideological lines were by no means always observed in the personal and social lives of local activists. By the 1960s, flexibility, which had long been a distinctive trait of the city's political mobilizations, would begin to reassert itself. There were certainly important divisions, but few were ever quite as starkly drawn as they may have seemed from the outside.

But the liberal anti-Wallace forces in Detroit were emboldened by their victory; their liberal anticommunism had found an even greater audience. The era of the united front was over, and ideological tensions within the Left played out repeatedly on the terrain of social activism. Of course, this contest between ideologies and organizations was hardly limited to Detroit but left its stamp on the civil rights movement nationally as well. When the NAACP organized its national civil rights mobilization in the fall of 1949, CP-aligned Left organizations and individuals were

barred. When William Patterson, the chairman of the National CRC, protested his group's exclusion and appealed to the unity of all progressive forces, the NAACP turned him down in a scathing three-page reply written by Roy Wilkins. "In the present Civil Rights Mobilization we have no desire for that kind of cooperation, or that kind of unity," the letter stated.

We do not believe it will contribute to the success of the campaign. On the contrary, we believe it will be a distinct handicap. The organizations sponsoring this Civil Rights Mobilization are seeking the enactment of civil rights legislation to the end that minority groups may be more fully protected in their rights under the American constitution and the American concept of democracy. We do not believe in light of the consistent performance of the Civil Rights Congress and its associates, that this is their end objective. This was the basic consideration in the decision not to list the Civil Rights Congress as an organization to be invited to cooperate.⁸⁰

Like many anticommunist liberal groups, both nationally and locally, the NAACP and its allies latched on to the proposition that communists and their organizations must be disassociated from "legitimate" civil rights mobilizations. Whether this was true due to the political climate of the times, and if so to what degree, remains debatable.

The mobilization was a positive endeavor, but it is difficult to ignore the confusion over communism behind the scenes. The NAACP had already taken measures to exclude the Civil Rights Congress. Under orders from the CIO it also excluded the United Electrical Workers (a CIO member), as well as ten other unions under investigation for being "communist dominated" and therefore politically compromised. Moreover, it rejected out of hand the demand that Congressman Vito Marcantonio, one of the most consistent fighters for civil rights legislation in the House, be allowed to speak as a representative of the hated Progressive Party. To further guard against communist infiltration, all delegates were required to obtain certified advance credentials, which were authenticated by representatives of the NAACP, the CIO, the ADA, the American Jewish Committee, and other staunchly anticommunist organizations.

The differentiation between valid and nonvalid credentials was made almost capriciously. In one case, all the delegates from the New York City NAACP, whose president had photocopied his signature for the creden-

tials of hundreds of attendees, were initially barred. The decision was not reversed until Adam Clayton Powell Jr. intervened. In another case, a wife was allowed in while her husband, a trade unionist from a politically suspect union, was not. The fact that many of those who were assigned to control admission were white did not help matters. "You people can afford to pick and choose who's going to fight for civil rights," a member of one group of Black delegates was reported to have said, but "[t]he fight is too tough for the Negro people for us to be so choosy."⁸¹

Nonetheless, the NAACP succeeded in bringing over four thousand people to Washington, DC, in February 1950, to press for civil rights legislation. In Detroit, over one thousand people gathered to hear Roy Wilkins and give local delegates a big send-off.⁸² The mobilization, as one slightly disgruntled leftist commentator put it, "turned out to be a powerful outpouring of the determination of the Negro people to win civil rights despite possible embarrassment to either the Truman administration or the bourgeois and social democratic leaders of the over 50 'non-communist' organizations which reluctantly called the Mobilization."⁸³ The exclusion of the CRC and other radicals was an affront to William Patterson, however, who stepped up his critique of the NAACP and its liberal allies. Patterson hoped that his position against the NAACP would "certainly be a guide to action on a local scale."⁸⁴ Jack Raskin, head of the Michigan CRC, was less convinced. Tension between Raskin and the national office of the CRC had been developing for some time, and this conflict probably had something to do with his resignation as executive secretary in 1950.

Raskin's tenure as head of the organization had been mixed. The dedicated activist had established a wide network of contacts, most of which he committed to memory. He liked to get things done but was not fond of writing reports to the national office. He had the ability to work on many issues simultaneously, but his lack of organization could be frustrating to his coworkers. As Anne Shore, who left New York to become secretary of the Michigan branch around 1947, put it, the office was "a mess." "There is a fine potential here," she related, "but it is so amorphous that it drives me crazy. The hundreds of contacts we have all seem to be in Jack's head." Still, Raskin's dedication to the cause of civil rights, civil liberties, and antiracism led him to make enormous sacrifices. His CRC salary was always small, too small to support his wife and their young child, and Raskin resigned in late 1950 for "personal reasons"—even though he believed that the push for his resignation was influenced by the CP's desire to have an African American in this key leadership position.⁸⁵

Sometime between the end of 1950 and the summer of 1951 Raskin was replaced by Arthur McPhaul, a Black communist and auto worker who had recently lost his job at Ford's River Rouge plant. Born in rural Georgia, McPhaul came to Detroit from Oklahoma with his family during World War I. The son of an outspoken Methodist minister, McPhaul was introduced to racial segregation at an early age. He later recalled that "it wasn't much better in Detroit than in the South, not a lot." He began working at Ford in 1935, and became a volunteer organizer for the UAW soon after. Like many others, he saw a direct connection between union organizing and civil rights and affiliated himself with both the NNC and the Civil Rights Federation. He also came to know Reverend Hill, whom he described as "one of the outstanding black leaders of that period" and whom he admired for Hill's commitment to "speaking out on issues that affected not only black people, the black community, but all poor people." Although there was certainly a great deal of anticlericalism in radical circles and a tendency to think of religion as "the opiate of the masses" and of ministers as ineffectual, McPhaul attended services at Hill's church with some frequency. The two men eventually became close friends and allies.⁸⁶

So McPhaul was no stranger to the Left community when he took over Raskin's position at the CRC, nor was he a stranger to its racial dynamics. Patterson and others at the national offices insisted that African Americans be elevated to positions of authority on the local level, but, as McPhaul realized, such a policy rankled even "the best white people." True, some Blacks associated with the civil rights community could not seem to recall much racism in its ranks. "I don't get any feeling that there was any domination by whites," recalled Geraldine Bledsoe. "I was caught up in the middle of much of the civil rights movement, and I would say there were more whites than Negroes, but I would say they walked pretty much side by side." For the most part, Hill concurred. McPhaul tells a different story: "I guess it was part of the racist system in which they live. . . . I had a running fight all the time with Anne Shore. . . . I want to say I have a great deal of respect for her, but she was still full of chauvinism. Just could not accept leadership from a black person."⁸⁷ McPhaul's experiences left him bitter and disillusioned about the capacity of whites to thoroughly dedicate themselves to antiracism, but he was just as likely to find fault with African American liberals, not to mention conservatives.

Despite his criticisms, McPhaul never lost faith in the organization that he guided through its final years. His tenure as head of the local branch was an active one. In the early 1950s, the Left community was

forced to divide its time between mobilizing on civil rights issues such as fair housing, fair employment, and police brutality on the one hand and the defense of civil liberties, and by extension their own political viability, on the other. While the CRC insisted that “in spite of all the hysteria being put in the papers that we are on the subversive list, we have plenty of support, not with the big shots but with the Negro and Jewish people we have a big circle of friends,” community activism was becoming increasingly difficult.⁸⁸ As historian Ellen Schrecker notes in her study of McCarthyism and the American communist movement, the financial and human cost of defending members and sympathizers was exorbitant. “The struggle to fend off the government’s onslaught turned the party and its adjunct organizations into self-defense groups,” she writes, “preoccupied with fundraising and legal strategies.”⁸⁹

The result was a mixture of offensive and defensive tactics, of civil rights and civil liberties—*especially* civil liberties. The CRC worked on a wide and impressive variety of cases, including that of Lemas Woods. Woods was a private in an all-Negro army unit stationed in the Philippines who was accused of murder. Hastily sentenced to death by a military court, he sent a farewell letter to his father. The senior Woods, a member of UAW Local 208, spoke to his shop steward about his son’s situation, and the steward referred him to the CRC. During the campaign to reverse Woods’s death sentence and secure him a new trial the CRC distributed over thirty thousand leaflets and held dozens of community meetings in churches and other venues around the city. They took the case on in April 1946; in August 1947, after a new trial held at San Francisco’s Presidio, Woods was found guilty only of involuntary manslaughter. His sentence was eventually reduced to eighteen months.⁹⁰ Much the same mixture of legal strategy and community activism was on display when the CRC mobilized around the shooting death of Leon Mosely, a fifteen-year-old African American boy who was beaten and then shot by police.

On the night of June 4, 1948, a police cruiser fell in behind Leon Mosely, who was allegedly driving in a “suspicious” manner. A pursuit began and was swiftly augmented by reinforcements. Several shots were fired during the chase, and Mosely drove the car, which turned out to be stolen, into a tree. According to witnesses, the police pulled Mosely out of the car and began to pummel him. Mosely either broke loose or was deliberately allowed to “wobble down the street,” but in either case he was shot in the back and killed. The incident joined a long list of community complaints against the police and Police Commissioner Harry S. Toy. A Joint Committee for Justice for Leon Mosely was quickly set up,

headed by the Rev. T. S. Boone, of King Solomon Baptist Church, and Coleman Young, with representatives from the CRC, the CP, the CIO Council, the UAW, and even the NAACP and the Michigan Committee on Civil Rights. Hundreds attended the young man's funeral, and days later thousands participated in a march to City Hall to demand action. Acting on behalf of the family, CRC attorneys pressed for and finally received a coroner's inquisition, which would investigate whether the officers involved had committed a crime and then make a recommendation to the Prosecutor's Office. The inquisition found unanimously that the shooting was "unwarranted and unwise" and that the two officers involved were culpable.⁹¹

The demonstrations continued, and the pressure eventually forced the Prosecutor's Office to act. Unfortunately, instead of issuing a warrant against the two officers for a felony, the prosecutor sought only a manslaughter warrant for one officer and none at all for the other. Commenting on this mixed success, Reverend Hill reminded his allies that "the fact that any type of warrant was issued against a police officer is a direct result of the organized protests and demonstrations of an aroused community." While he expressed regret at the weaker manslaughter charge, it was progress nonetheless, "for this is the first time that we have been able to get a verdict of any kind." Hill incorporated the case into his Common Council campaign and the Joint Committee for Justice kept up the pressure, only to be thwarted in the end by a recalcitrant Commissioner Toy, who refused to have the officer arrested.⁹²

Attorneys Ernest Goodman, George Crockett, C. LeBron Simmons, and others associated with the legal staff of the Michigan CRC and the National Lawyers Guild spent a tremendous amount of time and effort on cases like those of Lemas Woods and Leon Mosely. They typically worked on a pro bono basis, and the resources that the CRC and community groups could generate were always spread thin. They were spread even thinner when the Left was forced to defend itself in cases such as that of the "Michigan Six," in which six members of the Michigan Division of the Communist Party faced trial for alleged violations of the Smith Act. This was only the first in a series of state-sponsored trials and hearings that would decimate the Communist Party and its sympathizers in Detroit and across the nation. In the words of Joseph Starobin, the foreign editor of the *Daily Worker*, the party became "at least a case of civil liberties, at best an object of sympathy, but no longer a power."⁹³ Much the same could be said for most of the men and women who had dedicated a portion of their lives to Detroit's early civil rights movement.

HUAC

The Un-Americans Come to Town

With the Korean War heating up, Detroit, still a center of defense industry production, was beginning to receive a great deal of attention from the government's subversive hunters. It was in this politically charged environment that the House Un-American Activities Committee set up shop and held hearings in the city in 1952. "The Un-Americans are sent to Detroit," warned Arthur McPhaul, "to put the 'fear of God' into the people. . . . [T]heir side show can prove exceedingly damaging to organized labor and the struggle for complete equality for the Negro people."⁹⁴ The cumulative effect of the hearings was indeed damaging, both politically and personally. McPhaul found himself a chief target of investigation. When he refused to turn over the records of the Michigan CRC, he was convicted of contempt. Ernest Goodman and George Crockett fought the conviction all the way to the Supreme Court, but ultimately lost, and McPhaul served nine months in prison in 1959.⁹⁵ He was just one in a long list of activists who were called before the committee. Eleanor Maki, one of the founding members of the old Civil Rights Federation, was also summoned. She treated Detroiters to some sensational newspaper coverage when she disappeared for two weeks before finally appearing in front of the committee,⁹⁶ after which she lost her job in the Detroit public school system, which had a loyalty oath of its own.

Coleman Young's testimony made him an instant celebrity in the city's Black neighborhoods for chastising the committee's counsel, a Virginian named Frank Tavenner, and the committee head, Congressman John Wood of Georgia, for mispronouncing *Negro* as *Nigra*. Recordings of his belligerent testimony on the "un-Americanness" of the proceedings against people who had been engaged in the struggle for Black rights were widely circulated. Reverend Hill was also called. While he refused to answer most questions on Fifth Amendment grounds, he did manage, despite the advice of his attorney, George Crockett, to get in a few verbal jabs. In response to the suggestion that he had been "used" by communists "for their own purposes," he replied that "the Bible is my only guide." "Do you mean," countered the senator, "that the Bible influenced you to sponsor a banquet for two Communists?" At another tense moment, Congressman Donald Jackson (R-CA) remarked with some asperity: "It is bad enough that a man should commit treason by joining the Communist Party. But for a minister, a wearer of the cloth, to aid and give comfort to communism is to compound that offense by including the Almighty God is his treason."⁹⁷

The exchanges between Hill and the congressmen caused quite a stir in the Black ecclesiastical community. Once again, the “proper” role of churches and clergy, where and with whom they should stand, was avidly debated in Detroit. While most observers seemed to take offense at Congressman Jackson’s remarks, their responses to the hearings were otherwise mixed. The Detroit edition of the *Courier* interviewed twenty-seven local pastors about Hill’s testimony. Fifteen supported him outright, five did so with reservations, two condemned him, and an additional five had no comment. The strongest statement of support came from the young Reverend Albert B. Cleage Jr., who had just taken up his first pastoral appointment in Detroit at St. Mark’s Community Church. “I have absolute confidence in the Reverend Hill’s integrity, loyalty and Christianity, and I am much more willing to accept his definition of God’s position on race prejudice, segregation and discrimination than I am of the House Committee on Un-American Activities,” he told the paper.⁹⁸

Horace White, once a political ally of Hill’s and a mentor of Cleage’s, was especially harsh in indicting his old compatriot. White characterized Hill as a communist “dupe” and well-meaning but naive. The third of the trio of pro-labor Black ministers, Fr. Malcolm Dade, who served on the city’s Loyalty Investigating Committee, raised similar questions about Hill’s political sympathies.⁹⁹ In fact, Dade claimed that his “feelings had been [so] aroused by the *hostility to the committee*” in Hill’s testimony that he felt compelled to walk into the Federal Building and deliver a prepared statement to Chairman John Wood. “The disparaging remarks expressed yesterday by a clergyman . . . make imperative a statement by a minister of the Gospel of Christ of the true feelings of the Negro religious community regarding communism,” the statement read. Dade wanted to make it as clear as possible that neither he, the Episcopal Church, nor Blacks in general had any doubts that “communism is most devilish. . . . For deep in the very marrow of the Negro’s bones and roots, is a sincere love for God and a tested loyalty to his country.” At any time when the nation’s security is threatened, he assured the committee, the African American “closes ranks with his fellow Americans.”¹⁰⁰

There were some who felt that Dade and White had betrayed Hill, especially given their shared past of political militancy. Since the NAACP’s Edward Turner had already strongly denounced the CP on behalf of both the NAACP and “the race” in his testimony before the committee, one wonders why Father Dade felt it necessary to add his own rebuke. But all three men seem to have been doing what they believed to be right, not only for themselves but for the larger communities they were dedicated to serving. Dade and White represent a road—a safe, lib-

eral path—that Hill could have taken but did not. Although White died in 1958, Dade went on to enjoy a full and rich career as a well-respected pastor. In 1962 he was elected as the only clerical member of the Michigan State Constitutional Convention, and he served by appointment on a variety of city commissions from the 1940s until his retirement in 1972.¹⁰¹

Hill's reputation was once again damaged by this testimony but not destroyed. He maintained his position at Hartford, and no coordinated attempt was ever made to oust him. Young emerged from the hearings as a folk hero; recordings of his testimony were made, sold, and exchanged throughout Black Detroit.¹⁰² The other men and women who were called included Stanley Nowak, who was nearly deported as a result; C. LeBron Simmons; Arthur McPhaul; and five members of Local 600 (Jack Conway, William Hood, John Gallo, David Moore, and Nelson Davis) who were subsequently fired and struggled for years afterward with damaged reputations and difficult work situations.¹⁰³

It is not clear whether the government had an explicit strategy for destroying Left organizations and activists by forcing them into costly and prolonged legal defenses, but this was certainly one of the greatest successes of McCarthyism. When Black attorney and longtime NNC member C. LeBron Simmons was asked by an interviewer whether any significant questions had not been asked or answered in their session, he replied: "Yes, you did not ask me what it [my activism] cost me."¹⁰⁴ The costs for some were very high indeed. George Crockett served four months in prison for contempt of court in his defense of eleven CP leaders tried under the Smith Act in 1949. "When you come out of prison, people don't line up to have you represent them," he later remarked.¹⁰⁵ By 1956, activists such as McPhaul, who was soon to be jailed as well, were working on a voluntary basis, the funds of the Michigan CRC having been depleted by the cost of defending communists and suspected communists.

Likewise, the Michigan branch of the American Committee for Protection of Foreign Born, which had fought the deportations of radicals, was barely solvent. All of the HUAC proceedings were public, and the media coverage wreaked havoc on the social fabric of the city. One contemporary observer helpfully pointed out that "any social historian anxious to get the 'feel' of dark epochs like the Salem Witch-Hunt or the Stalin purges in Russia [could find] fertile soil in this tense, febrile city since the opening of the hearings by the congressional Committee on Un-American Activities last week."¹⁰⁶

Sensational stories filled the major newspapers. In one auto plant, the wife of an accused "Stalinist" was driven from the plant, with newspaper men "egging on the workers for 'some action shots.'" Individuals were attacked on streets and in front of their homes. A prominent radio commentator and a well-known businessman both issued public statements after receiving death threats because people with names similar to theirs had been identified as communists.¹⁰⁷ The "Great Fear" had come to Detroit, but even as the HUAC hearings destroyed reputations and weakened political associations the adversity also strengthened the personal ties between activists. When Hill's oldest son, Charles Jr., was nearly drummed out of the air force reserves on charges of communist sympathies because it was reported that he read the *Daily Worker*, drove his father around town, and had attended a social gathering at his father's house, members of the Left community rallied to the young Hill's defense. "It was the only time I remember being afraid," recalled Charles Jr., who flew with the fabled Tuskegee Airmen. His sister Roberta and brother Lantz were similarly harassed.¹⁰⁸ George Crockett, Maurice Sugar, Ernest Goodman, and C. LeBron Simmons sacrificed careers spent defending wealthy clients, and their firm barely stayed afloat in its early years. "We didn't make much of a living during the McCarthy period," remembered Goodman, "but it was a hell of a practice."¹⁰⁹

"Seeing that there was no venturing into the mainstream," recalled Coleman Young, "I pulled back and took refuge among one of my own." Having few other options, he and Jack Raskin opened a dry-cleaning business on Livernois Avenue on the city's northwest side (where a free-way stands today), "hoping that there was a living to be made on the shirts and slacks of Progressives and Communists." Discussions once held in union meetings, churches, and community forums continued, with such vitality that people complained "they couldn't get their pants back because we were always arguing about Wallace or Truman or DuBois." "I was a hell of a spotter," Young insisted. "It's just that there wasn't much of a call for politically enlightened spotters in those days." The social ties that had sustained the core members of the civil rights community did not disappear; people attempted to nurture them as best they could. The annual Buck Dinner, a tradition started by Maurice Sugar in the early 1930s, remained a cultural institution in Detroit's left-ist movement culture. It provided an opportunity for activists and old friends to socialize, and it was also a venue for fund-raising for the defense committees of individuals and organizations. (The Buck Dinner continued, becoming in later years a source of funding for New Left

activism in the 1960s.) “We stuck close to our friends,” said Young. “Through it all we had a pretty good time together for a battered group of political misfits, which says something about misery and company.”¹¹⁰

In one of the odder instances of an activist being persecuted for his or her views and activities, Claude Williams, who had transferred the home base of his Institute of Applied Religion from Detroit to Birmingham, Alabama, after 1944, was tried by the Presbyterian church for heresy. Williams was repeatedly accused of communist subversion by such prominent Red baiters as Gerald Smith and Elizabeth Dilling, and the Detroit Presbytery, to which Williams still technically belonged, along with the National Council of the Presbyterian Church, had finally had enough. Although the committee assigned to the case dropped the charge of communism on the grounds of insufficient evidence, they did find him guilty of heresy for his distinctive brand of politically charged theological innovation. He was officially defrocked and expelled—the only such case in the twentieth century. Hill’s decision to reordain Williams as a Baptist preacher at a 1965 ceremony at Hartford—a move it was thought would help Williams’s work with a new generation of southern civil rights activists—was a highlight in the two men’s friendship.¹¹¹

Although the early 1950s was a dark time for leftists such as Claude Williams, Charles Hill, and thousands like them in Detroit and across the nation, the city’s Left community did not merely fade away. Reverend Hill remained a consistent voice for the civil liberties of all Americans, particularly those whose political affinities lay with the radical Left. He continued to use his church as a “free space” for organizing and exchanging ideas. Old friends and allies with national reputations, including Paul Robeson, Claude Lightfoot, and Ben Davis, were always welcome at Hartford Avenue Baptist. Hill merely insisted that members of his congregation transcend rumor and come and find out for themselves what such men had to say.¹¹² “Reverend Hill’s church was one of the few places that Paul Robeson could come to Detroit and have a concert and go away with some money to help him live, really, during that period when he was denied places to give concerts in this community, as well as communities all over the country,” recalled Geraldine Bledsoe in a story that was often repeated. “Reverend Hill’s church was one church that was always open to him. And this was characteristic of his [Hill’s] position in all of these matters.”¹¹³ In fact, Hill became so close to Robeson politically that at least one researcher identified him as “the leader of this group” of Robeson’s followers.¹¹⁴

Reflecting the tenor of the times, Hill opened his church to a variety

of cultural and political programs that often centered on Africa, Cuba, or the Soviet Union. Robeson's performances were always billed as cultural evenings, as were the cultural bazaars, discussions, and presentations of films. Many of these events were organized by another good friend of Hill's and Robeson's, Erma Henderson, a young Black woman who became involved in the Progressive Party, the Council on African Affairs (which was also an important concern of Robeson's and Hill's), and the fight for the Sojourner Truth Housing Project. Like Coleman Young, Erma Henderson eventually rehabilitated herself politically. She would go on to win and then hold a seat on the Common Council for over a decade.

Although his reputation had been sullied by the HUAC hearings, Hill continued to support the activities of older civil rights organizations such as the Civil Rights Congress, as well as newer ones such as the National Negro Labor Council. But realistically Reverend Hill's moment as the man "around whom the world of Negro activism turned" was at an end. There was a general recognition that the labor movement, which had provided such an important base for his activism, was becoming an increasing liability in the Black struggle for social and economic liberation. As the UAW became an institution to fight with *and* against, Hill found himself an ever more marginal player in the struggle led by Coleman Young and the other Black unionists associated with the NNLC.

In 1953, the Rev. Charles A. Hill celebrated his fiftieth birthday and his thirty-third year at Hartford. With what one author described as a "high, balding brow and copper skin," he was now a grandfather. Beyond his duties to his congregations, which were always demanding and important, Hill's activism was focused less on Detroit and more on national and international causes, including the American Committee for Protection of Foreign Born and the American Peace Crusade, which opposed American involvement in Korea. Both groups were eventually classified as subversive communist fronts by the government. Certainly, Hill's church remained a place where various ideas were discussed, but the locus of activism was shifting. It was a phase of civil rights activism of which Hill was certainly supportive but to which he was not central.¹¹⁵

IN THE SHADOW OF THE COLD WAR

In the shadows of the cold war, domestic anticommunism, and the raucous abundance generated by the nation's postwar economic boom stood thousands of Black workers who had lost their all too brief

foothold in American industry. The government's attempts to silence "dangerous Reds" and free the nation from subversive influence did not visibly improve the lives of Black workers. Blacks had made important gains in Detroit's industries in the 1940s, but they were still largely confined to domestic labor in downtown office buildings and nonskilled labor in the plants and on construction sites. Based on the argument that whites would not accept close contact with Blacks, they were also barred from employment as delivery truck drivers and in the service departments of companies such as Michigan Bell. Nor could they secure employment in many of the city's retail stores. While Black industrial workers were attempting to hold on to the gains made during World War II and the Korean War, the boom and bust cycles that structured employment in the auto industry—along with the harsh processes of deindustrialization—hit African American workers, and especially Black women workers, the hardest.¹¹⁶

Unemployment in Detroit's African American community was by most estimates at least double the average for whites in every recession of the 1950s, and the same was true in Black communities across the nation. Yet the union movement put forth few coherent programs to deal with these racial disparities and their effects. Frustrated with this reticence, radical Black unionists, hamstrung as they were by the Red label, nonetheless took matters into their own hands; the NNLC grew out of the local activism of Black, and some white, unionists, particularly in Detroit and Harlem. In Detroit, Coleman Young and William Hood, the recording secretary of Local 600, were the driving force behind the creation of the Greater Detroit Negro Labor Council, which merged with other local councils in 1951. Although the Negro Labor Councils, much like the Jewish Labor Council and the ACTU, were union based, they had the support of community activists such as Hill and Erma Henderson, as well as national figures such as Adam Clayton Powell and Paul Robeson, who sang and addressed the crowd at the NNLC's founding convention in Cincinnati in 1951.

"We approached Cincinnati in two capacities, basically," Young explained, "as Negroes and Black people, and as trade unionists. And we dedicated ourselves to a dual role: to bringing democracy to a trade-union movement . . . and using that trade union base to move the trade-union movement and our white allies within it into the liberation struggle for Black people, with a primary concentration on economic issues."¹¹⁷ The conditions facing Black women and southern workers received a great deal of attention at the founding convention and from the national body throughout its existence. "We need not continue to be

driven backwards on the South," declared Black unionist Viola Brown, who reported on Black oppression in the South at the convention. "We need not let the South remain an unorganized base for us, and an organized base for reaction and fascism. We in the South believe that a force can be made . . . if together, North and South, we begin to make it."¹¹⁸

As part of its "Gateway to the South" mobilization, the NNLC fought to make sure that African American workers got a fair share of the jobs in new Ford and General Electric plants opening in Louisville, Kentucky. The campaign was spearheaded by the Louisville chapter of the NNLC. Coleman Young, along with Nadine Baxter and other Detroiters, went to Louisville to protest the discriminatory practices at the Ford plant; both Young and Baxter were arrested. Back home in Detroit, what was left of the Left within Local 600 demanded that the UAW get involved in the situation in Louisville. Under the continuous assault of "advertisements, protests, demonstrations, and legal action," both Ford and General Electric were forced to comply with the NNLC's demands. The group also managed to secure small but significant victories for Black women.¹¹⁹

At the founding convention, over a third of the delegates were Black women. Octavia Hawkins, a Chicago garment worker and member of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, served as its first treasurer. The body adopted a resolution calling for "job opportunities for Negro women throughout industry, in offices, department stores, public utilities, airlines, etc."; for the organization of domestic workers, "both North and South"; for job training and upgrading for women; and for "the right to play a leadership role in government, industries and the unions, based on demonstrated ability and willingness to give leadership in family and other struggles." This emphasis on Black women in itself represented a significant advance. Throughout its existence, the old civil rights community tended to submerge gender issues under those of race and class. The resulting myopia is epitomized in comments such as this one from Charles Hill: "I never made appeals on behalf of Negro women, only women." In contradistinction to such attitudes, the NNLC attempted to articulate and mobilize around the specificity of interlocking forms of race, class, and gender oppression.¹²⁰

This resolution was behind the NNLC's decision to confront the Sears and Roebuck Company, which had a robust policy of racial discrimination. Picket lines were set up outside of Sears stores in Cleveland, Detroit, Newark, Philadelphia, Saint Louis, and Chicago, the site of the company's headquarters. After long negotiations and much agitation, practically all Sears outlets outside of the Deep South had come to terms with the activists by 1954. As part of its southern campaign, the NNLC

also targeted southern factories that employed high percentages of Black women; in 1953, for example, it sponsored a strike among Louisiana sugar workers. In Detroit, the labor council, which included unionists such as Nadine and Willie Baxter, Chris Alston, and Harold Shapiro, as well as community activists such as Ernest Goodman, Hill, Erma Henderson, and Nadine Gordon (the Detroit correspondent for the *Detroit Courier*), concentrated its efforts on a new mobilization for municipal FEPC legislation.¹²¹ Back in 1946, the Left community had turned to the initiative petition to force action on fair employment legislation; in 1951, the Detroit Negro Labor Council used the same strategy on the municipal level. And once again the campaign to secure fair employment legislation was ensnared in factional fights. As the Detroit council began its petition drive, liberals associated with the NAACP, the Jewish Community Council, the Detroit Interracial Committee, and Catholic organizations concentrated their efforts on persuading the city's Common Council to enact the legislation and thereby defeat the "Reds."¹²²

To ensure the defeat of the petition drive of the Detroit NLC's, the liberal coalition also stepped up their anticommunist crusade. The Michigan Committee on Civil Rights (MCCR), a liberal umbrella group that grew out of the older, anticommunist Michigan Council for Fair Employment Legislation, referred to the Detroit NLC's backing as the "kiss of death" for FEPC legislation and reaffirmed its opposition to that group, for "posing as friends of FEPC this group consists almost entirely of people expelled from the CIO for Communist sympathies." Speaking on behalf of the UAW, Walter Reuther called the petition drive an "irresponsible Communist-inspired approach" that was "not cleared with the UAW-CIO." Along with seven other international officers, Reuther issued a directive to local unions calling upon auto workers who had signed the petition to withdraw their signatures.¹²³ Thanks to this confusion, the petition and its model FEPC ordinance were successfully kept off the ballot.¹²⁴ The liberal coalition was no more successful in its policy of suasion than the Detroit NLC had been with its petition campaign, but at least the liberal coalition could deflect attention away from its own shortcomings by exposing the "communists." Detroit and the state of Michigan would have to wait until 1955 before FEPC legislation was finally enacted.¹²⁵

The experiences of the Detroit NLC were not dissimilar to the experiences of the NNLC overall. While the group could claim small successes, it could not withstand the anticommunist assault from liberals, unions, and the government. In 1956, the NNLC was placed on the U.S.

attorney general's subversive list and investigated by the Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB). Instead of fighting an expensive legal battle, the NNLC voted to disband. Council secretary Coleman Young spoke for many in the old Left community when he issued the following statement after destroying the group's records.

In surveying this situation, the leaders of the [NNLC] came to the conclusion that we would not dissipate the energies of our members attempting to raise the tremendous sums of money required to go through the SACB hearings, and at the same time, jeopardizing their personal well-being when the freedom struggle is at its present height.¹²⁶

The idea that the NNLC could operate under the fetters of anticommunism was improbable from the beginning. Like so many other left-wing efforts organized to secure the socioeconomic and civil rights of Blacks, the NNLC did not survive the cold war. And yet it did succeed in raising, once again, certain issues—about the failure of the labor movement to deal with its internal racism and employment discrimination, about the inseparable relationship between race and gender; and about the need for Black self-determination in the context of coalition building—that would structure the course of civil rights activism in Detroit over the next two decades and beyond. By the end of the decade, a younger cohort of activists would begin to ask the same questions and devise new political strategies. Many of the older activists, such as Reverend Hill, whose politics had been shaped by the Depression, World War II, and the difficulties of the postwar period did not manage to adjust to the “new mood” of Black political radicalism in the late 1950s and the 1960s; others, such as Christopher Alston and Coleman Young, did. It was the latter group that bridged the gap between the early civil rights community and the later one that rose and took its place as a new local movement with its own cultures of protest and struggle and its own complex ties to religion and faith.