BETWEEN TWO FIRES: RACE AND THE CHICAGO FEDERATION OF LABOR,
1904-1922

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation critically examines the failure of the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) to organize interracial unions during the World War I era. Specifically, it argues that progressive unionism was structurally limited and offered CFL leaders little ability to directly confront the racism of white workers. External factors—most importantly, the race riot of 1919 and the hegemonic power of employers—further weakened the Federation and doomed its efforts.

After suffering a series of brutal defeats in the early twentieth century, all of which involved racial conflict, CFL leadership sought to transform the city’s labor movement. Their solution was “progressive unionism,” a system by which loosely affiliated union locals were empowered to organize unskilled workers, with a particular emphasis on African Americans. The CFL’s initial organizing drive was met with enthusiasm by white and black workers alike, and scored a historic victory in 1918 when the President’s Mediation Commission awarded the city’s meatpacking workers union recognition, a wage increase, and the eight-hour day.

Unfortunately, progressive unionism was organized around so-called “neighborhood locals” organized by community rather than by craft. As a result, African Americans faced de facto segregation within the Federation and quickly grew frustrated. On the shopfloor, tensions between whites (suspicious of African Americans, who they feared as a “scab race”) and blacks (who viewed unions with a jaundiced eye) exploded into violence. Employers used spies and agitators to enflame conflict, and courted the loyalty of black workers on the shopfloor and middle-class leaders in the community. The brutality of the 1919 race riot further divided whites and blacks, and a series of racially entangled defeats in the early 1920s, including disastrous strikes in steel and meatpacking, sealed the fate of progressive unionism.
Acknowledgements

Some clichés are clichés because time has proven them true; perhaps none more than the truism that writing a dissertation is a social act. With that in mind, I must first offer tremendous gratitude and thanks to my committee, David Roediger, Sundiata Cha-Jua, and Clarence Lang, whose comments and guidance were invaluable. Special thanks are due to my advisor and dissertation director, Jim Barrett, without whose wisdom, patience, and good humor this project could not exist.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: “MIGHTY HARD IF YOU AIN’T”: RACE AND AMERICAN WORKING-CLASS HISTORY ................................................................. 1

CHAPTER 1: “FOOLISH COLORED MEN”: RACE IN THE CHICAGO LABOR MOVEMENT, 1894-1905 ........................................................................ 15

CHAPTER 2: “EVERY NEGRO CAN MAKE A FIGHT”: RACE AND THE CFL CAMPAIGN, 1916-1921 ...................................................................... 77

CHAPTER 3: “DEMORALIZED BY ITS OWN WEAKNESSES”: THE STRUCTURAL LIMITS OF FEDERATED UNIONISM, 1916-1921 ........................................ 131


CONCLUSION: THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF INTERRACIAL UNIONISM ........................................................................ 341

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................. 346
Introduction: “Mighty Hard if You Ain’t”: Race and American Working-Class History

In its landmark 1922 report, *The Negro in Chicago*, the Chicago Commission on Race Relations included an extensive section detailing the opinion of black Chicagoans toward labor unions. A black trucker identified as “W— W—” claimed that he had “got along fine” during a brief stint as a union butcher. But his feelings were also tinged with suspicion. “ Strikes are too hard on the main that ain’t in the union,” he said. Unions, he concluded, “are all right if you are on the inside, but mighty hard if you ain’t.”¹ The anonymous worker’s wariness was born of hard experience. By the early 1920s, African Americans felt forcibly estranged from Chicago’s labor movement.

This dissertation critically examines the process by which that estrangement occurred. Specifically, I analyze the central role of race in the defeat of a major organizing drive by the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) during World War I. Though the drive was motivated by a legitimate desire for progressive, interracial unionism, the CFL was unable to build an interracial union and ultimately faced the 1920s divided and weakened. This introduction will recount extant scholarly interpretations of this event, explicate my intervention and argument, denote the importance of that intervention, and lay out the structure of this project.

Most discussions of race in the so-called “old labor history” tradition were focused on larger structural issues; namely, the exclusionary tendencies of American Federation of Labor (AFL) craft unions. Herbert Northrup, for example, discussed the AFL’s largely unsuccessful attempts to organize black workers, but argued that union discrimination policies were “to a large extent the product of their environment.” Northrup’s largely quantitative study concluded that the

structure of industry itself determined the orientation of its unions.² Though his subject matter was similar, Philip Foner reached very different conclusions in *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*. Foner excoriated the AFL for “the economic and racial prejudice of [its] white trade unions” and the hypocrisy of its leaders, who promised reform and interracial organizing but delivered nothing. By 1919, he raged, “black labor was no more able to gain large-scale admission to the AF of L than before the Great Migration.”³ Sterling Spero and Abram Harris were similarly merciless in their analysis. Though their work contains case studies of meatpacking and steel strikes, Spero and Harris remained focused on union racism as a problem of large-scale structure and not one of rank-and-file conflict. They concluded that unions were bastions of white privilege that excluded the black worker as “a social and racial inferior trying to force the white man to associate with him as an equal” and as “a member of a race which must not be permitted to rise to the white man’s level.” As a result, the black worker “turn[ed] a deaf ear” to unions who claimed “that the Negro’s plight is the plight of the working class in general.”⁴

Other historians narrowed their focus to black workers in meatpacking and thus studied Chicago extensively. Alma Herbst’s masterful study of black Chicagoans in the slaughtering industry argued that racial tension was largely the result of considered attempts by employers to divide the races. Whereas immigrant workers, even those introduced as strikebreakers, quickly achieved promotions and were assimilated into native white working-class culture, black workers saw few gains at the workplace. Relegated to the lowest-paying and most unpleasant jobs, they

remained outside the traditional scope of unions, allowing employers to prey on union
discrimination and reserve blacks as a captive “strike insurance” force for packing bosses. In his
history of meatpacking unionism, David Brody denied the existence of extensive interracial
conflict among Chicago’s slaughterhouse workers, but concluded that reticence on the part of
black migrants and the explosive impact of the Chicago Race Riot conspired to undermine the
CFL’s hope for cooperation between whites and blacks. Walter Fogel reached a similar
conclusion, maintaining that the CFL’s efforts “probably appeared more calculating than
altruistic to black workers” who were largely aware of the AFL’s problematic racial history and
influenced by the paternalism of employers. The old labor history school sheds significant light
on the structural problems that inhibited interracial organizing, and includes considerable work
on the unique problems faced by the CFL in Chicago.

The so-called “new labor history” inverted this approach; rather than examining large-scale
structures of union organization, new labor historians focused their energies on local studies of
workers’ attitudes and culture, both on the shopfloor and in the community. As a result, many
scholars have acknowledged the large-scale exclusionary policies of trade unions while focusing
their attention more on moments of contact and even cooperation between white and black
workers. Much of this work focuses on black railroad workers, who faced a unique paradox:

Company, 1932).

75-105.


8 General tr eatments of labor that discuss race include Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing
America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); and David
Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925*
(New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). For more focused discussions of race, see Dennis C. Dickerson,
*Our of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1950* (Albany: State University of New
though completely excluded from viciously racist white unions, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters represented one of the most legitimately progressive labor organizations in the nation. Though it falls outside the purview of this project, another vibrant area of study concerns interracial contacts in the South, where scholars have found that white and black workers cooperated to a degree never before imagined. In The Challenge of Interracial Unionism, Daniel Letwin argues convincingly for the existence of significant, if limited, levels of class solidarity among white and black coal miners in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Alabama. Recently, scholars such as David Roediger have examined the ways in which a constructed “white” identity served as a crucial counterpoint to negative stereotypes about African Americans.

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More significantly, the advent of the new labor history has resulted in a major reassessment of the Chicago labor movement during the World War I era, and particularly the racial conflicts that arose within it. Most scholars have focused their attentions on the ways in which conflicts between rank-and-file workers, on the shopfloor and in the community, contributed to racial division. In 1970, William Tuttle’s classic account of the Chicago Race Riot of 1919 posited that the riot was the result of “bitter and functional animosities” that festered “at the common denominators at which races coexisted—at the shop level in industry, at the block level, at the neighborhood recreational level.” Though he acknowledged the long and ugly history of trade-union racism, Tuttle excoriated historians for “wast[ing] much energy debating the AFL’s attitudes toward black workers” as opposed to examining racial enmity “not at the national but at the shop level.” In Tuttle’s estimation, the racism of white workers—who viewed African Americans as a “scab race”—combined with black migrants’ resistance to unionization to produce a firestorm of racial resentment that eventually exploded into violence.\(^\text{12}\)

Other historians have focused their arguments on divides between the white and black communities of the city. James Barrett attributed the Federation’s failure to organize an interracial union to a combination of community divisions and packer interference. Unionism held little appeal in the Black Belt, where “the strongest bond…was race, not occupation.” Such divisions left the union open to the predation of the packers: “Chicago’s militant labor movement…did not simply fall apart,” he argues, “it was attacked and destroyed.”\(^\text{13}\) In his examinations of race and paternalism in the stockyards, Paul Street similarly argued for the


centrality of employers’ divide-and-conquer tactics, claiming that “certainly no group has
exercised a more potent influence on modern American labor history” and noting that “their
racially divisive intent” crippled the CFL drive.\textsuperscript{14}

James Grossman, in his history of black migration to Chicago, argued that African
Americans made a rational, considered choice to reject unions as “white institutions” that were
“external to the community” in favor of organizations shaped around the black experience. Here,
Grossman agrees with Barrett that migrants “interpreted exploitation in a manner different from
white workers”; namely, “they were exploited…not because they were workers, but because they
were black.”\textsuperscript{15} Rick Halpern acknowledged divisions between white and black workers and the
shortcomings of the union approach, but also offered a somewhat more hopeful take, arguing that
the struggles of the World War I era and the 1920s served as a prelude to the interracial triumphs
of the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC) in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{16}

Though all of these scholars have made critical contributions to our understanding of the
CFL, black workers, and interracial unionism more generally, their arguments are limited in
scope. The shortcomings of the old labor history are well-established. By focusing solely on

\textsuperscript{14} Paul Louis Street, “Working in the Yards: A History of Class Relations in Chicago’s Meatpacking Industry, 1886-
1960” (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York-Binghamton, 1993); ibid., “The Logic and Limits of ‘Plant
Loyalty’: Black Workers, White Labor, and Corporate Racial Paternalism in Chicago’s Stockyards, 1916-1940,”
Journal of Social History Vol. 29, No. 3 (Spring, 1996), 659-681; ibid., “The Swift Difference: Workers, Managers,
Militants, and Welfare Capitalism in Chicago’s Stockyards, 1917-1942,” in Shelton Stromquist and Marvin
Bergman, eds., Unionizing the Jungles: Labor and Community in the Twentieth Century Meatpacking Industry (Iowa

\textsuperscript{15} James R. Grossman, Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 1989); ibid., “The White Man’s Union: The Great Migration and the Resonance of Race and Class in

\textsuperscript{16} Rick Halpern, Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago’s Packinghouses, 1904-54
(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); see also Roger Horowitz, “Negro and White, Unite and Fight!: A
Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930-90 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997);
Halpern and Horowitz, Meatpackers: An Oral History of Black Packinghouse Workers and Their Struggle for Racial
large-scale union processes, practitioners of the old labor history neglect the critical importance of on-the-ground relations between workers. Just as critically, however, the community studies promulgated by new labor historians tend to privilege worker relations at the expense of union organizing, thus disregarding the impact that labor organizations and their leadership can have on the course of interracial unionism.

This project makes a major conceptual intervention by attempting to combine the best facets of each approach and thus produce a more complete history of race and the Chicago labor movement. I argue that the CFL’s drive failed due to the fateful triangulation of three groups: white workers and their unions, black workers, and employers. The CFL was unable to create a union structure conducive to truly racially progressive organizing—that is, a structure that afforded African American workers a space in which they could materially affect the direction of the union. Just as importantly, white rank-and-file unionists alienated black workers with their racialist ideas. Second, as a result, black workers viewed the union with skepticism and responded with little enthusiasm to the union appeal, which only confirmed the racist ideas of white workers. Finally, employers sensed the tenuousness of interracial relations within the CFL and exploited racial tensions mercilessly and ultimately succeeded in dividing the CFL and defeating its campaign.

Labor unions had built a long and infamous history of racial exclusion by the time of the CFL campaign. AFL unions were craft-oriented and thus shunned unskilled workers, immigrants, and African Americans. Though the CFL’s leaders earnestly sought to transcend such bigotry, their view of racial inclusion was limited and the structure of their campaign proved disastrously repellent to black workers. The rank and file played its role as well. Historical experience and simple ignorance conspired to make many white workers suspicious of
African Americans as a “scab race.” When such prejudices manifested as violent shopfloor conflict, many black workers—influenced as well by the paternalism of employers and anti-unionism among community leaders—turned away from unionism entirely. Black reluctance to embrace the CFL campaign only reinforced white prejudices and led to greater conflict. Employers preyed on the union mercilessly, using strategic hiring and firing practices to enflame racial tensions, divide their workforce, and defeat the campaign. As a result, both black and white workers entered the 1920s as easy prey for the whims of bosses.

My intervention here is at its root conceptual. Previous scholars have focused on one or perhaps two of these groups. My work, by contrast, triangulates the failure of the CFL campaign between these groups and thus brings them into greater conversation with one another. This process is important for three reasons. First, my argument brings class and race into greater interaction with one another. Because such a large number of urban African Americans were industrial workers, working-class history must necessarily address the ties between racial oppression and class exploitation. Numerous historians of the black experience have criticized the manner in which labor historians privilege the salience of class over race and “celebrate…episodic occurrences of interracial solidarity while ignoring the overall historical pattern” of working-class racism, in the words of Herbert Hill.17 Though my work is deeply influenced by the new labor history’s Marxist orientation—specifically, its understanding of class as a material, lived experience—I do not privilege class over race. On the contrary, I argue that race, while a social construction, results in lived experiences in much the same way as class.

Moreover, my examination of the CFL’s campaign demonstrates the complex ways in which problems of class and problems of race were inextricably linked—through the Federation’s attempts to build an interracial union to white and black workers’ skepticism about such efforts to employers’ ability to exploit racial tensions.

Second, this approach demonstrates the vital importance of examining both union structures and rank-and-file behavior. By critically analyzing the leadership of the CFL and the ways in which they sought to bring progressive unionism to life—including their goals, rhetoric, and the structures they created within the Federation—I offer a new understanding of the ways in which unions can fall short of their aims. In the CFL’s case, structural flaws born from a naiveté regarding African American workers proved a serious blow to the campaign. However, I also provide an analysis of workers themselves. The prejudices of white rank-and-file workers, rooted in a combination of historical experience and fearful myth, led them to harass black workers, sometimes violently. Black workers thus responded with skepticism to the CFL’s call for interracial unionism. By examining the high-level processes of union organization in concert with the struggles of the rank and file, I provide a more complete picture of the CFL’s failure than would be possible through a traditional “old labor history” or “new labor history” approach. In this way, my study avoids what Daniel Letwin has dubbed the “ahistorical dichotomies” that so often define discussions of interracial unionism.18 Because both union leadership and union members played a role in the defeat of the CFL campaign, they must be understood alongside one another, a process that my argument is uniquely suited to describe.

These two interventions—linking race and class and examining both union structures and the rank and file—lead to a final, and crucial, benefit of this approach. My intervention demonstrates

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18 Letwin, 6.
both the possibilities and limits of interracial unionism. The CFL’s attempts to create a racially harmonious union failed not merely because the union failed to create a workable structure, but also because of the reactions of rank-and-file workers and the predation of employers. As a result, I do not view the failure of interracial unionism in Chicago as inevitable. In fact, quite the contrary—progressive unionism saw terrific success before succumbing to internal weaknesses and external events such as the race riot of 1919. Rather, this dissertation proves that a truly interracial union is possible, but only if union leadership and rank-and-file workers make earnest efforts to embrace racial cooperation and resist the efforts of employers to divide them. Only through an understanding of both race and class, both unions and their members, can the historical potentiality and limits of interracial unionism be fully understood.

My argument can be understood in four main sections. The first—Chapter 1—deals with the antecedents of the CFL campaign. Chicago has a long and bloody history of labor conflict, and the CFL’s efforts to build a new form of racially progressive unionism had their roots in the brutal strikes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Three of these conflicts—the waiters’ strike of 1903, the meatpacking strike of 1904, and the teamsters’ strike of 1905—are particularly instructive. In 1903, Chicago’s waiters, organized into interracial unions, walked off the job to protect the closed shop. When the union negotiated differential benefits for white and black waiters, the black workers walked off the job once more. They were abandoned by their union comrades, excoriated by national union leadership, and ultimately expelled from the organization entirely. The episode left African Americans deeply skeptical of unionism. Such distrust was quickly reinforced; the meatpacking strike of 1904 and teamsters’ strike of 1905 were notable for their spectacular violence. In both strikes, employers’ use of black strikebreakers enflamed white unionists’ hatred and resulted in the harassment, beating, and even
murder of black workers. Even black Chicagoans who had no connection to strikebreaking suffered assaults, leaving the city’s workforce racially divided and allowing employers to crush both strikes. These defeats left in their wake deep racial divisions.

Chapter 2 represents another major line of argument. There, I discuss the CFL’s attempts to transcend the divisions fostered by racial conflict and build a new interracial unionism. Upon his election to the presidency of the Chicago Federation of Labor in 1906, John Fitzpatrick set out to eradicate the corruption of his predecessors and institute a new campaign of what historian John Keiser has called “progressive unionism,” an ideology under which the Federation would organize all workers, regardless of race and skill, into so-called neighborhood locals based in local communities. Though hampered by employee victories during the early twentieth century, the Great Migration provided Fitzpatrick with the opportunity he needed. Recognizing that the thousands of black workers flowing into Chicago represented the balance of power between labor and capital, Fitzpatrick, along with radical William Z. Foster, began a campaign to organize the city’s unskilled workers, particularly African Americans. In meatpacking, this campaign was sufficiently successful that in 1917, the union issued to meatpacking bosses a series of demands and backed them with the threat of a national strike. The resulting arbitration, during which the union’s arguments made significant mention of black workers, was a resounding success for the CFL and appeared to portend a new day for Chicago’s workers.

Unfortunately, that new day did not arrive. In Chapters 3 and 4, I examine internal flaws that damaged the CFL campaign. The CFL was beset from within by structural problems that plagued the organizing drive. These issues are the subject of Chapter 3. For one thing, the CFL’s vision of federated locals was heavily indebted to federal labor unions (FLUs), a device long used by the AFL to organize black workers. But for the territorial, craft-oriented, and often racist heads
of AFL international unions, FLUs were merely a tool of convenience. FLU locals had virtually no power within the AFL, and their segregated structure tended to reinforce, rather than break down, existing patterns of workplace exclusion and discrimination. The CFL’s neighborhood locals quickly encountered similar problems. For one thing, neighborhood locals shifted power from the shopfloor into the community, eroding their influence at the workplace; the union’s reliance on the largesse of federal mediators only exacerbated this problem. More importantly, the neighborhood locals reflected a devastating racial naiveté on the part of CFL leaders. Rather than strengthening the ties between the black community and the Federation, the neighborhood local in the Black Belt functioned as a de facto segregated local. African American members thus viewed the CFL’s campaign with distrust, limiting the Federation’s ability to build a truly interracial union movement.

In Chapter 4, I examine another of the CFL’s internal problems, namely, ongoing clashes between white and black rank-and-file workers. Many white workers harbored racist attitudes toward blacks, rooted both in the bloody labor conflicts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in the constellation of pathologies Eric Arnesen has dubbed “the specter of the black strikebreaker.” The influx of African American migrants from the South only deepened the resulting tensions, as employers flooded the city’s slaughterhouses with nonunion black employees in an effort to provoke racial strife and undermine the union. Packing bosses also eagerly cultivated alliances with black churches and community organizations such as the Wabash Avenue YMCA and the Chicago Urban League, stiffening the black middle class’s traditional opposition to unionism. A series of violent shopfloor confrontations between white and black workers proved that the packers’ strategies were successful.
My final two chapters explore the decline and death of the CFL’s vision of progressive unionism. In Chapter 5, I examine the ways in which the Chicago Race Riot of 1919 helped to decimate the CFL campaign. Though union workers notably refrained from participating in the riot’s brutality, the conflict’s unique violence—which included pitched street battles between white and black Chicagoans—created an atmosphere of mutual racial distrust that was difficult to overcome. Even more important was the riot’s aftermath, which has been largely overlooked by historians. Employers, seeking to exacerbate racial tensions among their workforce, reopened the stockyards by having militia escort black nonunion workers into the slaughterhouses. White union workers walked out in protest, but many of their black union comrades did not follow them. The wildcat strike left the union more divided and powerless than ever. Black workers, disgusted by the riot and unconvinced of the union’s message, increasingly turned toward racial rather than class organizing, with many abandoning unionism entirely.

Chapter 6 details the final blows to Fitzpatrick’s vision of progressive unionism. Three major events signaled the decline of the CFL’s campaign. The first was a bitter internal struggle for control of the stockyards. Members of the old Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen (AMCBW), which had been folded into the CFL’s Stockyards Labor Council (SLC) created a new district council and demanded that the rights of unskilled, immigrant, and African American workers be reduced. The ensuing fight sapped the CFL of much of its energy and ended when Polish-American organizer John Kikulski was murdered by an unknown person or persons. This ugly chapter typified the waning fortunes of the Federation. A pair of deathblows soon followed. In 1919, the CFL (particularly Foster) took a leadership role in the organization of the steel industry and in the execution of the strike in November. But black workers, skeptical of unionism, refused to join the campaign and generally did not strike. With the assistance of
strikebreakers and government repression, the steel bosses defeated the union handily. A similar scene played out in meatpacking, where the CFL made one last desperate stand in 1920-1921. That winter, Chicago was the center of a national butcher’s strike. But despite a furious organizing campaign, black workers were once again unmoved by the union appeal. Few joined the union and even fewer struck. As in steel, the use of strikebreakers coupled with employer power and a brutally cold winter to doom the union campaign to failure. By the early 1920s, the CFL had been driven out of both meatpacking and steel, and Fitzpatrick’s vision of progressive unionism was dead.

The collapse of progressive unionism cannot, then, be attributed to white racism, nor black resistance, nor employer predation. Rather, it must be understood within the context of a complex interplay of white and black workers and employers. Union structures, rank-and-file conflicts, and employer resistance combined to doom the campaign to failure. A true understanding of the CFL’s efforts must account for all of these factors. With this goal in mind, I turn first to a discussion of the Chicago labor movement and its racially charged struggles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.
Chapter 1: “Foolish Colored Men”: Race in the Chicago Labor Movement, 1894-1905

In the summer of 1903, at the height of a hotly contested strike by Chicago’s waiters and hotel workers, the Chicago Tribune printed an editorial excoriating black workers for taking part in the work stoppage. The Tribune acknowledged that African Americans faced “outrageous” levels of racial enmity within the city, but maintained that the best way to transcend such feelings was to return to work. White workers had “set the colored man a bad example” through their aggressive union organizing, the paper argued, “but if [black workers] were sensible they would refuse to imitate the whites in these particulars.”¹ For black workers, the reality was not nearly so simple as choosing obedience or militancy. As workers, they were implicated in the labor conflicts that embroiled Chicago in the early twentieth century. As African Americans, they were subject to exploitation by bosses and prejudice by unions. The seeds of the racial discord that accompanied the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) organizing drive of 1917-1919 were sowed in the early years of the twentieth century, as a series of labor struggles fostered suspicion, disunity, and hatred among the city’s workers.

This chapter examines three such antecedent events: the waiters’ strike of 1903, the stockyards strike of 1904, and the teamsters’ strike of 1905. More specifically, it interrogates the process by which the actions of employers and workers, both black and white, racialized each strike. I use the term “racialized” to refer to the process by which each labor conflict was transformed into a primarily racial one. Though previous scholars have analyzed the process by which racial feelings significantly animated these strikes, none has explicated the legacy that each conflict bequeathed to the CFL organizing drive of 1917-1919. Though temporally distant

from the 1917-1919 organizing campaign, these three events illuminate the mutual racial distrust that would come to suffuse Chicago’s labor movement by the late 1910s. In the wake of these three strikes—all union defeats to one degree or another—the CFL would fade into obscurity for close to a decade as new leadership rebuilt the city’s labor movement and steeled it for a new organizing campaign. The memory of these defeats, as well as that of the stunning violence that accompanied them, remained fixed in the minds of workers, union leaders, and the black community. These experiences helped influence the course of the CFL’s 1917-1919 campaign.

The execution, success, and legacy of each strike was profoundly affected by race, albeit in ways that reflected the differing roles of black workers in the respective industries. Black waiters were a significantly unionized group at the vanguard of the city’s hotel and restaurant unions. The stockyards strike, conversely, was led by the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen (AMCBW), a craft union that contained almost no black members. Finally, a number of black teamsters were unionized at the time of the 1905 strike. In each case, the actions of employers and white and black workers redefined class conflicts as racial ones. Employers, eager to exploit racial tensions, successfully deployed a variety of tactics to turn white against black. African American workers, facing discrimination from whites, often heeded the call. White workers responded to such actions with violence. As a result, despite the resounding victory of employers in each case, it was racial hatred that would ultimately characterize the most bitter and lasting legacy of each strike.

**Black Workers and Chicago Unions**

The violence of the 1903-1905 period can best be understood in the unique context of Chicago unionism. By the time the opening salvos of the waiters’ strike were fired in the summer
of 1903, the Chicago Federation of Labor was nearly two decades old. The CFL was officially chartered in late 1896 by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). As the labor movement’s main coordinating body in one of the nation’s largest industrial centers, the CFL grew at a dizzying pace. At its founding, it represented only 34 local unions. By 1906, that number had reached nearly two hundred, and would continue to grow until the mid-1920s. Despite these impressive numbers, the CFL was organized not as a powerful governing apparatus, but as a loose federation of autonomous local unions. As such, the duties and privileges of the CFL’s Executive Board were tightly circumscribed and exercised on an almost purely voluntary basis—strike funds, unemployment assistance, conciliation of inter-union disputes, publicity, and political pressure. In a city whose labor movement was dominated by craft unions bound by traditions of self-policing, such a structure proved a reliable if somewhat conservative element of leadership. But because the constitutional authority of the Federation was vested entirely in the local unions, there was no mechanism by which locals could be compelled to change their behavior or repudiate their policies, even if such behavior or policies might damage the Federation as a whole. In no area was this more amply demonstrated than in the question of black union membership.

The CFL constitution, like that of the AFL, specifically forbade exclusion on the basis of “race, color, or creed,” but the reality was more complicated. It would be incorrect to say that the majority of CFL locals barred African Americans by constitutional provision, though some industries, the railroads in particular, were notorious bastions of white privilege. In many ways

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2 Delegates, for example, could not be suspended or even censured by the Federation, but only by their locals. Constitution of the Chicago Federation of Labor (1896), Chicago History Museum; Truman Cicero Bigham, “The Chicago Federation of Labor” (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1925), 12-16.

3 For a discussion of race and the AFL, see Chapter 3.
the creation of “whitewashed” locals was a haphazard process. Three significant factors gave rise to racial exclusion within the Chicago labor movement. First, Chicago’s black population at the turn of the century was minute. Though the city’s African American population increased 150% between 1900 and 1910, blacks represented only 2% of the city’s population by 1910. Many local unions drew from specific neighborhoods and had their roots in fraternal societies that reinforced ties based on community and ethnicity, rather than class and workplace. Workplace composition also played a major role. For much of the early twentieth century, industrial jobs—many of which remained skilled positions—were not considered “Negro jobs,” making black union membership a moot question. In other industries, such as hotels and restaurants, workers were segregated on the job, and thus organized into segregated locals. Policies of segregation enforced by employers were often reflected in the composition of unions.

A second major factor was white workers’ fear of competition with black labor. Despite the negligible size of Chicago’s black population, black labor represented a significant threat to the economic position of white workers. African Americans arrived in the city with very few skills (or possessing skills rendered useless by the exclusionary policies of white tradesmen) and generally became “part of a floating population of laborers who shifted from one industry to another in search of work.” White workers rightfully feared the presence of a fluid, low-paid

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labor force, recognizing that it could quickly be deployed to undermine a strike. The irony, of course, was that Chicago’s local unions helped maintain the low pay and fluidity of black laborers by refusing them membership either by constitutional mandate or by informal discrimination. Many employers—though perhaps exaggerating to pass the blame—cited the refusal of unionized whites to work alongside unorganized blacks as one of the main reasons for African American workers’ low pay and industrial transience. Despite their stated resentment of workplace segregation and its implications for strikebreaking, Chicago’s white union workers helped to reinforce mechanisms of segregation and oppression within the workplace. 7

Finally, and most critically, the unwillingness of white labor to accept black workers in larger numbers helped make their fears a self-fulfilling prophecy. For white labor, the presence of black workers conjured one indelible and unspeakable image: the scab. A transitory labor force, possessing little skill and demanding little pay, was a nightmare for white union men and resulted in what Eric Arnesen has dubbed “the specter of the black strikebreaker.” In each of the conflicts discussed here, the number of black strikebreakers was greatly exaggerated. Thus the “specter” of black strikebreaking was in some cases more important than the reality of it. As Jonathan Coit has argued, white working-class racism was in many ways “a process of signification rather than...a direct (or mediated) outcome of a material conflict.” When that material conflict emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the exclusion of blacks from the great number of Chicago’s unions—whether by circumstance or by design—

made breathed life into the specter. Black behavior thenceforth served to confirm whites’ existing prejudices.\(^8\)

Barred from participation in the city’s labor movement, blacks had no reason to turn down any jobs that were offered to them, even if their acceptance of such jobs would undermine white labor. “If the Negro has to depend on a strike in order to gain employment,” economist Herman Feldman quipped, “he cannot be blamed for feeling somewhat like the undertaker who is saddened at the decline of deaths.” But as this chapter will demonstrate, strikebreaking was not, as historian Andrew Wender Cohen has explained, an act of “calculated treachery on the part of the colored man.” In fact, black strikebreakers occasionally made common cause with strikers. But African Americans’ exclusion from union membership replaced the potentiality for class unity with the reality of racial animus. Black workers, as David Roediger has observed, were placed in an impossible position: “it was ridiculous for African-Americans to expect to work alongside whites in skilled jobs and criminal for them to take the jobs of whites during strikes.”\(^9\)

For black workers open to strikebreaking, Chicago in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a fruitful locale. In 1894, Chicago took center stage as the Pullman railroad boycott swept the nation. Militancy was at a fever pitch, with dozens of local unions participating in support actions, including sympathy strikes. When stockyards workers walked out, they were replaced by black strikebreakers, who quickly became the targets of white wrath. A white foreman tendered his resignation when instructed to supervise a gang of black workers. At the

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corner of Root and Halsted streets, near the entrance to the stockyards, a crowd hanged and burned an effigy labeled “nigger scab.” Though the number of blacks employed as strikebreakers was negligible, their participation was crucial to the defeat of the sympathy strike. The racial feeling engendered by the defeat and the presence of the scabs lingered, as the African Americans became “intimately associated with the defeat.” During the building trades lockout of 1899-1900, black strikebreakers were the victims of targeted assaults by aggrieved construction workers, resulting in at least thirty injuries and four fatalities.10

An examination of three major labor conflicts of the early twentieth century illuminates the complex ways in which a class conflict, such as a strike or lockout, can become a racial one. In each of the three cases, African American workers were violently expelled from the labor movement and the workplace. In each case, white workers rallied around one another, through their unions or their communities, further closing ranks against black labor. In each case, black workers displayed a high degree of class militancy, and in each case it was ignored as class anger turned to race anger and blacks were forced to defend themselves from whites. Most significantly, each conflict bequeathed to Chicago’s labor movement a legacy of racial hatred and helped inexorably connect Chicago’s labor movement to its racial dynamics.

The Waiters’ Strike of 1903

Chicago’s restaurants and hotels represented a rare industry: one whose workforce was both racially diverse and heavily unionized. Because black and white waiters served different clienteles, they were organized into segregated locals. If the actions of the most powerful black local, Colored Waiters #509, are any indication, black workers took tremendous pride in the organization and maintenance of their membership. Local #509’s business agent, Ben Ricketts, was a regular correspondent to *Mixer and Server*, the official journal of the cumbersomely titled Hotel and Restaurant Employes’ International Alliance and Bartenders’ International League of America.¹¹ Ricketts swelled with obvious pride in his local, which was “gaining strength and enrolling names on her roster every day.” He boasted of the local’s hall as being “one of the most complete local Headquarters in the city,” a place positively bustling with waiters “chat[ting] about the bright future the great International will create for them.” The excitement of the black waiters was nearly palpable: “they all seem to comprehend that ‘something will be stirring soon,’” Ricketts explains. “There is unionism on every lip, unionism in the very air we breathe…every one is impressed with the magnitude of this gigantic undertaking.”¹² The waiters union was thus a rarity: not only were black workers organized, they represented a proudly militant faction of the union.

Given this sense of pride, it is not surprising that black waiters were at the vanguard of the waiters’ strike of 1903—particularly given the fact that employers evinced racial motivations from the very beginning of the strike. The conflict began in the spring, when the restaurants of H.

¹¹ “Employe” or “employes” was a common spelling of “employee”/“employees” in this era; rather than incessantly label quotes or citations with the traditional [sic], I have chosen to simply leave these alternative spellings as-is.

H. Kohlsaat & Co. summarily fired their black employees and replaced them with white waitresses. Infuriated, the black waiters alerted their comrades. By that afternoon, more than five hundred employees, white and black, had walked off the job at various downtown restaurants.\footnote{“Kohlsaat Waiters’ strike,” \textit{Chicago Daily News} (5 May 1903), 1; “Strike Epidemic On,” ibid. (6 May 1903), 2; “Waiters on Strike Now,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (6 May 1903), 3; Letter from Ben F. Ricketts, \textit{The Mixer and Server} Vol. XII, No. 6 (15 June 1903), 45; Josephson, 54; Cohen, \textit{Racketeer’s Progress}, 107-108.} Sensing an opportunity, union leadership demanded a wage increase and a reduction in hours—many waiters worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week—and refused to call off the strike until all the strikers, white and black, were reinstated. Despite some misgivings regarding the wisdom of a strike in the hospitality industry, the CFL pledged its financial and moral support to the waiters.\footnote{Ibid.; “Labor Leaders Keep Up Strikes,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (13 May 1903), 2; “Strike Called Off,” \textit{Chicago Daily News} (20 May 1903), 2; “Labor Crisis is Near,” ibid. (23 May 1903), 1-2; Josephson, 55.} The waiters employed a variety of creative protest tactics to pressure the employers. Supplies were cut off, as union teamsters refused to cross the waiters’ picket lines to deliver ice and other essentials. A group of the union's business agents entered a struck shop, ordered coffee, and surreptitiously urged the strikebreaking waitresses to join the strike. Within a few minutes, the waitresses walked out. In another case, forty-three black strikers marched into a Kohlsaat restaurant, sat at the counter, ordered coffee and lunch—and remained there, eating as slowly as possible, for more than two hours. The restaurant was forced to turn away dozens of regular patrons for want of seating.\footnote{“Bakers Push Up Prices,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (8 May 1903), 3; “Peace Fails at Deering,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (9 May 1903), 3; “Laundry War Crisis,” \textit{Chicago Daily News} (9 May 1903), 2.}

With the strike quickly growing, the Chicago Restaurant Keepers’ Association met to discuss the strikers’ demands. Deciding that the waiters were adequately compensated and well-treated, and sensing an opportunity to retake their shops, the Association offered an ultimatum: agree to
arbitration of the strike dispute, or be locked out. The union was enraged. Though an expansion of the strike to hotels was initially considered risky, employees citywide now walked out. Maids, bellhops, elevator operators, cooks, and waiters all abandoned their posts, some in the middle of their shifts. At the Chicago Beach hotel, maids “left the beds unfinished, and when the strike call came even the scrub girls quit work, some of them leaving their nails and brushes on the partly cleaned floors.” Well-to-do hotel guests donned aprons and performed their own cooking and serving.

Despite the strikers’ creativity and militancy, the fears of both the CFL and the waiters union were well-founded: a strike of restaurants and hotels was widely viewed as a threat to the city’s public interest and even its safety. The city’s newspapers helped spread hysterical fears, ranging from a decline in the tourist industry to an increase in homelessness and starvation. Editorials slammed the strikers, claiming that “the man who has made it his business to furnish board and lodging to the public differs from…the ordinary manufacturer” and asserting that “it is the duty of the hotels to keep open.” One editorial claimed that the resumption of business at restaurants and hotels resulted in a number of scuffles, with “the pickets generally selecting women for their victims.” Such condemnations were not limited to the city’s anti-labor “kept press.” The generally pro-labor *Chicago Daily News* acknowledged that the strikers had “real grounds of complaint,” but excoriated them for “putting themselves, the employers and the public to the loss and annoyance of a strike.” The strike received national attention as well. The *New York Times*

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referred to the strike as “Chicago’s Famine Peril” and argued that the “furious and vindictive proceedings” of the strike were taking place “at the expense of the city of Chicago,” as “the question of getting something to eat has become a serious one for thousands of Chicagoans.” Meanwhile, concerned consumers began a counterprotest under the aegis of the so-called Anti-Tipping League, geared toward “correct[ing] conditions in the hotels and restaurants and the preservation of the pocketbook.” “Unionism is to be met with unionism,” its advocates claimed, arguing that the waiters union should be able to protect its members “without levying tribute on the public.”\(^\text{18}\)

Such pressure took a toll on the union. Significantly, the first cracks within the ranks of the strikers followed racial lines. In mid-June, Vice President J. T. Brewington of Colored Local #509 resigned his post, claiming that the union’s refusal to engage in arbitration was “a form of highway robbery.” Brewington recognized the tremendous public pressure under which the black strikers in particular were operating: “we have against us the press, the pulpit, the bench, the bar, and the sensible labor leaders.” A refusal to arbitrate, he argued, “takes away from us our last hope of public sympathy.” Though Brewington “was greeted with mingled cheers and hisses from the rank and file,” the black strikers were clearly growing concerned that they might never be reinstated. A number of black waiters at the meeting “signified their intention of following [Brewington’s] lead unless the policy of the board is quickly and materially changed.”\(^\text{19}\) There was some justification to Brewington’s anger. Compared to white waiters, the black workers were lower paid and worked under worse conditions in segregated facilities. More importantly,


\(^{19}\) “Waiters Falter; One Leader Out,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (16 June 1903), 1.
the restaurant owners had openly targeted black waiters already. Brewington’s concern that they would be left behind would prove grimly prophetic.

The strikers were rent by dissension from within, beset by public opposition, and losing money at an astronomical rate. Eventually the strikers agreed to meet with the Restaurant Keepers and arbitrate. No less a personage than AFL president Samuel Gompers arrived in Chicago in June to broker the peace. The sides were close enough to an agreement on June 18 that Gompers left the city, but talks fell apart at 2 a.m. when the Restaurant Keepers held fast on their offer to hire back 85% of the strikers—a proposal the union termed “a complete surrender.”20 Their obstinacy proved short-lived. On June 20, the union agreed to end the strike, capitulating to most of the Restaurant Keepers’ demands, including a partial reinstatement of striking workers and an agreement to work in “peace and harmony,” i.e., to refrain from any workplace discussion of the strike.21

Despite the fearful calls for arbitration of just a few days before, the strikers were disgusted. Most of the workers felt the union could have extracted more concessions from the employers, particularly in the way of reinstatement. Their anger grew as they dutifully flowed back into work, only to find many of their places filled. Crowds of infuriated workers pressed into the city’s restaurants and lunch counters, denouncing the arbitrated contract and demanding to be given their jobs back. When their efforts proved fruitless, their anger turned toward the union.


21 “Waiters at Work; Strike is Ended,” Chicago Daily Tribune (20 June 1903), 3; “Big Strike is Ended,” Chicago Daily News (20 June 1903), 2; “Kohlsaat War Ends,” Chicago Daily News (26 June 1903), 1-2; see also “The End of a Strike,” editorial, ibid. (21 June 1903), 4.
Dozens of men and women “appeared at the union headquarters demanding to know what provision had been made for them…indignation ran high and a massmeeting of the discontented ones was called.” The union’s leadership claimed that most members would be reinstated within ten days, but “the idle employes were not happy.”

Particularly dissatisfied with the arbitration results were the black workers. The arbitrated contract provided certain standards for the white workers: a general increase of ten per cent to white waiters and waitresses and an increase of just over twelve per cent for the miscellaneous white workers. The black workers, by contrast, were awarded an increase scaled to match the salaries of African American employees at “the big hotels, with the Palmer house as a standard.” The arbitration also gave the employers greater power over certain workers, such as bartenders and cooks, who railed against the loss of local union autonomy. These workers found common cause with the black waiters. The bartenders and cooks “began to cry ‘fraud’ and the negroes added to the chorus.” Ben Ricketts, the idealistic business agent of Local #509, glumly summed up the feeling of the black waiters: “our cause has been belittled, our principles trampled upon, the trust that we placed in a so called arbitration or conciliation body has been betrayed.”

Having led the initial work action, black workers now felt betrayed by the union’s white leaders. The “chorus” soon sprang into action. In early July, the black waiters again found themselves at the vanguard of the waiters’ struggle, as five hundred walked out of downtown restaurants, citing that the arbitrated contract did not provide them with a satisfactory wage increase. Repeating their earlier tactics, the black waiters informally occupied the restaurants, “gathering

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on sidewalks [and] taunt[ing] all those who entered.” Robert Callahan, the international president of the waiters union, cited the arbitrated contract as sacrosanct, declared the strike illegal, and ordered the black waiters back to work. When they refused, Callahan traveled to Chicago and met with the Restaurant Keepers Association to “arrange for what he considered…improved wages and conditions.” Callahan negotiated what he assumed would be a satisfactory compromise, but in a stunning show of solidarity, the waiters union’s Local Joint Board unanimously rejected this new agreement and ordered a general strike.24

Despite the admirable display of solidarity and interracial unity displayed by the Local Joint Board, the waiters’ situation quickly grew ugly, as the issue of race divided the union. It soon became apparent that white workers would sell out their black colleagues to retain their own benefits. White waiters in five of the city’s largest restaurants evinced no concern for the black workers, declared that the arbitrated contract was perfectly satisfactory, and maintained “that they would not support any attempt of the joint board to call another strike.” Callahan agreed and ordered the black waiters to go back to work.25 Without the support of the waiters in Chicago’s largest shops, the black workers would find themselves defeated by public opposition, an employer counteroffensive, and, most of all, the betrayal of their own union.

Many in the public excoriated the black waiters for causing more trouble in the city’s hospitality industry. The Tribune argued in an editorial entitled “Foolish Colored Men” that if

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25 “Waiters Told to Work,” Chicago Daily Tribune (9 July 1903), 5; “Cloakmakers in War,” Chicago Daily News (9 July 1903), 1-2. A year later, the black newspaper The Broad Ax would chide the unwillingness of employees to support one another, remarking that strikebreakers “are to be pitied more than sensured [sic] for their lack of self esteem and manly principles.” See L.W. Washington, “The Afro-American Waiters of Chicago,” The Broad Ax (23 July 1904), 1.
the waiters were to “repudiate the agreement by which they have bound themselves nobody will sympathize with them—not even the labor men.” Public opinion, now tinged with racial undertones, swelled against a renewed strike. A strike of the black waiters, the Tribune continued, would do “themselves and their race an injury.” Though recognizing that “the blacks are the victims of an outrageous race prejudice in many quarters,” many felt that “the most effective way for [black workers] to combat that prejudice is to be steady, trustworthy, faithful workers who do not repudiate arbitration awards and violate agreements they have entered into.” A restaurant patron was heard to remark that the striking waiters “ought to be shipped down south where they lynch them for less than this.”

The white waiters’ betrayal of their black comrades evinced their dedication to the principle of racial privilege over that of class solidarity and doomed the black waiters’ protest.

Circumstances quickly escalated, as the issue of race took center stage for employers and employees alike. Buoyed by the public’s fury at the black waiters and sensing a split in the union’s ranks, the employers moved to consummate their original plan. In late August, the Restaurant Keepers’ Association began “a determined movement to eliminate negro employes from the downtown eating houses.” Devoid of union protection, black waiters were helpless as hiring agents recruited white women from Milwaukee, St. Louis, Indianapolis, and other Midwestern cities to take the place of those fired. The employers argued that “since the negroes joined the union…they have been indolent, often insolent to patrons, and practically worthless as waiters.” The company sneeringly claimed, “with an eye to justice,” that it would “place the few negroes who remained loyal to it in one restaurant.” But the words of Kohlsaat’s president, F. R. Barnheisel, were authoritative: “the day of the negro waiter in the downtown district is

over…within a short time not 10 per cent of the negroes now employed in the restaurants within the loop will be found at work.” Other members of the Restaurant Keepers’ Association soon announced plans to follow Kohlsaat’s example. Although the waiters Local Joint Board attempted to negotiate with the restaurants, the combination of a fractured union and a determined employer was simply too much to overcome. With nonunion waiters arriving in the city daily and their former positions being “filled at will,” it was clear that the black waiters had suffered a tragic defeat.27 Black waiters were shut out of their industry—and their union had played a major role in their expulsion.

The black waiters were infuriated. They rightfully felt “indignant at their leaders,” with most agreeing that their participation in the strike—a strike which they initiated and helped lead—ultimately “cost them an increase in wages and, in many cases, the loss of their positions.” As historian Matthew Josephson has written in his account of the waiters union, “plainly…the Chicago workers did not trust the President of the union, nor his associates, [nor] the other union officers in charge of Chicago.”28 Unfortunately for the black waiters, their ordeal was only beginning. Callahan returned to the union’s international headquarters and immediately called a meeting of the Executive Board, at which he demanded the revocation of Colored Local #509’s charter—ostensibly for failure to pay their per capita dues, but almost certainly also as punishment for their wildcat strike.29 The black waiters protested, claiming that their charter had been withdrawn “solely because of the color line” and pledging that they would carry a


28 Ibid.; “Seek to End Strike,” Chicago Daily News (26 August 1905), 2; “To Control Strikes,” ibid. (1 September 1903), 4; Josephson, 55.

29 Report of President Robert A. Callahan, Proceedings of Twelfth General Convention, Hotel and Restaurant Employes' International Alliance and Bartenders' International League of America (1904), 10; Josephson, 55.
discrimination grievance to the CFL and AFL. Local #509’s president expressed disgust that he and his workers “were suspended at a time when such action was to the interest of the employers.” Black waiters’ presence in downtown restaurants had already been effectively destroyed with the complicity of their white coworkers. It now appeared that union leadership was seeking to put an end to black waiters’ presence in the union itself.

Indeed, Local #509’s charter was revoked for reasons more racial than procedural. Without a charter, the local was no longer entitled to financial support from the national union. Much of that money was used to pay for the room and board of members who had lived above local restaurants and been evicted for their participation in the strike. Lacking the support of both the international union and the white Chicago locals, many black waiters “went hungry until another arrangement was made.” A member of Local #509 claimed that some of the men had fallen into “the clutches of poverty,” with close to a dozen families left homeless and in need of food. The international union had done nothing when local employers targeted black employees for the second time, allowing the Restaurant Keepers to purge their restaurants of black waiters. Now, the international demanded that Local #509—most of its members out of work, many homeless, and some starving—pay up. One final humiliation remained. Fully two years after the revocation of Local #509’s charter, its members applied to be reseated in the CFL, a crucial first step toward rebuilding their shattered organization. The Federation, though sympathetic to the local’s plight, was forced to deny the application under pressure from Callahan and the international—an act of staggering heartlessness that only furthers the idea that they were more concerned with a racial coup than financial restitution.30

30 “Unions Draw Color Line,” Chicago Daily Tribune (25 September 1903), 2; “Cracker Makers Sue for Peace,” Chicago Daily Tribune (5 October 1903), 3; Chicago Federation of Labor Minutes, 2 June 1905, 2-3; ibid., 10 June 1905, 13-14; Minutes of Chicago Federation of Labor Grievance Committee Meeting, 15 September 1905, 2;
The waiters’ strike is in many ways a moment out of step with its time. A group of black workers stood at the vanguard of an interracial union and, for a time, found themselves enjoying a tremendous degree of solidarity with their fellow workers. Unfortunately, the legacy of the strike lies not in moments of solidarity, such moments as the rejection of Callahan’s compromise with the Restaurant Keepers, but in the betrayal that ultimately resulted in the expulsion of black waiters from their union and from Chicago’s hospitality industry as a whole. Black waiters served their union with distinction and pride, leading a militant walkout against an open attack on their rights as workers. The strike they initiated was ended with a negotiated settlement that placed their wages below those of white workers. When they protested, they were abandoned by their fellow unionists, targeted by racist employers looking to “clean up” their workplaces, and ultimately expelled from the union for nonpayment of dues despite the international’s complicity in reducing Local #509’s members to destitution. For black waiters, class solidarity was a losing proposition. If black workers who held significant leadership roles in interracial unions could be offered as a sacrifice on the altar of employer avarice, then union membership was a sham.

In 1922, the Chicago Commission on Race Relations issued its report on the race riot of 1919. Among its voluminous findings lies a conviction, still bitterly held nearly two decades later: “there is a widespread belief among Negro workers that the colored waiters were ‘double-crossed’ by white unions in this strike.” For black workers, the preeminence of white privilege, the willingness of white workers to discard class solidarity for racial advancement, and the betrayal of unions remained the bleak legacies of the 1903 waiters’ strike.

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31 CCRR, 426; see also Andrew Holmes, “Labor Organizer Says Race Must Spurn Charity,” *Chicago Whip* (14 February 1920), 1, 5; Tuttle, 108-156; Meyers, 500.
The Stockyards Strike of 1904

The waiters’ defeat was unique in that the union was composed of a significant number of black members. This was not the case in the city’s stockyards. By 1900 meatpacking was the largest employing industry in the city. Meat conglomerates operated thirty-nine plants that churned out one-third of Chicago’s total manufacturing output, and employed more than twenty-five thousand employees who received ten percent of the city’s total wages.\(^{32}\) The massive size of the meat industry was not an accident. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a major reorganization of the manufacturing and labor process of the stockyards. Long valued as a skilled position filled by master workers, butchering became a mechanized, “deskilled” process. By the turn of the century, the “butcher aristocrats” saw their numbers dwindle as the packers installed a massive, socially and ethnically diverse army of unskilled workers that composed two-thirds of meatpacking workers in the city by the turn of the century. The shocks of this transformation were immense. Employers valued skilled workers only by the specific tasks they could perform; as these skills became increasingly mechanized, their labor decreased in worth. More importantly, the presence of vast numbers of unskilled workers allowed the packers to control the wages of both the skilled and unskilled men.\(^{33}\)

The skilled butchers were protected by their union, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen (AMCBW). The AMCBW was particularly strong in Chicago, with twenty-two locals representing thousands of members. As a result, in 1903 the union secured agreements with the city’s major packers—Swift, Morris, Cudahy, Schwazchild and Sulzberger, and


National Packing—that guaranteed regular hours, paid time off for major holidays, a wage scale, and a seniority system in some departments. Though the AMCBW organized some small locals for the unskilled workers, the packers refused to negotiate with them, subjecting the unskilled workers to low wages and irregular employment. Feeling their livelihood threatened by the presence of the unskilled workers, in 1904 the AMCBW demanded a wage scale with tiers for both the skilled and unskilled men. Though the packers offered a modest pay increase, they refused to guarantee wages for the unskilled workers. The skilled butchers voted almost unanimously for a strike. On July 12, 1904, the stockyards strike of 1904 began.34

The results were immediate and staggering: five thousand men walked out of Armour, more than four thousand at Swift, three thousand at Morris—a total of more than twenty thousand in Chicago alone.35 Significantly, however, most of these strikers were white. At the time of the walkout, blacks were an insignificant portion of the total stockyards workforce. Most of the strikebreakers hired to break the 1894 sympathy strike were fired after the conflict ended; by


1904, African Americans—almost exclusively unskilled—represented only about five percent of the total workforce in Chicago’s meatpacking industry.36

That number increased almost immediately. The packers sought to break the strike by placing foremen at the stockyards gates, authorizing them to hire as many men as possible to come inside and work.37 More galling to the strikers, the packers sent labor agents, paid on commission, to scour the nation for replacements. Thousands of men were hauled in by train from areas as close as Joliet and Evanston and as far as Missouri and Cincinnati, with many simply “picked up at various towns along the way.”38 This strategy paid immediate dividends: at 11:30 on the first night of the strike—when nearly all union pickets had returned to their homes—a pair of electric cars bearing fifty black strikebreakers pulled into the yards under the escort of a dozen police.39

Race immediately became a flashpoint of the strike. Ironically, the vast majority of the strikebreakers deployed in the stockyards (some observers estimated as many as eighty-five percent) were white. But where white strikebreakers could overcome their class betrayal through ethnic ties, black strikebreakers—inescapably marked by racial difference and resented as “imported” outsiders—were labeled a “scab race” and became the target of the strikers’ wrath. In the words of one striker, “the negro of the South is so far removed from the current of industrial

36 Spero and Harris, 264-265; Brody, Butcher Workmen, 41; Clark, 27.


life as to be almost wholly without [a] sense of class solidarity.” In the span of a few weeks, African Americans would change from a negligible proportion of the meatpacking workforce into a strikebreaking army of thousands: “a horde of debased, bestialized blacks...brought in[to] the labor market and shipped into the yards as hogs are shipped for the killing floors,” in the words of a labor newspaper. The strikebreakers were beset almost immediately by violent hatred. Sympathetic railroad workers alerted the strikers to the arrival of trains loaded with strikebreakers, which the strikers bombarded with rocks and bricks. The strikebreakers were no safer within the city; just two weeks after the beginning of the strike, a mob attacked a group of two hundred black workers leaving the yards. The strikebreakers’ arrival would immediately and irrevocably add a racial character to the strike.

The tragic irony of the attacks on black strikebreakers is that the replacement workers had significant grievances against the packers as well. Many of the men who had been “imported” from Missouri and central Illinois were not aware until their arrival that their newfound jobs were coming at the expense of striking workers. Labor agents often recruited African Americans to work in furniture factories, then brought them into the stockyards once they reached Chicago; the strikebreakers—without any money or contacts in the city—had little choice but to accept employment in the yards. Nevertheless, the strikebreakers were clearly resentful of the public opprobrium they faced. In August a pair of black workers engaged in an argument in a saloon.


When one man called the other a strikebreaker, the latter flew into a fury, pulled a knife, and stabbed him to death. The black newspaper *The Broad Ax* railed against the “slugging” of a black worker by a union man, calling the attacker a “brute” who was “impeding the progress of the working man”; in the same article, however, the author chided black workers themselves for strikebreaking, noting that African Americans “can’t afford to antagonize the good spirit of our brother workmen.” In another article, the paper noted that “every place taken in the Stock Yards by [black strikebreakers]…makes it possible for the Negro to [lose] out somewhere else,” since strikebreakers would be “first in the crisis” when the strike ended.\(^{42}\)

The black strikebreakers also collectively defied the packers. Just two weeks after the opening of the strike, a group of black strikebreakers at the Hammond meat plant went on strike themselves, demanding an increase in their daily wage from three dollars to five.\(^{43}\) At the end of July, a group of strikebreakers from the Armour and Morris plants estimated at between three hundred and five hundred “held a meeting and decided that they had worked long enough under the circumstances.” Citing their inability to cash their checks—there was no bank within the yards, and the strike-sympathizing banks and saloons of the surrounding neighborhoods refused to honor the pay stubs of strikebreakers—the men walked out. The scene was truly surreal: the black strikebreakers-turned-strikers filed out of the yards escorted by a group of white union workers “who guaranteed them safe conduct to the heart of the city.” Along the way, unionists and their families lined the streets to cheer on the erstwhile strikebreakers, who eventually reached the Loop and departed the convoy, “thanking their protectors.” A thousand more black


\(^{43}\) “Strike Hangs on Packers' Action,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (20 July 1904), 1; Spero and Harris, 265-267; Street, “Working in the Yards,” 215-216; Fogel, 26-27; Pacyga, 177; Henri, 151-152; Lewis, 20-22.
strikebreakers abandoned their posts in early August amid a massive parade of the strikers; at least a dozen of the strikebreakers joined the parade and received union buttons.\textsuperscript{44} The strikebreakers’ anger at the stockyards bosses reveals that the violence to come was not inevitable. Though most had never been part of a union, the brutality of stockyards employment made possible class-based alliances between whites and blacks.

Such alliances were insufficient to stay the wrath of the union men, however, as the opportunity for interracial cooperation slipped away and the black strikebreakers became the chief targets of the strikers. The union men identified the strikebreakers not only as occupiers of what they felt were rightfully union (and rightfully white) jobs, but also as agents and allies of the packers, actively uniting with capital in an effort to undermine the white working class more generally. More critically, the strike became racialized, as black strikebreakers in particular became associated with moral degeneracy and class betrayal.

No phenomenon more incited this resentment than the housing of the black strikebreakers. From the beginning of the strike, the packers recognized the need to lodge their newly hired employees; for reasons of both safety and practicality, asking new migrants to find housing on their own was simply not practicable. Carpenters began working around the clock on the first day of the strike to construct bunks inside the stockyards warehouses. That night, a group of black strikebreakers was marched into the beef house at Morris, where they were quartered for weeks at a time. Throughout the strike, new arrivals, hefting mattresses, blankets, and bags of clothes,

\textsuperscript{44} “Strikers Guard Men Who Desert,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (31 July 1904), 1; Neither Packers Nor Strikers Will Yield,” \textit{New York Times} (16 July 1904), 1; Henri, 151-152.
were shepherded through the stockyards gates under police guard. Bunks were built in four tiers, and the rooms were packed with close to a thousand men at a time.\textsuperscript{45}

The “scab hatcheries,” as they came to be known, were by no means exclusively reserved for black strikebreakers. The Chicago \textit{Tribune} made note of the bunks’ mix of “negroes, Italians, [and] Scandinavians,” dubbing it “a cosmopolitan mixture of workers living a garrisonlike existence.”\textsuperscript{46} But the tactics of the packers caused public perceptions to be tinged with racism. As historian Alma Herbst observed, “no scabs were as loathsome as the Negroes,” who were “easily distinguishable” and “conspicuous among the strike-breakers.” The companies reinforced this feeling at every turn. They not only provided room and board for the strikebreakers, but also paid them $2.15 per day (well above the normal daily unskilled rate of $1.85, but still undercutting the union’s request for $2.85), infuriating white union men who were striking for a wage increase.\textsuperscript{47} The packers also took special care in singling out the black workers for propaganda campaigns that portrayed the meat companies as benevolent parents and the unions as deceitful hucksters. Company managers often welcomed newly arrived strikebreakers with a lavish Sunday dinner and beds made with fresh linens, even as white strikers struggled to provide for their families amidst “the horrible, penetrating stench that permeat[ed]” all of Packingtown.\textsuperscript{48}


\textsuperscript{46} “Workers: Strike Breakers in Big Storage Rooms Have Good Dinner After Hard Work of Day,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (1 August 1904), 4.

\textsuperscript{47} Spero and Harris, 265-267. John R. Commons claimed that pay for the black strikebreakers was $2.25 per day. See Commons, “Labor Conditions,” 247.

\textsuperscript{48} “What Packingtown is Striking Against,” \textit{Chicago Socialist} (30 July 1904), 2; “Workers: Strike Breakers in Big Storage Rooms Have Good Dinner After Hard Work of Day,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (1 August 1904), 4; “Make
The boarding of strikebreakers became inexorably tied to race within the public imagination, particularly as details of the arrangements became public. As one might expect in rooms housing close to a thousand men during a Chicago summer, safety and sanitation were sorely lacking. The rooms had no windows, and men slept on bare cots in the stifling summer heat. One investigator claimed that conditions in the barracks had “no advantages over sleeping in the cattle pens.” At least one of the dormitories was a converted hog house. Smallpox swept through the bunks. Fires were a constant hazard. Rumors began to circulate that the packers had obtained reams of blank death certificates and were smuggling corpses out of the yards. For the union men, the filth of the conditions became a reflection on the strikebreakers rather than the packers, as observers labeled the workers “big, ignorant, vicious Negroes, picked up from the original elements of the black belts of the country.”

Many Chicagoans were even more disturbed by what they perceived as moral degeneracy within the strikebreakers’ dormitories. African Americans were considered morally inferior before the strike, partly because of the proximity of the city’s red-light district to its growing Black Belt. Conditions within the yards only strengthened public perceptions of blacks as

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49 Merry in “Yards,” Chicago Daily Tribune (14 August 1904), 3; “The Packingtown Strike,” Chicago Socialist (20 August 1904), 1; Pacyga, 177; Herbst, 25-27; Meyers, 500-501; Stephen H. Norwood, Strikebreaking & Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth Century America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 80, 91-93; see also “Famine at the Yards,” Chicago Daily News (26 July 1904), 1-2. The room-and-board arrangement was not fully satisfactory, and in fact helped cause the July 31 walkout of the black strikebreakers. A leader of the aggrieved men claimed that “some of the men asked the company to pay us in cash and were told that, as we had no need for money as long as we were housed and fed by the company, the demand was unreasonable.” See “Strikers Guard Men Who Desert,” Chicago Daily Tribune (31 July 1904), 1; Henri, 151-152.

49 Harry Rosenberg, “On the Packing Industry and the Stockyards,” undated (c. 1907), Mary McDowell Settlement Records, Chicago History Museum, Part 1, Box 3, 12; Meyers, 521; Norwood, 80, 91-93; see also George C. Hall, “The Health or the Sanitary Condition of the Negro in Chicago,” The Broad Ax (31 December 1904), 5; Letter to the editor, The Broad Ax (13 May 1905), 2.
The packers placed no restrictions on the behavior of the men, who were free to entertain themselves with games of poker and craps; one reporter claimed that eight separate poker games were running in a single room at one point. Some of the workers treated their fellows to impromptu boxing matches, using gloves and a ring provided by the packers. On weekends, musicians were brought in and dances were held. Despite the near-constant presence of company guards and police, “fights over women and crap games” and “guns pulled in the heat of gambling or a drunken brawl” were common occurrences. It was charged that the bunks became “a den of prostitution, where all the vile practices of the underworld were given full sway.” One report claimed that two hundred cases of syphilis were being treated each week. Another observer declared that conditions within the yards to be “a saturnalia of bestiality such as the Romans of centuries gone by.”

Though the AMCBW protested the barracks with sufficient vigor to force an investigation by the city Health Department, the black strikebreakers were frequently blamed for the conditions therein. The presence of black strikebreakers living under foul conditions seemed to confirm white perceptions of blacks as a degenerate “scab race.” A white striker referred to the strikebreakers as “men in whom the savagery of Africa has been intensified by generations of the [worst] savagery of wage- and chattel-servitude, accompanied by a final education in the slums.” He claimed that “there was no need to debase the negro,” as “earlier generations of masters had done that.” But in order to retain the loyalty of black strikebreakers, he argued, “their every

50 Drake and Cayton, 55-56; see also “The Packingtown Strike,” Chicago Socialist (20 August 1904), 1.


52 The Health Department ordered the immediate closing of the barracks, but the packers secured injunctions from friendly judges that allowed them to continue operating. See Meyers, 522.
passion must be gratified,” thus leading to the “gambling, drinking, and....bestial” entertainments within the yards.53 The black strikebreakers were now viewed not only as scabs, but as morally degenerate monsters invading the workplaces of Chicago.

The packers’ treatment of the men reinforced such feelings. Some strikebreakers attempted to resist the “vile practices of the underworld” by attending the sermons of black preachers, many of whom served as strikebreakers themselves. But the truth is that once inside the plants, the men had little to do other than to gamble or submit to the amusements—boxing, dancing, and gambling—provided by the packers. The strikebreakers were kept under guard and not permitted to leave, save for company-approved excursions.54 As a result, public perceptions of the strikebreakers became tied to sensational tales of immorality, which in turn became linked to the black strikebreakers in particular. When asked about the conditions within the yards, a police captain responded, “it’s hell down there.” The Ashland Avenue Business Men’s Association adopted a resolution lamenting the presence of the black strikebreakers who were “brought from the vilest slums of the leading American cities,” who represented “a menace to the city of Chicago” and who would “be poured out upon the city” once the strike was over. A striker feared that “every woman now working in the Yards is the free prey of whatsoever brutalized negro may care to use her for his purposes.”55 Recognizing the explosive danger that racism posed to the success of the strike, CFL leadership attempted to convince Booker T. Washington to visit

53 A. M. Simons, “The Battle of the Meat Makers,” Chicago Socialist (27 August 1904), 1; Norwood, 80, 91-93.


55 A. M. Simons, “The Battle of the Meat Makers,” Chicago Socialist (27 August 1904), 1; Clark, 130-132; see also Norwood, 103-104.
the city and entreat blacks to refrain from strikebreaking, but he refused.\textsuperscript{56} Black strikebreakers were hated for their willingness to take on union jobs, derided for their perceived degeneracy, and vilified for (literally) getting into bed with employers. Despised and isolated, they were viewed as the personification of the packers’ greed.

The white strikers’ ability to close ranks only augmented the strikebreakers’ isolation. White strikers were bound by a pair of ties unavailable to the black strikebreakers. The first site of unity, of course, was the union itself. Assisted by a CFL strike fund of more than four thousand dollars a week, union members spent the weeks before the strike building up stocks of food to prepare for a “long siege.” Once the strike began, ethnic ties reinforced the strikers’ solidarity. One \textit{Tribune} estimate held that of the twenty thousand strikers, more than fifteen thousand were of foreign birth. Though some of these were Irish and German “old immigrants,” many were common laborers from southern and eastern Europe who lived alongside one another in the tenements “back of the yards.”\textsuperscript{57}

Such physical, social, and cultural proximity provided another crucial site of white class and racial unity: the neighborhood community. Circumstances at the workplace and in the community served to mutually reinforce white class and racial solidarity. Historian David Brody has noted that the close contact between coworkers on killing floors (as opposed to the tending of vast, dehumanizing machinery in steel mills), as well as the steady movement of new immigrants into the ranks of skilled workers, organically created a sense of common cause between various white ethnicities. As a result, ethnic whites—even those who broke the strike—did not suffer the

\textsuperscript{56} Spero and Harris, 267; Herbst, 25-27. It is unclear whether Washington refused the CFL’s request because of a previous engagement or because of his pro-business ideology and general opposition to labor unions, particularly vis-à-vis black workers.

same fate as the blacks, who were newcomers to the city and the industry. Similarly, James R. Barrett has described a phenomenon he calls “Americanization from the bottom up,” by which trade unions themselves worked to tear down ethnic barriers by encouraging identification by craft rather than by nationality, thus “facilitat[ing] the process of acculturation.”\textsuperscript{58} This process certainly seemed to take hold in the white neighborhoods surrounding the stockyards. On August 7, a month into the strike, the strikers marched in a massive parade estimated at between twenty and twenty-five thousand. Butchers, unskilled workers, women workers, and their children marched together behind an American flag.\textsuperscript{59} Further evidence for the unity of the white strikers can be found in the actions of local women. The wives and daughters of striking men—including some striking female stockyards workers—were active participants in strike activities. Three Polish brides offered to donate the gifts from their weddings (an estimable sum of up to five hundred dollars per bride) to the strike fund. Women also partook in the violence surrounding the strike: a group of female strikers dragged a female strikebreaker from a car and viciously beat her as male strikers looked on, cheering.\textsuperscript{60} The solidarity of white workers was constantly reinforced by their affiliation with the union and the class and ethnic ties of their neighborhoods.

Black workers were unable to partake in such expressions of unity. Because the number of blacks in the pre-1904 stockyards was so low, and because the AMCBW was a skilled craft union that was largely closed to blacks, the African American workers had little opportunity to engage with fellow employees on the shop floor. Indeed, for many African Americans, strikebreaking represented their first opportunity to join the industry. But blacks were also barred

\textsuperscript{58} Brody, \textit{Butcher Workmen}, 40; Barrett, \textit{Work and Community}, 64-117, 138-142.


\textsuperscript{60} “Drivers' Council Against Strike,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (25 July 1904), 1; “Girls Act as 'Sluggers,'” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (24 August 1904), 3; Norwood, 91-93.
from common cause with the unskilled white strikers. Not only were they despised as strikebreakers, they lacked the community contacts that helped forge union solidarity among the immigrant whites. Whereas immigrant communities lay just outside the stockyards, reinforcing a strong identification between work and ethnicity, blacks were isolated in the so-called Black Belt. The black neighborhoods were physically far removed from the Stockyards and reviled as a haven for vice, only heightening whites’ suspicion of African Americans.⁶¹

Without the benefit of protection from the union or the binding of community ties, black strikebreakers—and African Americans in general—soon became the central targets of the strike, as race replaced class as the strike’s central issue. Attacks on nonunion men were common, but they played out with particular viciousness in the case of black strikebreakers.⁶² One black worker leaving the Armour plant boarded a streetcar with his son. Spotting him, a crowd of two hundred strikers assembled and chased the car down, pelting it with bricks and stones. The two were badly injured and were forced to take refuge in the home of a packinghouse boss, an act that only further infuriated the crowd. Such assaults were common. In another case, a group of striking workers standing in front of a saloon spied a group of African Americans riding a streetcar. The strikers boarded the streetcar and menaced the strikebreakers, telling them “the

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⁶² Though lacking a racial animus, the attacks on white strikebreakers were equal in brutality to those against blacks, including the stoning of a sixteen-year-old girl, the beating of a pair of Armour Institute students riding a streetcar; and a pitched street battle between police and a mob of four thousand strikers. See “Labor Wars Bitter,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1 April 1904), 1; “Policemen Fire on the Strikers,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (15 July 1904), 1; “Girl Mobbed by 1,000,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (23 July 1904), 1; “Keep the Peace,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (25 July 1904), 6; “Mob Vents Its Fury,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (25 July 1904), 1; “More Nonunion Men Beaten,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (5 August 1904), 3; “Strike Battle in Chicago” and “Strikers Battle With Police,” *Chicago Eagle* (6 August 1904), 8; “Students Beaten by Pickets,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (17 August 1904), 3; “Mob of 4,000 Men Charges Police,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (19 August 1904), 1; “Charge a Downtown Mob,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (27 August 1904), 3; “Fatal Riot in Chicago,” *Chicago Eagle* (27 August 1904), 8; Meyers, 533-536.
sooner you get out of this part of Chicago the better for you,” and threatening them with bodily harm if they did not leave town.63

Deepening the tension was the response of black strikebreakers, who engaged in armed self-defense against the strikers’ attacks. In the case of the men who were threatened on the streetcar, their response was simple: one of the strikebreakers pulled a revolver and gunned down the strike mob’s leader.64 Black strikebreakers who were not housed in the yards began to arm themselves as a matter of course. Many carried revolvers and did not hesitate to fire into the mobs that regularly menaced them coming to and from work. In fact, black strikebreakers armed themselves in such numbers that police began frisking the men as they boarded streetcars or entered the yards. On one occasion, a Lake Shore train carrying fifty strikebreakers to the Morris plant was boarded by police; it was reported that “more than a score of weapons,” including “revolvers and knives…in great numbers…especially among the negroes” were confiscated.65 Some strikebreakers initiated the violence themselves. On at least one occasion, a group of white strikers was set upon by a gang of black strikebreakers, who stabbed two of the white strikers and left them for dead.66 Such open warfare between white and black strikebreakers only

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64 “Fight and Riot Near the Yards,” Chicago Daily Tribune (27 July 1904), 2.


66 “Negroes Slash White Striker,” Chicago Daily Tribune (9 August 1904), 5; Norwood, 89-90.
exacerbated racial conflicts and redirected the rage of the strikers from the packing companies toward black workers.

Perhaps the best evidence for racial privilege as the guiding ideology of the strike is the repeated persecution of black workers not involved with the strike. As one reporter explained, “the union men and their friends have become so embittered against the colored strike breakers that the appearance of a negro in the vicinity of the stock yards is almost certain to be followed by violence… [the] development of a race war is rapidly proceeding throughout the strike district.” The streetcar attacks were often initiated from the streets by strikers loitering in front of saloons. Rather than identifying specific strikebreakers, they often spied black faces on the cars and immediately assembled a mob for violence. In several cases, groups of white strikebreakers attacked black Chicagoans who were most definitely not involved with the strike. After the aforementioned streetcar shooting incident, the crowd—disappointed at being thwarted—dragged a black barber’s porter out of his shop and beat him. The mob apparently believed the man was a strikebreaker, “and without waiting to ask any question attacked him before he could offer an explanation.”

In another case, a black man named E. Raglan was walking along Forty-Third Street when a man standing on a curb yelled “There goes a strikebreaker!” Raglan was not. He had traveled to Chicago from Kansas City of his own accord and was planning on looking for work outside the stockyards. The crowd was not appeased. They threw sticks and rocks at Raglan. Soon neighborhood children began sounding the alarm, and hundreds of men emerged from saloons and tenements to join the chase. Raglan managed to escape by climbing atop a building, where

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he was eventually rescued by police. As the racial spirit of the strike spread, black Chicagoans were persecuted in non-violent ways as well. In the restaurants surrounding the stockyards, a group of waitresses walked off the job to protest the presence of black cooks. Indiscriminate attacks on black Chicagoans who were not involved with the strike reflect the increasingly racial nature of the stockyards conflict: black people, not just black strikebreakers, were now the avatars of meatpacking bosses.

Despite the violent attacks against them, the black strikebreakers served their purpose: by late summer, the strike was quickly losing ground. In early August, the packers declared victory, claiming that they had added more than one thousand new men, with more than five hundred union strikers returning to work as well. The numbers confirmed their triumph. In the first week of August, the struck houses were producing thirty percent of their pre-strike output; that number would rise to fifty percent by mid-August and seventy percent by the beginning of September. With the strike slipping away, the AMCBW attempted unsuccessfully to declare a national butchers’ strike and meat boycott on September 3. A series of negotiations between the packers and union took place throughout the next week, until finally the AMCBW put the strike to a vote. The strikers’ votes did not match their actions—though they voted to continue the strike, more were flowing back into the yards everyday. With their numbers dwindling and their coffers exhausted, the AMCBW officially ended the strike on September 8. It was a total defeat. The union had not secured a wage increase for the skilled men, nor a wage scale for the unskilled. As

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68 "Girl Mobbed by 1,000," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (23 July 1904), 1.

a final insult, the packers refused to reinstate the union men as a group, claiming they would
rehire them only on an individual basis.\textsuperscript{70}

Racial hatred flared as the white men returned to the yards. A mass of four thousand men
rushed back into the plants, with “many cases of assault on both union and nonunion workers”
occuring. Many of the black men were attacked on the street as they left their posts, while others
were lucky to escape with nothing more than harsh language directed at them. The small number
of black workers who attempted to remain in the yards and hold onto their positions were
“warned that it would be unwise to remain in the yards’ vicinity.”\textsuperscript{71} The racial hatreds that had
engulfed the unionists only deepened in the wake of the brutal loss they eventually suffered.

The legacy of the 1904 strike was a bitter one. The AMCBW was all but chased out of the
yards. Before the strike, the AMCBW had organized thousands of Chicago butchers into
numerous locals. After the strike, a mere one hundred union butchers in a single local
represented the entirety of the ACMBW’s presence in the city until the CFL organizing drive
during World War I. Even that solitary local met in secret, fearing company reprisal—a far cry
from the union’s aggressive pre-strike posture. The union’s officers and many of the strikers

\textsuperscript{70} “Claim Victory Over Strikers,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (2 August 1904), 2; “Says Strike is at End,” \textit{Chicago Daily
News} (2 August 1904), 1-2; “Strikers Learn Packers’ Secret,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (6 August 1904), 1; “Nonunion
Men Secure,” \textit{Chicago Daily News} (18 August 1904), 1-2; “Recognize No Strike,” ibid. (25 August 1904), 1-2;
“Packers Again Say No,” ibid. (26 August 1904), 1-2; “Plan Fight on Unions,” ibid. (30 August 1904), 1-2; “Unions
Still for War,” ibid., 3; “Shun All Meat, Says Donnelly,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (3 September 1904), 3; Brody,
\textit{Butcher Workmen}, 55-56; “Men Will Vote on Ending Strike,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (5 September 1904), 1; “Yards
Unions Ballot,” \textit{Chicago Daily News} (6 September 1904), 1-2; “Bolt Strike at Yards,” ibid. (5 September 1904), 2;
“Reign of Chaos in Meat Strike,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (8 September 1904), 3; “Strike is Ended; Men Surrender,”
\textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (9 September 1904), 1; “All to Ask for Work,” \textit{Chicago Daily News} (9 September 1904), 1-
2; “Past Year in Review,” \textit{The Broad Ax} (31 December 1904), 7; Clark, 136; Halpern, 34-38; Street, “Working in the
Yards,” 186; Commons, “Labor Conditions,” 222; Brody, \textit{Butcher Workmen}, 58; Barrett, \textit{Work and Community}, 179-
180; Meyers, 525-530.

\textsuperscript{71} “Shots Fired at Yards,” \textit{Chicago Daily News} (3 August 1904), 2; “Bricks and Rocks Fly,” \textit{Chicago Daily News} (9
August 1904), 1-2; “Strikers Chase Colored Men,” ibid. (1 September 1904), 1; “Strikers Rush to Resume Work,”
\textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (11 September 1904), 4; \textit{Chicago Eagle} (17 September 1904), 1; \textit{The Broad Ax} (17
September 1904), 4; Herbst, 27.
were blacklisted from the industry.\textsuperscript{72} For the better part of the next decade, the AMCBW effectively ceased to exist in Chicago.

The black workers suffered a double indignation. First, as in the wake of the 1894 strike, almost all of the strikebreakers were fired immediately; as before, their numbers dwindled to nearly nothing. By 1910, out of more than ten thousand unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the yards, only sixty-seven were African Americans.\textsuperscript{73} Second, and more importantly, black workers were blamed for the failure of the strike. This resentment was inescapably racial. White strikebreakers, who composed the majority of the scab force, actually found the strike a boon. Freed from the racial violence visited upon African American workers, the white scabs gained a foothold in the meatpacking and were quickly assimilated into the workforce and community. In fact, ethnic whites (especially eastern European immigrants) would form a key component of the CFL’s later attempts to organize the stockyards.\textsuperscript{74} But despite their relatively low participation in strikebreaking, black workers were permanently marked as allies of capital. Whites resented their undermining of the strike and of white wages, but they also grew to fear (rightfully) that such undermining could set a precedent for the future. The packers came to the same conclusion. Black workers had become identified, in the words of Alma Herbst, as “an available, ever larger group of manual laborers against whom the entire [white] community was arrayed”—a group, in other words, that could be depended upon to undermine strikes economically and socially, to


\textsuperscript{73} Spero and Harris, 153; Clark, 27; Fogel, 23; Meyers, 518-519; Halpern and Horowitz, \textit{Meatpackers}, 27.

\textsuperscript{74} Grossman, \textit{Land of Hope}, 218-219; Herbst, xviii; Brody, \textit{Butcher Workmen}, 40; Barrett, \textit{Work and Community}, 137-142. For more on immigrants in the CFL campaign, see Chapters 2 and 3.
work and to sow discord. The black worker, in the eyes of white unionists, had become despised and unassimilable: “a hated and foreign creature.”

In mid-September 1904, almost a week after the strike had ended, a group of black men were dragged from a streetcar by a gang of white butchers and beaten. None of the black men were stockyards workers (one was a janitor at a nearby shop). In the investigation of the beating, the police uncovered what they termed “a ‘deep, dark plot’ to drive negro workers from the packing houses.” A full year later, a white butcher at the Chelsea market was attacked at Sixty-Seventh Street and Kimbark Avenue and severely beaten. During the assault, his attackers spat out the following motive: “you taught the niggers how to kill cattle when the strike was on at the stockyards last summer, didn’t you?” It seems fitting that the violence of the 1904 strike extended beyond the strike itself. The ultimate legacy of the strike was not merely the destruction of the AMCBW, but a furious racial hatred and a widespread conviction that blacks were a “scab race.”

The Teamsters’ Strike of 1905

The race-baiting of the waiters’ strike and the bloodiness of the stockyards strike were mere preludes to the vicious paroxysms of violence that would grip Chicago during the summer of 1905. In April of that year, the city’s teamsters declared a strike against downtown retailers in sympathy with the United Garment Workers. The strike quickly reached a fever pitch of bloodletting, as strikebreakers, police, and even shoppers suffered the fury of the teamsters. Although the union contained both black and white members, the strike would quickly develop a

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75 Herbst, viii-xix, 24-25; Lewis, 20-21; Tuttle, 114-117; see also Coit, 63.

viciously racial character. Black strikebreakers and police, black citizens unaffiliated with the strike, and even some black union teamsters were brutally attacked. For a period, the strike devolved into class and race warfare, with the teamsters arraying themselves against the retailers, the police, and black Chicagoans. The wanton brutality and naked racism of the strikers helped destroy any remaining semblance of class unity between the races. The open wounds of the 1905 teamsters’ strike would have critical effects on the CFL’s organizing campaign of 1916-1921.

The strike began much like the waiters and stockyards strikes: as an expression of class unity. In April 1905, the Brotherhood of Teamsters demanded that Montgomery Ward rehire striking members of the United Garment Workers, who had been fired for their participation in a strike months before. When Montgomery Ward refused, the teamsters vowed to honor the strike’s original picket line. On April 4, union teamsters stopped all deliveries to and from Montgomery Ward. Other downtown stores, members of a capitalist collective known as the Employers Association, demanded that the teamsters make their scheduled deliveries; when they did not, the boycotters were fired and replaced. Within a few weeks, the strike had spread from less than one hundred participants to more than eight hundred, as other large retailers—Marshall Field; Pirie,

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77 The teamsters, like the waiters and butchers, were organized into skilled craft unions. Historically each local was organized according to trade (ice wagon drivers, coal wagon drivers, etc.) and retained complete autonomy within that trade. In 1902 the locals merged under the aegis of a joint executive council; in 1903 they affiliated with the International Team Drivers (later the International Brotherhood of Teamsters). See David Witwer, “Race Relations in the Early Teamsters Union,” Labor History, Vol. 43, No. 4 (November 2002), 509-513; Commons, “The Teamsters of Chicago,” in ibid., ed., Trade Unionism, 36-38; “The Chicago Strike: A Teamster,” in David M. Katzman and William M. Tuttle, Jr., eds. Plain Folk: The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 115-116; Meyers, 559-560.

78 David Montgomery has noted that by the late nineteenth century, strikes in highly unionized industries like team driving often concerned work rules rather than wages; similarly, sympathy strikes rose to an all-time high during this era. See Montgomery, “Strikes in Nineteenth Century America,” 91-93.
Scott; and John V. Farwell among them—were struck. By the end of April the union spirit had spread to an estimated three thousand men. The strike was a watershed moment not only for the viciously racial character it would soon assume. In many ways it was an acid test for a new, aggressive unionism. Historian David Witwer noted that by 1905, the CFL had led an organizing drive “distinguished by a remarkable degree of solidarity” and “strongly rooted in the community.” Moreover, the Teamsters had been an avowedly interracial organization since 1902; black Chicago teamster T.A. Stowers addressed the Teamsters international convention the following year and spoke on the ways in which unionism could ameliorate racial conflict. As Witwer has argued, the Employers Association was most fearful of “an aroused working-class community that actively cooperated with and fought for the Teamsters Union.” Taking its cues from its predecessor, the Knights of Labor, the CFL united militant unions like the Teamsters and Teachers Federation under the banner of a unionism that made significant use of aggressive tactics such as boycotts and sympathy strikes. In this way, the teamsters’ strike “became a contest to determine whether the newer model of unionism would survive or whether it would give way to the more conservative model represented by the building trades.” As a result, the CFL held numerous meetings at which Teamster head Cornelius P. Shea called on Federation unions to strike in sympathy with the

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79 “Teamsters Open Great Struggle,” Chicago Daily Tribune (7 April 1905), 5; “Fierce Class War Raging,” Chicago Socialist (15 April 1905), 1; “Drivers Line Up for Labor War,” Chicago Daily Tribune (27 April 1905), 1; “Gigantic Strike is in Full Swing,” Chicago Daily Tribune (28 April 1905), 1; Witwer, Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 28; ibid., “Race Relations,” 514-515; see also “Reaping the Whirlwind,” Chicago Eagle (25 July 1903), 4. The Employers Association had a history of union-baiting that dated back even earlier than the Montgomery Ward conflict. In 1904, the Association opened an employment bureau that actively sought to compete with the city’s unions by charging dues to provide employment; just as galling was the agency’s practice of targeting black workers in its efforts. See “The Employers Association of Chicago,” The Broad Ax (9 July 1904), 1.
garment workers and teamsters. The CFL also allocated significant funds to the strikers, evincing a high level of unity between the Federation’s various locals.\textsuperscript{80}

Despite the teamsters’ interracial unionism and strong solidarity, the use of strikebreakers immediately added a volatile element to the strike. But the mere presence of strikebreakers quickly became less important than the fact that a number of them were black. As with the stockyards strike, this move more than any other racialized the strike, augmented its violent character, and destroyed any possibility for interracial class unity. The enmity directed at black strikebreakers was, once again, disproportionate to their actual numbers. One claim holds that of the strikebreakers “imported” from other cities, whites outnumbered blacks by a ratio of seven to one. Of the roughly 5,800 strikebreakers employed, it is estimated that less than one thousand were black; at one point, a total of only 250 black strikebreakers were employed in a workforce of thousands.\textsuperscript{81}

Such figures were lost on the strikers. As Robert Fitch explained in his history of the Teamsters, the involvement of African Americans strikebreakers transformed the strike into “a slow-motion race riot.” Strikers immediately seized upon race as a central aspect of the strike. As in the stockyards strike, the presence of black strikebreakers seemed to confirm existing white suspicions that African Americans were somehow uniquely suited for the moral degeneracy of strikebreaking. In a public letter, the teamsters claimed that black strikebreakers had come north only because they had “outraged every law of decency in their Southern homes.” The Chicago

\textsuperscript{80} CFL Minutes, 26 March 1905, 1-3; ibid., 2 April 1905, 2-3; ibid., 2 April 1905, 2-3; “Teamsters' Strike Spreads,” Chicago Eagle (6 May 1905), 7; Witwer, Corruption and Reform, 29-30; ibid, “Race Relations.” The local unions’ affiliation with the International afforded them a tremendous amount of influence in the industry, to the point that teamster locals briefly joined with employer representatives to form a de facto arbitration board that governed disputes within the city. See Commons, “The Teamsters of Chicago,” 42.

\textsuperscript{81} “Strike Must End, Say Team Owners,” Chicago Daily Tribune (13 May 1905), 1; Untitled editorial, The Broad Ax (27 May 1905), 2; Robert Fitch, Solidarity for Sale: How Corruption Destroyed the Labor Movement and Undermined America’s Promise (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 126; Spero and Harris, 132; Meyers, 593-594.
Socialist referred to the black strikebreakers as “social outcasts” who represented “the most degraded and desperate victims of chattel and wage slavery.” Claiming that strikebreakers were of “the class of negroes” frequently lynched in the South “for an unmentionable crime,” the Socialist declared that their “wholesale importation...is the most dastardly crime that has ever been committed by any body of outlaws on this continent.”

The employers did their part to augment such feelings. Labor agents of the Employers Association circulated a pamphlet that called Chicago “a haven of freedom” and claimed that through strikebreaking, “the colored laborer will assume a responsible place in society...upon equal terms with the whites.” Unlike the meat packers, who brought in their strikebreakers by train under cover of darkness into the gated safety of the stockyards, the Employers Association moved scabs through the streets in broad daylight, loading their wagons “with evil-faced, heavily-armed, negro sluggers.” Other strikebreakers, “armed with heavy walking sticks,” marched alongside the wagons to protect their “cargo,” all the while “taunting and threatening, waving their weapons—doing everything in their power to provoke a fight.”

Because the Employers Association was determined not only to win the strike but to destroy the union, such acts of provocation were at least partially deliberate. It was widely speculated that the Employers Association actively sought to provoke a race riot so that federal troops could be deployed to crush the strike. Employers regularly sent empty wagons careening through the streets in an attempt to redirect the mobs from attacking full wagons, or possibly to entice them


into attacking property of little value (thus subjecting themselves to arrest). Even more revealingly, the head of one struck firm was heard to remark, “there must be a certain number of people killed before this thing ends, and the sooner they are killed the better.” He claimed the best way to end the strike would be to import “a crowd of cowboys from Oklahoma and Indian Territory and put them on our wagons with shotguns and orders to do business.” Such open acts of antagonism infuriated the strikers and cemented in their minds the link between blackness and strikebreaking.

The strikers’ tactics illuminate the racialized character of the conflict. A month into the strike, the teamsters attempted to appeal directly to the public by circulating 30,000 leaflets to patrons of State Street department stores. The circulars carried a pointed attack against the employers “filling our places with colored men from Southern cities,” whom they derided as a “class of men who are continuously loafing.” No mention of white strikebreakers was made. Such sentiments were echoed by union leadership. Speaking before a meeting of the CFL, Teamsters president Cornelius Shea laid out the union’s demands: that the Employers Association reinstate all fired strikers, arbitrate the Garment Workers’ strike, and “get rid of the colored strikebreakers.” It is significant that in the same speech, Shea claimed that “white strikebreakers had become sick of their jobs,” implying a racial element in the settlement of the strike. White strikebreakers, he seemed to say, would eventually tire of doing the employers’ bidding; blacks would have to be forcibly removed from their places in the industry.

85 Ibid., CFL Minutes, 7 May 1905, 14, 17; Meyers, 572-573, 598-600; Witwer, “Race Relations,” 517-518.


87 Report of Special Committee, CFL Minutes, 7 May 1905, 7; see also untitled editorial, The Broad Ax (27 May 1905), 1.
Despite the animus hurled at them, the black workers—as in previous struggles—often made common cause with the strikers. Part of this was due to purposeful deception on the part of the Employers Association. Any number of the strikebreakers, brought in from St. Louis, Kansas City, Detroit, Minneapolis, and Milwaukee, were told that the strike was over; some were not told a strike had ever occurred. At one point, the union took the Employers Association to court to protest the “importation” of strikebreakers. During the trial, several of the black workers plead their own ignorance or the disingenuousness of the employers. Another claimed that when the men arrived in the city and were met with violence, the employers’ response was to arm them with sticks, send them out to patrol the scab wagons, and “take care of themselves.”

For other strikebreakers, violence took its toll. At one point, as in the stockyards strike, a group of strikebreakers struck themselves. In this case, the black workers walked out due to a concern with basic self-preservation. “We can’t properly protect ourselves with these things,” said the leader of the striking strikebreakers in reference to the walking sticks issued the black workers. The men demanded revolvers and walked out when they were rebuffed. Word of the strike’s violence also spread beyond Chicago. A group of one hundred prospective strikebreakers jumped a train from St. Louis when they heard rumors “of the violence to which they would be subjected.” Chicago’s black community also recognized the danger of the use of black strikebreakers, particularly those brought in from outside the city. The Tribune claimed to have received “a number of letters” from local black leaders and citizens “objecting to the importation of professional ‘strike-breakers’ of their own race as unwise.” One black newspaper, the Broad Ax, went even further, upbraiding the “Negro-hating concerns” of the Employers Association for refusing to hire black help in good times, then suddenly pursuing “the roving and irresponsible

Negro” during the strike. As a result, the paper argued, “any Negro who will spend his money in their stores or work for them...as a strike breaker, is an enemy and a traitor to his race.” But for white strikers, these words—even when backed by the militance of the strikebreakers—would ring hollow. As the strike took on an increasingly racial character, blacks would be targeted not merely for their role as strikebreakers, but for their very presence in the city.

The militance of the strikebreakers was effaced by a growing perception that African Americans were a “scab race.” In May, CFL leadership invited the pastors of the city’s six largest black churches to a conference, at which they were “urged to antagonize efforts of the employers to import any more colored strike breakers.” Again, the union’s efforts carried a decidedly racial tinge: no such conference was planned with Catholic, Orthodox, or Jewish leadership to attempt to curb white strikebreaking. For the strikers, the issue was clearly not merely strikebreaking, but black strikebreaking—and increasingly, blacks themselves.

The meetings did not have their desired effect. Soon after the sitdown with CFL leadership, a mass meeting of more than one thousand African Americans was convened at Bethel African Methodist Church on the south side; the group voted in support of a series of resolutions regarding the strike. The first, delivered by anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett, condemned the teamsters for circulating their leaflet among shoppers; Wells-Barnett claimed it was a “slanderous” letter that claimed the black drivers were “‘loafers,’ not willing to work.” Such charges were “a willful and malicious falsehood.” In fact, Wells-Barnett argued, the black strikebreakers should be commended; they had “proved their value by risking their lives to obtain work.” The group also condemned the police, calling upon the mayor to “save hard


working citizens from that kind of protection which lets the rioter go free and sends the victim to the jails and hospitals.\footnote{91} Leaders in the black community not only rejected the teamsters’ proposal for an alliance, they publicly backed the strikebreakers. As a result, the connection between blackness and strikebreaking grew even stronger among the white strikers.

Even more damaging than the sentiment expressed at Bethel Church was the growing presence of African Americans among the city’s police force. At the beginning of the strike, the Chicago Police Department consisted of roughly 2,300 officers. Within a month, more than half had been assigned to strike duty, and hundreds of other city employees from clerks to dogcatchers had been deputized, armed, and charged with keeping order—a task that generally consisted of protecting scab wagons, making police among the strikers’ most despised enemies.\footnote{92} Mayor Edward Dunne also used the strike as occasion for an aggressive recruiting campaign that brought in more than two hundred new officers by the end of May. Amongst these two hundred, a significant number—nearly one hundred—were black. These souls held perhaps the most unenviable positions in the city. Many of them only took the policeman’s oath because the city’s toxic racial atmosphere had forced them from other means of employment. One newly deputized officer owned a restaurant on Western Avenue, but “race prejudice, engendered by the teamsters’ strike…ruined the business he had built up, and he was compelled to close the place and seek employment as a temporary patrolman.”\footnote{93}

\footnote{91} “Negro Protest Against Race Prejudice in Strike,” Chicago Daily Tribune (10 May 1905), 2; The Broad Ax (13 May 1905), 4; Cohen, Racketeer’s Progress, 141-142.


\footnote{93} “Gigantic Strike is in Full Swing,” Chicago Daily Tribune (28 April 1905), 1; “Strike Victim is Near Death,” Chicago Daily Tribune (28 April 1905), 2; Witwer, Corruption and Reform, 36; “Chief O’Neill and the Colored Policemen,” The Broad Ax (17 June 1905), 1; “Policeman Kills a Boy,” Chicago Daily Tribune (30 June 1905), 5; Meyers, 606-627. Such venomous racial feelings seemed to take hold of the entire city, particularly in the context of
Once on the job, black police were afforded little respect. Besides being a constant target for white mob violence, black officers found themselves with few allies. A number of complaints were filed with the mayor’s office claiming that “policemen…fostered the racial feeling and…ignored the appeals of the colored men for protection.” Many black police were undermined on the job by their would-be comrades; a number of newly deputized police were white union “sluggers” who took the policeman’s oath so as to commit their mayhem behind the protection of a badge. City courts were notorious for the harsh punishments they levied against blacks found to be carrying concealed weapons.94

Black police were also, unsurprisingly, the frequent target of white rage. With the strikers already infuriated at both the police and the black community, the use of black police inevitably provoked a violent response. Scab drivers objected to the plan from the outset, claiming that “the presence of negro police as their guards would invite more trouble than no protection at all.” Black police became a favorite target of white mobs, as the black officers found themselves constantly fighting for their own lives. In one case, a black police officer was pelted with rocks and bricks and chased for blocks before he managed to seek shelter inside a patrol box. When the box was battered with stones, the officer threatened to kill the next man who approached him. When fifteen-year-old Michael Nejedly hit him with a stone, the officer fired his revolver, killing

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the boy instantly and provoking threats of lynching from whites.\textsuperscript{95} The use of African Americans as temporary police only cemented their despised status among white strikers as allies of capital.

Those feelings were further augmented by the rallying of white workers. The wives, sisters, and mothers of strikers supported their men, sometime violently. One striker recalled how the women armed themselves with clubs and attacked strikebreakers. “In all the riotous scenes attending the strike,” he remembered, “nothing...approach[ed] the fierceness of the attacks by these women.” In a bizarre development, the children of striking teamsters—angered by deliveries of coal by nonunion drivers—went on strike. At the Hendricks School, more than seven hundred went out; at Carter H. Harrison School, fifteen hundred of the school’s seventeen hundred students struck. The youngsters organized school-by-school “locals,” maintained pickets, and even elected business agents. The entire enterprise might be considered endearing were it not shot through with the same racial enmity that increasingly animated the “grown-up” strike. At both schools, the pickets smashed open the gates of wagons, spilled their contents onto the ground and distributed them among the community, and stoned the nonunion men. The children’s actions carried an unsettling combination of childish playfulness and adult brutality. After one black strikebreaker was beaten unconscious, “a crowd of boys played football with the victim’s blood stained hat.”\textsuperscript{96}

For their part, the strikers seemed to take a perverse pride in the actions of their sons and daughters. When the students were arrested and they (and their parents) were brought before a

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judge, the father of one of the strike’s ringleaders “denied blame, but pleaded the fact that the drivers were ‘black’ and ‘nonunion’ amply justified his son’s conduct.” The CFL also approved of both the children’s actions and their racial motivations. The Federation decried what it termed “an illegal crusade to discipline, denounce, and disgrace little children in our public schools who have dared to protest against hired thugs and scabs imported from the slums of Southern cities” and resolved to “most heartily indorse and commend the boldness, spirit and humanity of the striking children and extend to them our hearty thanks.”

Clearly the strike had expanded from a simple sympathy action to a community-wide struggle with deep racial undertones.

By the middle of May, as historian Robert Fitch has explained, the strike had been transmogrified from an instance of class unity—a sympathy strike—into a bitter class struggle, and from there into an increasingly vicious race war. First, the garment workers called off their fight with Montgomery Ward, undercutting the strike’s sympathetic underpinnings; when the Employers Association refused to rehire the strikers, the teamsters resolved to continue the fight. More importantly, the strike was transformed from a class struggle to a racial one. Increasingly, black strikebreakers, not the Employers Association, became seen as the strikers’ primary enemies. As a reporter observed, “now it would seem as if the real issue between capital and labor is to be dodged and the fight made along lines of color.”

Indeed, the strike’s disturbing racial aspect spread beyond the union, as blacks were increasingly seen as an invading army of pro-employer thugs. In an interview with the Tribune,


98 “Strike to Continue,” Chicago Socialist (29 April 1905), 1; “Capitalist Despotism in Chicago,” Chicago Socialist (13 May 1905), 1; Fitch, 127.
the city’s police chief remarked that “the negro has the same rights as the white man and is
entitled to be protected in them, but any man who ever has handled a strike knows that the
presence of negro strike breakers increases the trouble 500 per cent.” His words rang true. In the
midst of the Police Department’s massive recruiting drive, at least three men refused duty; one of
them explained his decision by saying, “you won’t get me to protect any of those negroes” and
claiming it was “against [his] creed” to “fight for a lot of negro strike breakers.” Such feelings
only grew in depth and breadth among white strikers.

The Employers Association, taking a cue from the meatpackers, provided lodging for the
newly arrived black strikebreakers, an act that reinforced the perceived bonds between blacks
and bosses. The strikebreakers quickly became associated with vulgarity and degeneracy. It was
reported that conditions at 405 South State Street, where nearly two hundred of the men were
lodged, “were suggestive of the levee district in St. Louis,” a reference to the red-light district of
the Gateway City. The Tribune sensationalized the public, reporting on the events of a typical
Sunday, which began with “a big ‘crap’ game and a prize fight,” followed by the men
“consum[ing] innumerable ‘gins’ at the saloon.” The black strikebreakers were described as
“Southern ‘darkies,’ who had loafed all their lives along the cotton bales of Mississippi docks”
and now spent their time “sunning themselves on the sidewalk with a ‘nothin’ doin’ expression
in their eyes.” In the public imagination, black strikebreaking increasingly came to be seen as
uniquely degenerate. The African American workers, “many of them turbulent, some of them
criminals,” were “all...provocative in the manner of their employment,” a statement that reflects
the connection between strikebreaking, blackness, and immorality in the white imagination.

Black strikebreakers caused “the whole race [to be] thrown under suspicion.” Significantly, the

Tribune (4 May 1905), 2.
situation at the white dormitory was pointedly described as well: “the day passed quietly…the congress of all nations that was gathered there managed to get along without internal strife.”

With racial hatreds now animating the strike, the conflict would quickly reach the bloody pitch of a race war: it became clear by May that the teamsters’ strike of 1905 would, in Fitch’s words, “ultimately…turn… on what to do about the black strikebreakers.”

The answer to that question was a grim one. The violence that accompanied the teamsters’ strike was intense and relentless, with African Americans suffering the worst of it. Black strikebreakers were routinely beaten and even murdered. The black nonunion men fought back, escalating the struggle to the level of a race war. And, as in the case of the stockyards strike, the conflict’s inherently and viciously racial character was revealed by attacks on African Americans who had no connection to the strike whatsoever.

From the beginning, the teamsters’ strike was characterized by a tremendous level of violence. Strikers stationed themselves on rooftops and hurled down barrels loaded with bricks, seeking to disable or destroy scab and police wagons; others carefully filled glass bottles with acid and tossed them onto scabs and police below. Strikebreakers were dragged from their wagons and beaten while mobs destroyed or “liberated” their contents and set the wagons ablaze. The words of a striker are perhaps most illustrative. When asked by a reporter why he wouldn’t go back to work, the striker responded simply, “because I don’t want to be killed.”

100 “Black Drivers Have Fun,” Chicago Daily Tribune (8 May 1905), 2; “The Race Issue in the Strike,” Chicago Daily Tribune (13 May 1905), 8; Fitch, 127; see also George C. Hall, “The Health or the Sanitary Condition of the Negro in Chicago,” The Broad Ax (31 December 1904), 5; “Colored Men,” The Broad Ax (6 May 1905), 1; “A Dastardly Crime,” Chicago Socialist (13 May 1905), 1.

Black strikebreakers received the worst treatment. Despite exhortations from the International headquarters not to “consider the colored strike breaker [as] any worse...[than] the white man who deliberately takes another workman’s place when he is on strike,” beatings and stonings of strikebreakers were commonplace. In one telling incident, a black nonunion man named Samuel Jackson was standing in front of company barns when a crowd of strikers threatened him. As Jackson fled, the pursuing crowd of strikers grew to nearly two hundred. When police finally waded into the crowd with billy clubs, Jackson lay at the center of the maelstrom, unconscious and bleeding profusely from a massive gash on his head. The crowd likely would have killed Jackson if not for the intervention of police.¹⁰² Both the brutality and the mass character of the Jackson attack were emblematic of incidents that took place throughout the strike. In one case, a black strikebreaker was attacked by a mob and held down as a union teamster hacked at him with an axe, gashing open his head and severing three fingers. Miraculously, he survived. The mob attacks often took on a community character. When another black strikebreaker was dragged from his wagon and beaten, he made the mistake of entering a nearby saloon for refuge. The teamsters therein drove him back into the street and bludgeoned him with shovels (so furiously that the shovels broke) and were attempting to throw him into the Chicago River when police arrived.¹⁰³

Mobs often coordinated their attacks. Strikers living near the yards of the Peabody Coal Company lured strikebreakers to dark corners of their neighborhood, promising shelter and safety. When the strikebreakers gratefully accepted their offer, the strikers—knowing that the


police rarely patrolled their streets—dragged them into alleys and beat them with impunity. In other cases, the strikers received aid from outside sources. As in the stockyards conflict, streetcars became battlegrounds; in at least one case, a streetcar conductor noted a black passenger did not wear a union button and sounded his horn, attracting a mob of strikers who dragged the man out of the car and beat him. One group of strikers created an impromptu garrison at 27th and Wentworth Streets; the so-called “Dead Line” was patrolled by whites who carried signs bearing the message “Negroes not allowed to cross this Dead Line” and beat anyone who dared defy the order.104 The brutality of the violence surrounding the strike, the racial character that animated much of it, and the community-oriented nature of the attacks all reveal the essentially racial orientation of the strike.105

Racial hatred was only enflamed by the strikebreakers themselves, who fought back in significant numbers. Black nonunion men took to arming themselves with revolvers and using them when necessary. On numerous occasions, the black drivers fired into white mobs to fend off attacks. In most cases, their self-defense only drove the strikers into greater paroxysms of fury. Police were generally forced to intervene to prevent all-out race riots from occurring. Some


105 These sorts of strategic, coordinated offensives were not limited to attacks on black strikebreakers. Pickets cordoned off portions of State Street and Wabash Avenue and intimidated shoppers who patronized the downtown stores. Strikers tracked the movements of a Montgomery Ward floor manager for a week before attacking and bludgeoning him. In April, a mob raided the stables of the employers, beat seven guards, smashed fifteen wagons, and stampeded thirty horses through the streets. Police even uncovered a plot to dynamite a major warehouse of Montgomery Ward; the scheme was foiled thanks to heavy rains that soaked the bomb and rendered it inert. See “Strike Riot in Chicago,” New York Times (14 April 1905), 1; “Strike Rioters Make Big Raid,” Chicago Daily Tribune (30 April 1905), 3; “Twelve Labor Heads Indicted in Chicago,” New York Times (30 April 1905), 1; “Annoy the Women Buyers,” Chicago Daily Tribune (2 May 1905), 3; “Curry Slugged in Eye,” Chicago Daily Tribune (3 May 1905), 2; “One Killed, 150 Hurt in Chicago Rioting,” New York Times (3 May 1905), 1; Untitled editorial, New York Times (13 May 1905), 8; “Big Strike Has Small Beginning,” Chicago Daily Tribune (20 May 1905), 2; “Frank Curry is Slugged,” Chicago Daily Tribune (4 August 1905), 5; Witwer, Corruption and Reform, 36; Meyers, 570-573, 581-586.
strikebreakers eschewed revolvers—which were frequently confiscated by the police—in favor of razors. In one case, a “quarrel concerning the strike” erupted between a white striker and black strikebreaker on a streetcar; it ended with the black worker slashing the striker’s face six times. The violence committed by strikebreakers could be as ugly as that of the strikers, as the conflict came to resemble race warfare. In one infamous case, a group of boys led by eight-year-old Enoch Carlson shouted derisively at a pair of black men walking through their neighborhood. One of the men, who “exhibited a deputy sheriff’s star, and...appeared intoxicated,” lashed out at the boys. When they continued jeering, he pulled a revolver and fired at them, killing Carlson. His death infuriated neighborhood whites, who immediately made “threats of lynching.” Local police were called into duty to patrol the streets. Racial hatred grew so intense that “a negro fears to appear in the streets.”

Such rage was by no means limited to white strikers. Black strikebreakers’ own use of violence was not chaotic, nor merely a response to white hatred. Increasingly, blacks began to evince a sense of racial pride in resisting the strikers’ attacks. In a letter to the editor of the Broad Ax, a black citizen criticized the “against the unfair and dirty prejudice that would make a 'strike-breaker' doubly cursed because he is black.” In the wake of the death of Enoch Carlson, the boy’s mother and her white neighbors reported receiving “several anonymous letters containing

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threats and warnings to beware of the consequences of race persecution.” The Broad Ax, which had initially derided black strikebreakers as “traitor[s] to their race,” had grown disgusted by the strikers’ brutality. The paper now lamented that because the strikers “trample[d] the laws of this city under their feet, and...place[d] no valuation on human life,” the black strikebreakers were compelled to do likewise—“hence the killing of...Enoch Carlson.” Such threats extended even to government officials. During a street scuffle, United States Appraiser J. G. Blair cracked a joke about one of the black strikebreakers, who immediately leapt from his wagon and thrust a revolver in Blair’s face. Blair apologized profusely and the strikebreaker returned to his wagon, but not before saying “you’re just white trash and I ought to shoot you anyhow.”

The black community also seemed to take armed self-defense as an expression of solidarity. At the meeting at Bethel Church, black community leader Dr. George C. Hall galvanized the crowd: “we must be allowed to go on the streets peacefully and not be subjected to the infamous treatment which we have received at the hands of both [labor and capital],” he raged. “We are not going to ask the people to stop this,” he continued, “we are going to stop it ourselves.”

Black Chicagoans certainly seemed to take such a message to heart. After a particularly brutal attack during which a black strikebreaker was killed, a mob of black citizens armed themselves with stones and clubs and took to the streets; police dispersed the throng and arrested its leaders before they could enter white neighborhoods. Nonetheless, “every white man that entered the ‘black belt’ was assaulted or chased away by armed negroes, who paraded the streets, crying for


109 “Negro Protest Against Race Prejudice in Strike,” Chicago Daily Tribune (10 May 1905), 2; Cohen, Racketeer’s Progress, 141-142.
‘justice’ and ‘down with the white trash.’” Just as white workers united against the strikebreakers, so too did the black community meet violence with violence and join together against the brutality of the striking teamsters. The violence of the strike united the black community against the union.

Unfortunately for Chicago’s African Americans, their use of armed self-defense only further enraged the strikers. The violence employed by the blacks, like their act of strikebreaking, was seen as more degenerate than that of whites—more brutal, more thuggish. The city itself frequently targeted black strikebreakers for harassment and arrest. Police, many of whom had little love for the “scab race” that they felt was invading their city, often ignored violence against black strikebreakers, or even helped incite it themselves. Blacks who fought back were frequently arrested and their weapons confiscated. Certain judges, such as the one who presided over the Harrison Street police court, were known to levy large fines against blacks who were cited for carrying revolvers, while letting whites arrested for the same crime go free. African Americans’ use of violence also further marginalized them from white unionists. The Executive Board of the CFL condemned the violence of strikebreakers while maintaining, absurdly, that the white strikers had been perfectly peaceful: “there was no violence committed by union men,” the Board claimed, “but it was shown conclusively that the violence was committed by thugs brought here for that express purpose by the Employers Association.”

As rage at black strikebreakers became generalized into a fury at the black community, the strikers expanded their attacks. As in the stockyards conflict, untold numbers of African

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110 “Negro Attacked; Shoots to Kill,” Chicago Daily Tribune (21 May 1905), 2; “Two Men Killed in Race Rioting,” Chicago Daily Tribune (22 May 1905), 1; “Killed in Chicago Riots; Strike May Spread,” New York Times (22 May 1905), 1.

111 “Cease to Support Striking Drivers,” Chicago Daily Tribune (27 May 1905), 1; Report of Executive Board, CFL Minutes, 3 February 1907, 5-7.
Americans who had no part in the strike were savagely beaten and even killed. A black waiter was accused of being a strikebreaker and knocked unconscious by a mob wielding bricks and stones. Correspondents from New York Times noted several instances of white mobs boarding streetcars and randomly attacking passengers, “giving as a reason later that they were strikebreakers, when, in fact, they had nothing to do with the strike.” The Broad Ax told of “an honest and respectable” black man named Bailey who was dragged out of a streetcar at the corner of State and Van Buren Streets and beaten for no reason “except that he happened to be a colored man.” In one such case, strikers boarded a streetcar and savagely beat a black medical student. In another case, a black porter named James Robinson was chased down Wells Street by a mob that mistook him for a strikebreaker. The porter eventually found refuge in a strikebreaker-friendly saloon, but as further evidence that the city would offer little protection to its black citizens, Robinson was arrested after he was found to be carrying a revolver. The mob that threatened and chased him, the Tribune wryly noted, “was not fined.”

Blacks unaffiliated with the strike even suffered murder. Another black porter, Edward Jasper, was returning from work late one night, when a crowd at Sixteenth and State Streets called him “a nonunion teamster of the Employers’ Teaming company” and gave chase. The mob overtook Jasper, beat him with rocks and bricks, and left him unconscious on the sidewalk; he suffered a fractured skull and later died. In a similar case, a black man named Charles Tull, who had recently arrived in the city from Iowa, was mistaken for a strikebreaker and attacked.

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The crowd had already sent for a rope to lynch Tull when police arrived and rescued him. These attacks were not merely cases of mistaken identity; they were targeted assaults that carried the full weight of the strike’s racialized character. The attacks began to resemble a form of race warfare or racial cleansing. As early as May, strikers dragged a group of fifteen blacks from a streetcar and ordered to leave the city “under penalty of a severe beating.”

Perhaps the greatest evidence for the strike’s overwhelmingly racialized nature can be found in attacks on black union teamsters. Like the waiters, the teamsters were an interracial organization, with a number of black members. Regardless, white strikers abandoned all pretense of class unity and engaged in several vicious attacks on black union teamsters. Despite the fact that black Chicagoans who worked as teamsters before the strike were “without exception members of the union,” their membership was not enough to save them from “contumely, insult, and violent assault, though it must have been known in many instances that they were union men.” The black unionists “were more or less in peril of their lives,” even if they were union teamsters in good standing and conspicuously displayed union buttons.

In one case a black teamster killed a white striker who pelted him with rocks. As it happened, the black teamster “was a union man himself, employed by a company which is not involved in the strike.” Nevertheless, “his color was black and displeasing to the strike sympathizer,” provoking the attack. In a similar case, a black teamster named William O’Day—also a union member, and also working for a non-struck shop—was assaulted by a striker named Albert

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Enders. Despite O’Day’s protestations, “Enders said that, being a ‘nigger,’ he deserved a beating anyway and continued throwing missiles.”116 With black strikebreakers increasingly marginalized, and the black community as a whole identified as a class enemy, the strike grew viciously violent and racialized, with much of the violence taking on the air of a race war.

By late summer, the strike was losing momentum. As early as May, Mayor Dunne appointed a committee to investigate both the strike’s high degree of violence and the rumors of corruption that swirled around it. The Teamsters were charged with graft, blackmail, and willful breaking of contracts, while the employers were accused of “willfully spreading the strike with the intention of precipitating a greater labor crisis” and destroying the union once and for all. Ultimately, the charges against the Teamsters proved more damaging. Indictments were handed down against a dozen union leaders, including the president of the CFL, for their role in the “conspiracy” to violate the teamsters contract. The secretary of a carriage drivers’ local confessed that the union had paid “sluggers” $15 a day to attack scabs. Union head Cornelius Shea, who directed the actions of the hired sluggers from a famed whorehouse known as the Kentucky Home, was accused of taking a payoff to end the strike. Teamster locals grew frustrated with the international union’s levying of new duties to support the strike, a process that bankrupted some locals in the city. In July, tiring of the entire debacle, the union purged Shea, who fled to Philadelphia, and attempted to negotiate a settlement of the strike.117


Negotiations were not easy. Because the union was unable to call off the strike in its entirety—the coal drivers initially refused to go back to work—the employers treated the remaining strikers as members of a “conspiracy” and refused to rehire the teamsters as a body. By August, however, most of the men were reinstated. The 1905 teamsters’ strike was staggering in its scope: during its 105 days, it involved some 5,000 strikers, caused more than 400 serious injuries, and resulted in the deaths of 21 strikers and strikebreakers.\(^{118}\) Perhaps appropriately, the violence was not yet finished. As the strikers flowed back into the struck shops, they found occasion to vent their anger one final time. In late July, a mob of strikers a thousand strong attacked a scab wagon, beat one of the drivers “into insensibility,” destroyed its contents, and set its horses loose. Union men unable to immediately regain their old jobs attacked five of Montgomery Ward strikebreakers and beat them. Labor agent and strikebreaker leader Frank Curry was attacked and severely beaten.\(^{119}\) Even after its conclusion, the violence of the teamsters’ strike lingered.

That violence helped chisel the legacy of the strike into the historical memory of the city. That legacy was twofold. For one thing, it seriously diminished the power of labor within the city. The teamsters quickly became viewed as a corrupt, ineffectual organization. Nor was the

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\(^{119}\) “Mob Attacks 16 Wagons,” Chicago Daily Tribune (27 July 1905), 1; “Union Teamsters Resume Rioting,” Chicago Daily Tribune (9 August 1905), 4; “Frank Curry is Slugged,” Chicago Daily Tribune (4 August 1905), 5. Curry not only by procured strikebreakers, he also took part in a number of street brawls with strikers. See Norwood, 97-100.
CFL above reproach, as it had a local reputation for being “honeycombed with dishonesty and 
graft.” As a result, the Federation’s vision for a militant, cooperative unionism was crushed and 
the CFL’s power greatly diminished. Though the CFL would clean house beginning with the 
election of John Fitzpatrick as president in 1906, it would take the better part of a decade for 
Fitzpatrick to restore the Federation to its position of prominence within the city.\(^{120}\)

More importantly, however, the 1905 teamsters’ strike ossified the venomous tensions that 
had come to define relations between white and black workers. For the white strikers, the black 
presence during the strike “made more indelible the image of blacks as a ‘scab race,’” a hatred 
that became generalized against city’s entire African American population, not just those who 
took employment as strikebreakers. Beyond the teamsters themselves, working-class white 
Chicagoans came to despise the “imported” black laborers, who “inspired racial hostility in the 
city for decades to come.”\(^ {121}\) The teamsters’ strike had often resembled a race war. Now, with 
the strike finally settled, it appeared that the conflict’s racial battle lines remained indelibly 
drawn.\(^ {122}\)

Just as significantly, the strike caused the black community to reflect on its own role in the 
city’s workplaces. The intense violence of the strike, beginning with attacks on black 
strikebreakers and later generalized against the entire black community, turned many African 
Americans against unionism entirely. The meeting at Bethel Church, in which black 
strikebreakers were lauded for their bravery, was but one example of this sentiment. In the wake

\(^{120}\) Bigham, 14; Witwer, *Corruption and Reform*, 29-30.

\(^{121}\) Tuttle, 120-123; Cohen, *Racketeer’s Progress*, 108-118.

\(^{122}\) David Witwer has argued that the 1905 strike did not necessarily foreclose the possibility of interracial unionism 
in team driving. Though he acknowledges that “it was a bargain frequently violated at the local level by white union 
members,” he argues that teamsters “redoubled their efforts to organize African Americans” by offering “equal 
wages and fair treatment” to blacks “in return for loyal membership” in the union. See Witwer, “Race Relations.”
of the strike, black Chicago lawyer S. Laing Williams spoke before the National Negro Business League, and again hailed the strikebreakers. He praised the men who “paraded the streets with no weapons, except walking sticks” as “bricks, shoes, stones, and everything possible were hurled at them.” But, he explained with an unmistakable note of pride, “they marched with heads erect and firm steps.” The strike “demonstrated that the negro who is called to do difficult work under difficult conditions is every inch a man.” Williams closed by echoing the sentiments of the Bethel Church meeting: that African Americans must be wary of any sort of class solidarity and rather uplift themselves as a race: “the men who must toil with their hands shall not be allowed to drift and become the victims of organized labor’s contempt or the easy tool of selfish and soulless capital.”

Even as white unionists grew more leery of black workers, so too did black workers find themselves distrustful of unionism. This oppositional relationship would come to define the nexus of class and racial conflicts of the coming decade.

Conclusion

Despite the differences between the three episodes recounted here—the comparably peaceful struggle of the waiters, the bitter fight of the stockyards workers, and the stunning violence and racial enmity of the teamsters’ strike—each helped to create a noxious racial atmosphere in which class conflicts, particularly those centering on unionism and the workplace, became highly racialized. These episodes placed further distance between white and black workers. In the case of the waiters, union leadership expelled black workers, thus leaving them vulnerable to the predation of employers. For the stockyards employees, blacks were viewed as an invading force stealing the very lifeblood of the white working class. By the dawn of the teamsters’ strike,

blacks in general had come to be seen as a degenerate race, inherently predisposed toward strikebreaking and inexorably opposed to the virtues of white workers.

In each case, black workers were expelled from the workplace on account of their race; in each case, racial feeling (and, in the latter two cases, violence) escalated; and in each case, black workers grew more indignant and resentful of white racism. By the end of the teamsters’ strike, the black community had grown as skeptical about unionism as whites had of blacks’ “fitness” for union membership. During the next decade, the CFL would rebuild itself with a new vision of inclusive, militant, progressive unionism. To succeed, the Federation would be forced to guide itself with the brutal lessons of 1903-1905.
Chapter 2: “Every Negro Can Make a Fight”: Race and the CFL Campaign, 1916-1921

In February and March 1918, seeking to avert a threatened strike, federal judge Samuel P. Alschuler and the President’s Mediation Commission traveled to Chicago to arbitrate disputes in the meatpacking industry. Frank Walsh, the attorney representing the CFL, impressed upon Alschuler the horrors of life in Packingtown. He guided him through the filth and danger of the killing floors and the squalor and open sewers of the Back of the Yards neighborhood. He ruthlessly cross-examined meatpacking bosses until they admitted that their lavish lifestyles were built on brutal conditions and below-subsistence wages. But Walsh also argued vociferously that unionism provided a way out—not only a path to higher wages and safer conditions, but a path to dignity among workers and mutual respect between employer and employee. Perhaps most revealingly, Walsh explained the ways in which the union, and the union alone, was capable of uniting the city’s diverse workforce. “The white man's unions,” he argued, “are as loyal to the rights of the black man as they are to a white man.” If Alschuler and the Commission would agree to the union’s demands for a living wage, shortened hours, and, in particular, recognition and the right to collective bargaining, it would allow “every negro…to have a grievance” and ensure that “every negro can make a fight.”¹ The CFL, Walsh claimed, was fighting not only for workers’ rights, but for interracial peace and cooperation.

Walsh’s stated concern for the rights of African American workers revealed a new direction for the CFL. For nearly a decade after the devastating defeats of the early twentieth century, the

influence of the CFL remained minimal. Local unions watched helplessly as employers brutalized their racially divided workforce through processes of consolidation, mechanization, and deskilling. Given the deep, violently expressed divisions between white and black workers, it is somewhat surprising that the Federation revitalized itself thanks to the arrival of black labor in the Great Migration. As hundreds of thousands of black workers poured into the city, CFL head John Fitzpatrick saw the opportunity not only to resurrect the Federation, but to reshape it into an independent, activist body that embraced workers of all races and levels of skill. Within two years, the CFL promulgated a new form of militant, community-based unionism that embraced industrial organizing, independent politics, and the aggressive recruitment of both immigrants and African Americans. In the process, the CFL grew to become one of the most powerful central labor bodies in the United States—so powerful, in fact, that a threatened meatpacking strike in late 1917 compelled wide-ranging federal intervention and secured the union’s first major victory in the stockyards.

Prelude: The Crisis of Defeat and the Opportunity of the Great Migration

The defeats suffered by the CFL in the early twentieth century were devastating. As employers consolidated their control of the workplace, Chicago’s union workers found themselves in full retreat. Reconstituting the city’s labor movement was made even more difficult by the staggering diversity of its workforce, which included large numbers of “new immigrants” from southern and eastern Europe. Additionally, hundreds of thousands of African Americans, pushed from southern farms by the brutality of the so-called Nadir period, moved north to take advantage of industrial opportunities in factories. Chicago, a major destination for
the Great Migration, became more diverse than ever, and presented a unique challenge to labor organizing.

With Chicago’s unions largely defeated, employers spent much of the decade of 1905-1915 securing their grasp on the city’s industries. Perhaps no industry better typifies this process than meatpacking. Between 1899 and 1918, the city’s meatpacking firms grew from thirty-nine plants employing 25,000 workers to forty-six plants staffed by nearly 46,000 employees. In the mid-1910s, a series of mergers gave rise to the infamous “Big Five” packers that ruled the stockyards: Swift, Morris, Armour, Cudahy, and Wilson. By 1917, these five firms slaughtered and packed 82.2% of the cattle, 76.6% of the calves, 76.4% of the sheep, and 61.2% of the swine that passed through Chicago’s stockyards. Such consolidation translated into massive profits, particularly given the nation’s mobilization for World War I. In 1915, meatpacking companies earned $17 million more than their annual average for the pre-war period. In 1916, that number rose to $36 million; by 1917, it had reached $68 million.²

Consolidation and record profits made the packers more powerful than before. They exercised that power by reasserting control on the shopfloor. Whenever possible, the packers mechanized and “deskilled” the processes of butchering and processing and replaced skilled workers with unskilled employees. As Paul Street argued, the packinghouses “epitomized the ‘drive system’ of shopfloor management,” under which efficiency was paramount. This system offered several benefits to the packers. First, it allowed bosses to break the power of the “butcher aristocracy” whose skill and experience were crucial to the functioning of the yards. By breaking down the process of production into a series of mechanized tasks requiring no particular skill, the

packers undermined what James Barrett has called the “strong sense of solidarity” and “tradition of militancy” that had led skilled Irish, German, and native-born butchers to walk off the job in 1904.³

Secondly, deskilling afforded the packers to take advantage of the massive labor surplus caused by prewar immigration. Not only did this surplus allow the packers to offer low wages and minimal benefits, it permitted near-dictatorial control of the shopfloor. Rick Halpern has noted that the butchering of hogs was broken down into twenty-four separate tasks, while a typical cattle gang employed 250 men. In each case, low-paid and easily replaceable unskilled workers performed the vast majority of the tasks. As Barrett explained, “whatever control over his or her daily work the [unskilled laborer] had enjoyed on the land was relinquished the moment he or she walked through the stockyards gate.”⁴ By reducing the essentiality of individual workers and playing on the city’s labor surplus, bosses were able to retake control of the killing floors.

Finally, the drive system permitted the packers to use a heavy hand in securing and maintaining a cowed and cooperative workforce. The influx of unskilled immigrant workers served notice to skilled butchers of their own fungibility. Foremen and supervisors, meanwhile, never hesitated to remind unskilled workers of the ease with which they could be replaced by the crowds of “desperate job-seekers” who packed the stockyards gates every morning. John Fitzpatrick lamented the ability of the packers “to maintain [an] enormous unemployed situation” and use it to their advantage. The packers used the full force of their economic might to reshape

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⁴ Ibid.
the stockyards labor force into a largely unskilled, interchangeable, and—most importantly—nonunion proletariat.⁵

The packers’ deskilling campaign brutalized the city’s meatpacking workers. By 1912, Chicago’s slaughterhouses paid 82% of their employees less than 20 cents an hour. Thanks to the vagaries of seasonal and shift work, the average workweek for an unskilled operative was only 37.5 hours. Working conditions were atrocious—not only were the workers subjected to the filth, danger, and stomach-churning gore infamously portrayed by Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle*, employers brutally and sometimes violently expressed their power to their workers. Union leaders told horror stories relayed to them by stockyards workers: that superintendents viciously beat a worker for perceived insouciance in his work, that a worker had fallen four stories down an elevator shaft and received no medical attention, that a protesting employee was hauled away and held in a mental institution against his will. As CFL organizer John Kikulski put it, “the packing industry is being controlled by five men.” It was clear that those five men would stop at nothing to maintain control of their workplaces.⁶

Not surprisingly, such attacks took a heavy toll on the CFL. Though many butchers’ locals proved open to integrating the new immigrants, the failed strike of 1904 had devastated unionism in the stockyards. Between the defeat of the 1904 stockyards strike and the dawn of the CFL’s renewed organizing campaign in 1916, only one local of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen continued to function in the yards, with a membership of less than one hundred. Other than a few small locals of the hair spinners and teamsters unions, organized labor

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⁵ Ibid.

had no place in the packinghouses. Even CFL president John Fitzpatrick recognized the
desperation of the stockyards. “We knew that we would have to keep the spirit of organization
alive in the Stock Yards,” he later said. “Each year we went into the district and carried on…a
campaign of organization,” despite the fact that “we knew our efforts were futile and no results
would come from them.” With the packers on the offensive, the CFL had been entirely driven
from the city’s largest industry.  

Although conditions appeared ripe for an organizing drive—namely, a large force of
underpaid, aggrieved workers—the presence of an increasingly diverse workforce made it
difficult for the CFL to make another attempt to organize the yards. By 1920, more than half the
white men and more than one-third of the white women working in Chicago’s industries were
born outside the United States; even most native-born industrial workers had at least one foreign-
born parent. A 1917 survey of workers in one large meatpacking firm is instructive. Native-born
whites made up nearly one-quarter of the workforce, with African Americans at 20%. But while
“old immigrant” workers—English, Irish, Scottish, and German—made up less than 7% of the
workforce, eastern and southern European immigrants comprised nearly 40%. The
neighborhoods around the yards underwent a similar transformation, as groups of German and
Irish immigrants saw their share of the population halved from 56% to 28%. At the same time,
southern and eastern Europeans increased their share of the population from 19% to nearly 50%.  

Such divisions made labor organizing exceedingly difficult. Not only were the packers able
to maintain constant control over an interchangeable workforce, their employment of unskilled
new immigrants reinforced divisions at the workplace and dampened the potential for unity. As

7 Cohen, Making a New Deal, 3-4; John Howard Keiser, “John Fitzpatrick and Progressive Unionism, 1915-1925”
(Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1965), 34; CFL Minutes, 2 December 1917, 4-5.
8 Ibid.; Street, “Working in the Yards,” 123, 257; Lewis, 24; see also CCRR, 357.
Barrett has pointed out, implication in the industrial process necessarily divided the workforce between the skilled workers, who dealt with “a maddening pace and continued threats to their status” and the unskilled immigrants, who faced “a wage below subsistence level and a constant search for employment,” divisions only augmented by the extant barriers of language, nationality, and ethnicity. The only thing the mass of stockyards workers had in common, in fact, was the “chronic insecurity” of their employment, the “domination by superintendents” they faced on the job, and “the personal alienation that is an inescapable product of mass-production work.” With the stockyards labor force divided and powerless, an organizing drive had little chance of success.

Those divisions often found their way into unions themselves. Union members were not immune to the ugly pressures of nativism and xenophobia. The new immigrants were bitterly resented by many native-born workers, who feared that the newcomers’ willingness to work for low wages, and their sheer massive numbers, would choke native whites out of the job market. As early as 1902, steelworkers in South Chicago filed a formal protest with the federal government against the presence of Hungarian and Croatian workers who, they claimed, were undercutting native wages. CFL leaders noted that immigrants were easily “exploit[ed] for political and economic ends” and “in our industries… [were] called by a number.”

Discrimination against immigrants’ foreign customs was also pervasive. The South Chicago workers’ protest made note of the immigrants’ “unhealthy and overcrowded living conditions,” while the CFL lamented that to most workers, the immigrant laborer was “nothing more than a ‘dago’ or a ‘hunkie.’” Such divisions made organizing extraordinarily difficult. John

9 Barrett, Work and Community, 58; Barrett and Roediger, 16.

10 Watkins, 30.
Fitzpatrick noted that with “the doors of the country...open to the toilers of the world,” and “the large manufacturers...able to reach out and bring them in in droves,” organizing was nearly impossible. The CFL simply had no personnel who could bridge the gap between English-speaking native and old-immigrant workers and the newcomers. Before beginning any campaign to organize the yards, CFL leaders estimated that they would need to hire five full-time foreign language organizers.¹¹

Into this tangle of employer power and workplace division appeared a new presence: the black worker. Though African Americans had found work in the stockyards before the World War I era, most of them were strikebreakers brought into destroy the 1904 strike and were dismissed soon after. But the brutality of southern racism, coupled with the opportunities offered by wartime mobilization of northern industry, attracted hundreds of thousands of African Americans to the north. Enticed by the promise of industrial work, many of the migrants found their way to Chicago, where they were eagerly employed by the packers. The arrival of massive numbers of black migrants in the city would increase the division of the stockyards workforce—but it also held the key to rebuilding the city’s labor movement.

African Americans came north for a variety of reasons. The brutality of life in the South was certainly a major “push” factor. The majority of southern blacks lived and worked as rural sharecroppers. Owning no land of their own, sharecroppers were subject to the whims of overseers. As a result, they faced chronic poverty—the average daily pay for black farm workers in the South was around 75 cents—and constant racial abuse, including violence. The prevalence

¹¹ CFL Minutes, 2 December 1917, 4-5; Reports of Organizations, ibid., 21 May 1916, 13; see also Cohen, Making a New Deal, 24; Barrett, Work and Community, 44-47, 54-58. For a deeper explanation of work and the experience of Americanization, see Jacobsen, Whiteness of a Different Color; Roediger, Working Toward Whiteness; Thomas Guglielmo, White On Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
of “lynch law” and the discrimination of southern judges made recourse next to impossible. Conditions for rural blacks were made worse by an infestation of boll weevils in 1915 and 1916, which devastated southern crops; it was black sharecroppers, subject to the largesse of land bosses, who suffered most from the plague. An editorial in the AMCBW’s newspaper linked the plight of blacks to those of industrial workers, claiming that southern farm owners were “the same landlords who exact such enormous fixed charges as rents or interest from industrial enterprises as to leave less than living wages, and who take toll of those scanty wages after they get paid.” With life in the rural South wretched and violent, it is no wonder blacks looked to the North as a “promised land.”

But such brutality had been a hallmark of black life in the South since the end of Reconstruction. The sudden migration of African Americans was due also to the emergence of “pull” factors. Chief among these was the northern industrial job market. Though employers had managed to maintain a labor surplus throughout the prewar period, wartime restrictions slowed immigration to a trickle. Arrivals of immigrants dropped from 1.2 million in 1914 to 326,700 in 1915 to less than 300,000 in 1916 and 1917. In 1918, barely 100,000 immigrants entered the United States. In addition, hundreds of thousands of young, able-bodied workers enlisted or were conscripted into the armed services, augmenting the shortage. The rising wages that resulted were a major attraction for black workers—sharecroppers making 75 cents per day in Mississippi could make three or four dollars per day in Chicago. African Americans began pouring north at an immense rate. Between 1910 and 1920 alone, more than 400,000 African Americans moved from South to North. The effect on national demographics was intense. From 1880-1910, three

12 CCRR, 80-86; Smith, 6-7; Henri, 51-52; Eric Arnesen, Black Protest and the Great Migration: A Brief History with Documents (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 2-4; Grossman, Land of Hope, 16-29; Barrett, Work and Community, 48-54; “Reasons Why Negro is Leaving South,” The Butcher Workman, Vol. 3, No. 7 (July 1917).
consecutive censuses tracked the center of African American population; each time it moved between Georgia and Alabama. In 1920, for the first time, “the center of negro population was found to have moved not westward but eastward, not southward but northward, being, in fact, 9.4 miles farther east and 19.4 miles farther north than it was in 1910.”13

Chicago was a particularly popular destination for black migrants. Migrants flooded into northern cities, seeking economic advancement, political and social equality, and freedom from discrimination and violence. But as William Tuttle has argued, “it was Chicago more than any other Northern city that represented ‘the top of the world’ and ‘freedom’ to Southern blacks.” The city’s sheer size—reflected in its diverse manufacturing base, its mail-order houses, and spectacles like the Columbian Exposition of 1893—made Chicago not just a city, but also “a state of mind.” Northern blacks encouraged these notions. The Chicago Defender, which had a national circulation, encouraged migration whenever possible, calling itself a “herald of glad tidings” to black southerners and encouraging them to join “The Great Northern Drive.” The Defender frequently printed letters from prospective migrants, partially in hopes of attracting the attention of employers, but also simply to let the migrants know their voices were being heard. Their letters reflect a clear yearning for a better life. One man expressed his desire for “a job in a small town some where in the north where I can receive verry [sic] good wages,” but emphasized that his highest priority was to live “where I can educate my 3 little girls and demand respect of intelegence [sic].” Another hoped “to leave the South and Go and Place where a man will Be anything Except a Ker [sic].” He claimed to prefer to go to Chicago or Philadelphia, but would

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accept life anywhere “so long as I Go where a man is a man.”

African Americans’ desire for economic and political opportunity led them inexorably toward Chicago.

As a result of this attraction, Chicago’s black population positively exploded during this period, from 44,103 in 1910 to 109,458 in 1920. African Americans also made up a more significant proportion of the city than ever before. Between 1910 and 1920, the black population in Chicago more than doubled, from 2% to 4.1%. The percentage increase of black Chicagoans was 148%. During the same period, Chicago’s white population (including immigration) increased a mere 21%. This demographic revolution would have a significant impact on the CFL and its efforts to mount a new organizing drive.

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of African Americans had a profound effect on the northern workforce. Between 1910 and 1920, the number of black workers in northern industry nearly doubled, from 551,825 to 901,181. This effect was felt in Chicago as well; in the same period, the number of black industrial workers in the city rose from 27,000 to 70,000. By 1920, blacks were estimated to compose between 16% and 21% of the city’s total industrial workforce. Such numbers were of particular importance to the CFL; an estimated 12,000 African Americans had found employment in the stockyards by 1920.

Indeed, the arrival of the migrants began a bitter struggle between union and employer for the loyalty of black workers. From the beginning, the packers were at an advantage. Though they no longer had the benefit of a labor surplus, the

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14 Emmet J. Scott, “Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918,” Journal of Negro History 4.3 (July 1919), 298, 337; Smith, 8-10; Tuttle, 76; CCRR, 87-92.


black migrants represented still another disparate group whose race could be used to divide the workforce. Union leaders accused the packers of sending labor agents into southern states to recruit black labor. Though the packers denied the allegations, they persisted throughout the World War I era; a 1917 report, for example, claimed that “stockyards firms are in need of from 10,000 to 14,000 men and they offered to guarantee lodging and food for one week to southern Negroes.”

The packers’ counteroffensive had driven unionism from the stockyards. The power of the packers, combined with a labor surplus and the increasing diversity of the workforce due to the arrival of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, created a divided workforce that made organization exceedingly difficult. The arrival of thousands of black migrants from the South appeared to exacerbate this problem, as the stockyards workforce became even more divided. But black workers would prove to be the lynchpin of a revitalized CFL campaign and the center of the Federation’s efforts to remake itself as a militant, diverse union.

The Promise of Progressive Unionism

The existence of a diverse and divided workforce in Chicago’s stockyards appeared to portend another decade of irrelevancy for the CFL. Instead, the CFL redefined itself and its values, and as a result enjoyed a three-year period as a dynamic and powerful labor body. The key to this reformation was the ideology of CFL president John Fitzpatrick and trade union radical William Z. Foster, and is best described using historian John Keiser’s term “progressive unionism.” Fitzpatrick directed the energies of the CFL away from the union’s tradition of craft organizing. Under his leadership, the CFL began the large-scale organizing of unskilled workers

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17 Tuttle, 89; Smith, 8; Coit, 60-61; “2,000 Southern Negroes Arrive in Last 2 Days,” Chicago Daily Tribune (4 March 1917), 1; Grossman, Land of Hope, 69-74.
into local unions connected not by the skill of their members, but to the communities in which those members lived. Fitzpatrick promoted an aggressive campaign to organize workers in Chicago’s basic industries—meatpacking and steel—and defied AFL orthodoxy by founding an independent labor party. And, most importantly, he aggressively pursued the organization of ethnic immigrants and, in particular, African Americans, who he recognized as representing the balance of power in the stockyards. Fitzpatrick’s ideology represented a major break with the past and a major step into the future, and would define the CFL during the period of its greatest power and influence.

Between 1915 and 1920 more than two million American workers joined labor unions. The majority of these new members were unskilled workers, many of them recent immigrants. From the beginning, there existed the very real possibility that the friction between these workers and the old-line craft unionists that dominated the AFL might tear the labor movement apart. But Fitzpatrick and Foster understood that the prevalence of a mass of unskilled workers was as much a boon as it was a liability—but only if provisions were made to channel the energies of the newly organized workers. The pair embarked upon a campaign of progressive unionism, an ideology that, in Keiser’s words, “was dedicated to the establishment of labor as a democratic force to counterbalance industry.” Materially, this meant the eschewing of jurisdictional conflicts through the creation of local federations and coordinating committees, the organization of unskilled workers, the formation of an independent labor party, and, above all, the protection of “the individual worker’s rights, privileges, and immunities, regardless of race, color, or sex.”

Progressive unionism, then, was a major transformation of the traditional AFL model, which promoted local union autonomy at all costs, refused to organize unskilled workers, shunned

political action in favor of “rewarding labor’s friends and punishing its enemies,” and had repeatedly evinced reactionary attitudes regarding the organization of immigrants, minorities, and women.

Fitzpatrick and Foster were an odd pair, but one perhaps perfectly suited to the execution of such a transformation. Fitzpatrick emigrated to the United States from Ireland as a child and began working in the stockyards at the age of eleven. A unionist’s unionist, Fitzpatrick was burly, charismatic, and garrulous, if not particularly eloquent. Fitzpatrick’s rise to leadership of the CFL is in many ways a story of the man’s principles. Fitzpatrick became president of the Federation in 1906, a position he would hold continuously for the next forty years. Fitzpatrick made it his first priority to snuff out the corrupt reign of his predecessor, Martin “Skinny” Madden—which one contemporary observer memorably described as “honeycombed with graft”—and made honesty and integrity the cornerstones of his tenure.  

19 Fitzpatrick’s reputation was burnished by his painstaking adherence to his own scruples. He abstained from swearing and drinking (even refusing to attend union meetings in saloons) and patronized union labels whenever and wherever possible, bragging that “my shoes, my clothes, my hat are all manufactured…where union men and women work.” Fitzpatrick packed his own lunch each day, refusing to dine at downtown restaurants staffed by non-union cooks and waiters. Fitzpatrick, in other words, was a union man through and through.  

20 Though Foster was no wild-eyed radical, his path to the CFL was far more circuitous. A native of New England and Pennsylvania, Foster held a dizzying array of jobs, including

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19 Madden’s secretary had been accused of embezzling funds and destroying incriminating documents. Fitzpatrick’s election occurred only after it was discovered that Madden’s thugs had tampered with union ballot boxes. A group of members walked out of the election meeting, convened at another hall, and elected Fitzpatrick as the Federation’s rightful president. See Bigham, 14-16.

streetcar motorman, railroad builder, and sawmill attendant, before becoming involved with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Frustrated by the IWW’s lack of cooperation with other unions, Foster joined the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen and the International Trade Union Educational League, which brought him to Chicago in 1915. Though not as traditional and staid a unionist as Fitzpatrick, Foster had become frustrated with Marxism and anarchism and felt that his dream of syndicalism—control of the means of production by small cadres of workers—could be achieved only by “boring from within” existing AFL structures.\(^\text{21}\)

Such a revolution was uniquely possible under the aegis of the CFL, which Foster complimented as “the most progressive central labor union in the United States.” That progressivism was no accident, but rather the product of careful maneuvering by Fitzpatrick. The structure of the AFL, relying on it did on the supreme power of the international unions and their locals, rendered city federations like the CFL relatively powerless. In a paradoxical way, this freed Fitzpatrick to challenge the AFL’s traditions; the CFL represented a loose but democratic federation of the city’s union locals, and in many ways was viewed as a representative of the rank and file rather than of the locals themselves. Fitzpatrick could thus advocate what amounted to heresy without fear of reprisal, so long as his actions did not violate the autonomy of Chicago’s union locals. This was not a concern for Fitzpatrick, who was no autocrat. Progressive unionism would not be instituted from the top, but would be the product of compromise and agreement among the CFL’s various locals.\(^\text{22}\)


\(^{22}\) Keiser, 20; Bart, 5, 25.
The first step in implementing progressive unionism was a reorganization of the structure of the CFL. Traditional craft unions were simply insufficient to organize the great mass of unskilled workers. Though attempts had been made to push the AFL toward industrial organizing, they had been sternly rebuffed by Gompers and other AFL officials. In response to one such proposal, Gompers claimed that industrial unionism’s shattering of traditional craft jurisdictions was akin to “breaking eggs for the purpose of making an omelet,” and its creation of industrywide locals like serving the omelet within the eggshells.23 Foster and Fitzpatrick considered the obvious choice of forming “one big union” in the IWW tradition that would cover all of the city’s industries. Such a project would have brought the ire of the city’s locals—many of which fiercely guarded their autonomy—and of the AFL itself.

Their solution was “federated unionism,” a form of organizing Foster had learned from his time in the railway crafts. Under a federated structure, all of the local unions of a particular industry (meatpacking, for example) would join under the stewardship of a central committee. The committee would be responsible for the organizing of new members, who would then be parceled out into the individual locals claiming jurisdiction. Federated unionism had several advantages. First, by circumventing the rules of traditional craft union organizing, it allowed the CFL to focus its energies on the organizing of the unskilled. In a similar vein, federated unionism effectively arrested jurisdictional battles before they began; by affiliating all of the locals within a central body, the CFL could organize unskilled workers irrespective of craft or skill level and allow local unions to claim the new members. Perhaps most importantly, it allowed the city’s unions to present a united front against employer oppression and prevented the division of union

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workers along the lines of skill or craft—and, by extension, by race or ethnicity. Affiliating unskilled and skilled workers together permitted the union to reinforce existing ties of community and ethnicity among workers; accordingly, the CFL organized not only on the shopfloors but on street corners and in saloons and fraternal houses.\textsuperscript{24}

Fitzpatrick and Foster did not have long to wait before testing the mettle of their ideology. In spring 1916, the AMCBW—attempting to take advantage of the wartime labor shortage—opened an organizing drive in the stockyards of Chicago. The going was tough. As a craft union, the AMCBW had little experience organizing unskilled workers, attempting to shoehorn them into unwieldy “common laborer” locals. The AMCBW quickly found itself frustrated by the immensity of its task. The workforce was more divided than ever, wrought by discrimination against unskilled immigrants and African Americans. For their part, the unskilled workers were largely ignorant of, or outright hostile to, unionism, fearing that signing a union card would cause more trouble than it would save. Most damagingly, the AMCBW was so weakened by years of systematic employer assault that it could make no meaningful offer of protection to the unskilled workers. Though the union made some small gains, it quickly became clear that success could only be achieved with the resources of the CFL.\textsuperscript{25}

For nearly a year the AMCBW campaign continued in fits and starts as Fitzpatrick and Foster rallied support within the CFL. Workers began to take matters into their own hands, agitating against management control in a variety of informal ways. A survey of three medium-sized plants in Chicago found that turnover rate had skyrocketed to 334% by June 1918. In July, Foster

\textsuperscript{24}“A Brief History of Organization in Chicago Stock Yards by the A. M. C. & B. W. of N. A.,” \textit{The Butcher Workman} (November 1919); Clark, 148-150; Keiser, 28; Barrett, \textit{William Z. Foster}, 78-79; Grossman, \textit{Land of Hope}, 211; Herbst, 29-30; Pacyga, 8-9, 183.

\textsuperscript{25}Clark, 145-174; Bigham, 46; Bart, 7.
made a proposal to the Federation, sponsored by Fitzpatrick, to organize the stockyards. Knowing that success would require the cooperation of any number of local unions, Foster attempted to inspire those assembled. He railed against the rising cost of food, claiming, “the workers in the Stock Yards [are] near starvation” and “had come to realize that the only way they could better their conditions would be to organize.” The duty of the Federation, he argued, was to begin “a joint campaign of organization” with “the co-operation of all trades affected.” The key words, of course, were “joint campaign.” The organization of the stockyards would be carried out by an entirely new body, the Stockyards Labor Council (SLC).26

Chicago’s first iteration of federated unionism, the SLC was a coordinating committee composed of a dozen union locals representing various crafts in the city’s meatpacking industry. Foster summoned the relevant unions to a series of meetings throughout August 1917, at which the details of the SLC structure were finalized. The crafts themselves ran the gamut of meat processing, and included everything from butchers and blacksmiths to coopers, horse shoers, and egg inspectors. Foster, explaining that “the power of the packing interests could be broken” only by a joint campaign, unified these various locals into a centralized, democratic governing body. As such, the SLC functioned in some ways like a particularly large union local, hiring its own set of organizers and business agents and resolving disputes among members.27

The SLC immediately prioritized the organizing of the unskilled workers, dispensing with the AMCBW’s “common laborer” locals in favor of a sweeping, industrial-style organizing campaign. Rather than organizing the unskilled workers separately, the SLC attempted to

26 CFL Minutes, 15 July 1917, 15; ibid., 5 August 1917, 17-18; Barrett, William Z. Foster, 77-78; Keiser, 25-27; Bigham, 46-48; Bart, 7-12; McCartin, 82; Street, “Working in the Yards,” 258.

organize all stockyards workers—regardless of craft, skill level, or race or ethnicity—as quickly as possible. Once they were members, unskilled workers would be doled out to so-called “neighborhood-based organizations,” i.e., local unions with ties to the workers’ ethnic and ward communities. The great advantage of the SLC, however, was that federated organizing allowed the unskilled and skilled workers to belong to the same central committee—meaning that membership in one local was as good as membership in the next.28 With the stockyards being organized along federated lines, the CFL had taken a crucial step forward in its efforts to reshape Chicago’s unions.

The CFL also sought to take control of local and national politics. Though Foster had little interest in political involvement—he felt it involved too much compromise—Fitzpatrick felt that both major parties were enemies of the working class. Both had appointed antiunion judges, both had called out police and militia against strikers, both had pledged their fealty to corporate interests. As historian Andrew Strouthous explained, Fitzpatrick believed that workers required an independent party “that could utilize the existing state to curtail the power of…employers.”

Fitzpatrick was of the belief that true democracy was impossible without such independent political action. As he asked a meeting of the CFL, “shall Chicago be governed by labor-hating plutocrats and politicians or by representatives of the people?”29

In November 1918, Fitzpatrick and the CFL called one of the largest official gatherings of rank-and-file workers in American history. Nearly one thousand union delegates, representing 93 towns in 35 states, poured into Chicago to hear the CFL chief speak. At the conference,


Fitzpatrick presented a resolution officially calling for the formation of a labor party. The proposal passed nearly unanimously, as did another resolution calling establishing a constitution that vested control of the party in local union bodies “Labor’s Fourteen Points,” a platform of political reform centered on public ownership of utilities, public housing and sanitation, and nationwide recognition of unions and the right of collective bargaining. On December 29, 1918, 160 delegates of dozens of local unions chartered the Cook County Labor Party.\(^\text{30}\)

With the establishment of the Labor Party, the CFL shattered yet another longstanding idol of AFL orthodoxy. This was no secret within the CFL or in other labor circles; the party quickly spread beyond Cook County and into downstate areas. By 1919, the Illinois Federation of Labor had overwhelmingly approved the creation of a state Labor Party in direct opposition to the values of the AFL. A proposed resolution to the claimed it a “deplorable state of affairs” that Gompers and other AFL officials were “still spending valuable time and our money digging up the lists of old office holders and office seekers for the friends of labor, when no such animal exists in the ranks of the old political parties.” The resolution “condemn[ed] the policy of…the American Federation of Labor” and recommended affiliation with the state Labor Party.\(^\text{31}\)


\(^{31}\) Resolution No. 41, Proceedings of the 36th Annual Convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor (1918),
Like the SLC, the party—particularly its iteration in Cook County—was intended to function as an independent representative of local rank-and-file workers, beholden neither to the pressures of party politics nor the policies of the AFL. As a result, it focused its energies primarily on local issues of concern to workers. At the convention of the Cook County Labor Party on January 12, 1919, the party named its candidates for public office, including Fitzpatrick for mayor and Polish SLC organizer John Kikulski for city clerk. Much of its platform, too, reflected local concerns. Fitzpatrick spent much of his time slamming the corrupt Republican administration of William Thompson for its “sham love for union labor.” The party’s posters were emblazoned with promises such as “Municipal Ownership and Operation…Democracy in the Schools…Better Labor Conditions…Protection of Health” and railed against “the money kings of ‘kingless’ America.” Party organizers sought to gain support from famed progressives like settlement worker Mary McDowell, who praised the party as “the party of promise.”

The formation of a federated structure and a base for independent political action revitalized the CFL and set the stage for a major organizing campaign. That campaign would require special focus on the diverse group of unskilled workers that composed the city’s workforce. Perhaps most significantly, Fitzpatrick and Foster realized from the outset that the success or failure of their efforts would hinge on their ability to organize black workers. The sheer number of African Americans within the city had made them too significant a force to ignore. Additionally, their location within the city’s industries made them strategically

134-154; McKillen, 87-89.

vital to the efforts of the SLC. By the end of the war period, the number of black workers employed in the yards would reach 12,000. Three of Chicago’s five largest employers of black labor were Big Five packers: Swift (nearly 2,300 black employees), Armour (just over 2,000), and Morris (1,400), with Wilson close behind (more than 800). Other than packing concerns, the only companies that employed more than one thousand African Americans were Sears Roebuck and International Harvester. The central importance of black workers thus came to define the organizing campaign. As Alma Herbst argued, “as members of a distinct racial group,” African American workers “were the men without whom the packers could not continue production and at the same time ignore the demands of organized labor.”

It was apparent that without the support of black workers, the SLC campaign would be doomed before it began.

The increasing numbers of blacks in the stockyards also summoned painful memories for the CFL. Interracial cooperation would allow the full organization of the stockyards, but just as importantly, it would forestall the possibility of black scabbing in case of a strike. Fitzpatrick and Foster both expressed concerns that black workers might become “a strikebreaking race,” in Keiser’s words. Additionally, the tendency of white workers to view blacks with suspicion could be allayed if blacks could be convinced to join the union in large numbers. As Illinois Federation of Labor president John Walker put it, “we should take advantage…of the present situation to strengthen the Labor Movement and fortify ourselves against [the] evil” of black strikebreaking. By recruiting the black worker, unions could make him “a source of strength…rather than a source of weakness and a club in the hands of the grasping employer.”

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33 CCRR, 361; Herbst, 28; Spero and Harris, 269.

the necessity of seizing upon “the present situation” by breaking down barriers between white and black workers. Foster regarded the organizing of black workers as “imperative” and vowed “to organize the colored worker if it was humanly possible to do so.” Shortly after the first organizing meeting of the Stockyards Labor Council, Foster acknowledged that the “one big problem…they had to face” was “the organization of the colored men.” Even at this early stage, he impressed upon the local unions the important of taking “such measures as would make the campaign a success.” That success could only come if “the men who carried on [the] campaign realized fully the necessity for the organization of the colored worker.”35 The support of African Americans would not only permit the CFL to organize the entirety of the stockyards, it would insulate the campaign from the use of black strikebreakers.

The CFL’s concern for black workers was not borne out of pure pragmatic self-interest. Foster had called the CFL the nation’s “most progressive central labor body” in earnest, and with good reason: union officials were legitimately concerned with the suffering of black workers. As Foster put it, CFL organizers campaigned “not wholly, or at least not only, from the white man’s point of view” and “were not altogether materialistic” in their approach. An altruistic method served the CFL well, since black workers had considerable grievances against stockyards employers. Many complained about discriminatory treatment from white foremen. One worker “was not given a chance to make overtime, while Poles who had not been with the company as long as he had were given this privilege.” Another was blamed for the misconduct of a white worker and summarily fired. The black worker protested to the superintendent, who ordered his reinstatement; the foreman attempted to rehire the worker as a “new hand,” which would have eliminated all of his seniority rights. Another worker claimed that an assistant foreman “had

35 CCRR, 428–429; CFL Minutes, 19 August 1917, 5; Grossman, Land of Hope, 209-219; Foner, 163-164.
openly made the statement that he would not work with ‘niggers.’” When the Chicago Commission on Race Relations conducted its survey of black packinghouse workers in 1919 and 1920, the most pervasive complaint was “lack of opportunity for advancement or promotion.”

In addition to the same low pay and dreadful conditions as white workers, Black workers faced discrimination and abuse, making them prime targets for the CFL campaign.

The CFL took great pains to distinguish itself and its policies from those of the AFL. At every available turn, the AFL had reaffirmed its belief “that the working people must unite and organize, irrespective of creed, color, sex, nationality, or politics.” Despite this stated commitment, racial discrimination was rampant within the AFL. Though many unions used informal means of segregation—refusing to train black apprentices, for example—a number of international unions defied the AFL’s directive and denied blacks membership by constitutional fiat. Though he understood the damaging effect of such policies on the labor movement, Gompers refused to violate the autonomy of individual unions and order them to admit black workers. At every turn, the CFL sought to countervail such ideas as vociferously as possible.

Black CFL official I.H. Bratton put the situation bluntly. “The colored people are almost entirely wage earners,” he noted. As a result, black workers who remained outside the labor movement abetted strikebreaking, the slashing of wages, and the dilution of the labor movement. Such

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36 CCRR, 387-390, 428-429.

37 Resolution No. 160, AFL Proceedings (1893), 56; AFL Proceedings (1897), 78; AFL Proceedings (1910), 237; Resolution No. 120, AFL Proceedings (1919), 228; see also AFL Proceedings (1918), 130-131; Resolution No. 37, AFL Proceedings (1920), 272; “Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor,” The Broad Ax (3 December 1910), 3; Lewis, 84; Taft, 313-314.

38 Gompers’ own problematic racial politics played a role in his reluctant pursuit of interracial unionism. See Jeremy Brecher, Strike! (Cambridge, MA: South End Press Classics, 1997), 116; Mandel, 34-60; Hutton, 18-19; Taft, 311-313; see also Henri, 153; Spero and Harris, 53; Northrup, 237-238; Keiser, 23; Cohen, Making a New Deal, 3; Foster, 209; see also Letter from Eugene Kinckle Jones and Fred R. Moore to American Federation of Labor, dated 6 June 1918, AFL Proceedings (1918), 198-199. For a full description of the AFL’s racial policies and their effects, see Chapter 3.
actions, he concluded, marked nonunion blacks as “opposed to human progress…against a higher standard of living, against the world movement for social and economic reforms, against the principles of collective bargaining and co-operation, and in every way against our best interests.”39 Though CFL officials clearly realized the unique pressures faced by black workers, they attempted to appeal to African Americans based on class unity. As wage earners, they hoped that African American workers would recognize the liberatory potential of an interracial union.

With the importance of black workers in mind, the CFL campaign began actively recruiting African Americans from its very inception. Among the founding principles of the Labor Party was a declaration of “the political and industrial equality of races, nationalities and creeds.” The opening convention of the party contained one of the most comprehensive antiracism platforms of its time. Claiming that “the present economic and social system keeps the American Negro in a condition of slavery,” the party condemned “the denial of fair trial to Negroes…and the sanction of lynch law” and the efforts of “unscrupulous politicians, employers and strikebreakers…to alienate the Negro from organized labor.” The party insisted that “the labor movement of America cannot attain the full realization of its industrial and social program without the solid organization and co-operation of the Negro workers” and pledged to “use its moral force to secure for the Negro a citizenship equal in every respect to that of his white brother.”40


The federated nature of the SLC and the industrial orientation of its locals allowed the immediate and mass organization of black workers as well. The CFL acquired organizers from the racially progressive United Mine Workers of Illinois, as well as black organizers such as I.H. Bratton and John Riley of the AFL, and sent them into the yards to recruit African Americans. By October, the SLC had installed a new black local within the stockyards, Colored Local 651. CFL leaders took great relish in publicly refuting the packers’ contention that “the American Federation of Labor… [did] not recognize the colored workers” and declared that Local 651’s charter “made the colored workers and integral part of the labor movement of the United States.”

The CFL clearly understood the vital importance of black support to the success of its organizing campaign, and immediately made the organization of African Americans a central focus of its efforts.

In 1916, John Fitzpatrick and William Z. Foster embarked on an ambitious campaign to remake and revitalize the Chicago Federation of Labor. Hoping to seize the opportunity presented by the wartime labor shortage and reverse a decade of employer domination, they transformed the CFL under the ideology of progressive unionism. Rejecting the conventions of traditional AFL craft organizing, they aggressively organized unskilled workers into community-based local unions federated under the control of a democratic central body. They courted ethnic immigrants and sought to create an independent labor party. Most importantly, they recognized the vital importance of black workers and structured much of their campaign around the organization of African Americans. These priorities of the resurrected CFL would come to dominate its campaign to organize the city’s stockyards, capture the energies of its workers, and recruit African Americans into its campaign.

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The Structure of the CFL Campaign

With Fitzpatrick and Foster in control of a newly federated CFL, they turned their attention to organizing. The CFL campaign of 1917-1919 enhanced the power of the Federation and made it a major force within the economic life of the city. Organizers aggressively worked the stockyards, bringing in thousands of new members in a matter of months. The CFL also formally organized the Labor Party, even running Fitzpatrick and other candidates for public office in the municipal elections of April 1919. Most importantly, the Federation followed through on its plan to organize African American workers. The CFL paid special attention to the needs and grievances of black workers, employing several full-time black organizers. Federation officials also directly communicated with the black community, meeting with ministers, aldermen, and other leaders, and holding a series of mass assemblies in the Black Belt, to disseminate their message. The success of the CFL in creating a diverse, dynamic union with significant political energy changed the fortunes of the Federation, undoing the last decade of employer supremacy and setting the stage for a federally mediated showdown with the packers.

The first priority for the CFL was to put the SLC to the test. Stockyards employees felt the weight of ten years of repression, but, divided along lines of skill, ethnicity, and race, the AMCBW had little chance of organizing them. With the advent of federated unionism, the stockyards were dramatically and immediately transformed. By August 1917, Foster had completed the work of affiliating the SLC locals and felt confident in launching a full union assault on the yards. On the evening of Saturday, September 8, an automobile parade was held in Packingtown, with dozens of workers enthusiastically decking their cars in red, white, and blue bunting and tearing through the streets. Throngs of workers and their families, holding union-issued red sparklers, lined the sidewalks to cheer them on. The next evening, a mass meeting of
the unorganized was held at Columbia Hall, drawing more than one thousand workers. For 
weeks, the meetings continued nightly, never drawing less than two hundred attendees and 
occasionally drawing more than twelve hundred. The hard work of restructuring the CFL and 
affiliating the meatpacking locals with the SLC had paid off. The battle for the stockyards had 
begun with a roar of support from the workers.

That roar only grew louder in the coming weeks. The nightly meetings spread word of mouth 
throughout the yards. Neighbors huddled on the street corners and stoops of Packingtown to 
discuss the coming of the union. The energy and dynamism of the SLC campaign clearly 
outstripped that of any previous organizing campaign. For the first time, unskilled workers felt 
themselves a major priority to organized labor—they were no longer stuffed into cumbersome 
“common laborer” locals, but organized into a body that represented all meatpacking workers 
and promised to transform the yards. As one contemporary observer put it, the “united front” 
presented by the SLC “precipitated a campaign such as was never known to the [AMCBW].” 
The federated structure of the SLC allowed organizers “to convince unskilled workers of the 
advantages of concerted, cooperative and collective action.”

With the passion of unskilled workers ignited by the excitement of the campaign, the SLC 
enjoyed a staggering level of success in its organizing. One Columbia Hall meeting was 
scheduled to be followed by a mass meeting fifteen blocks away, at 33rd and Morgan Streets. 
Foster, sensing the opportunity for a mass demonstration of the SLC’s power, organized a parade 
of stockyards workers between the two sites. More than five thousand workers took part in the 
march. Such a display of solidarity that would have been unthinkable mere months earlier; Foster

42 CFL Minutes, 2 September 1917, 13-14; Bigham, 49.
43 Lewis, 24.
took pleasure in noting that the campaign’s success occurred “in contrast to the opinion expressed by some when the campaign was begun that there were too many nationalities, etc., and it would be impossible to carry on an organization campaign.” His pride proved well-earned as the autumn wore on. A Thanksgiving Day rally drew another five thousand workers, one thousand of whom signed union cards. Though proud of the Thanksgiving turnout, Foster boasted that it was not at all unusual: “the increase in membership,” he claimed, “usually runs from 300 to 600 each day.” Packinghouse workers proudly displayed their buttons both on and off the job—a crucial symbol, in Foster’s mind, that “they were intensely interested in the outcome of the campaign.” No doubt this was true: by 1919, the SLC would boast enough members to hold a rally of 30,000 meatpacking workers. The campaign represented a veritable revolution in the stockyards.

Indeed, the success of the SLC campaign was unprecedented. In a mere two months, Foster and the Council had deflated the packers’ threats of arbitrary firings and wage fluctuations, neutered the importance of company spies, broken down barriers of race and ethnicity, and built a strong, unified campaign of skilled and unskilled workers. By the end of the year, the SLC had organized some 24,000 stockyards workers—fully 40% of the total workforce in the city’s meatpacking industry. In 1918, that number would rise even further, with some departments claiming 100% organization of the skilled tradesmen and greater than 90% membership among the unskilled. In a matter of months, as Alma Herbst argued “the union…felt itself firmly intrenched [sic] in the industry.”

Indeed, Foster and the SLC had transformed one of the

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44 Report of Stockyards Labor Council, CFL Minutes, 4 November 1917, 21-22; ibid, 2 December 1917, 3-4; ibid, 18 November 1917, 4-6; Bigham, 49; Herbst, 29.

nation’s great antiunion fortresses—the meatpacking industry—into a hotbed of union activity and a laboratory for the organizing of the unskilled. For the first time in a decade, a union existed that could materially improve the lot of packinghouse workers. Their response vindicated the faith of Fitzpatrick and Foster in federated unionism and held promise that the campaign could be a rousing success.

Much as the packers had done a decade earlier, the resurgent CFL sought to consolidate its power and influence over the stockyards. National membership in the AMCBW swelled from 10,000 to nearly 70,000 between spring 1916 and 1919, primarily due to the efforts of the SLC in Chicago. As early as November 1917, Foster felt confident in saying “Organized Labor is in position to take charge of the Union Stock Yards,” boasting that “so far as Labor is concerned the…Stock Yards are ours.” In mid-November, the AMCBW held a conference of meatpacking unions in Omaha; this was soon followed by an SLC-led conference of mechanical trades locals in Chicago. Between these two meetings, stockyards workers hashed out a list of demands to be submitted to the packers. First and foremost was recognition of the union, as well as demands for a guaranteed eight-hour day, paid holidays, and extra pay for overtime. The newfound influence of the AMCBW was in full effect, as the union also demanded more sanitary working conditions,

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Administration and Organized Labor, 1913-1920,” in James E. Cronin and Carmen Sirianni, eds., Work, Community, and Power: The Experience of Labor in Europe and America, 1900-1925 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 211-212; Grossman, Land of Hope, 211; Street, “Swift Difference,” 22; Herbst, 29. Estimates of SLC membership, as well as the timing of various milestones of the campaign, remain somewhat vague, in part due to the high turnover of stockyards employment. SLC members who lost their jobs remained on the membership rolls, but because they paid no dues, they were no longer considered “members in good standing”; this accounting problem would later prove a bellwether of the CFL’s failure to maintain a consistent cadre of black members. John Keiser claims that the SLC hit the 40,000-member mark before the end of 1917, but this appears unlikely. The most reliable source is SLC organizer John Kikulski, who estimated membership at around 24,000 during a federal hearing. In some ways, the percentage number is more significant—high proportional membership would insulate the SLC from scabbing—and that indisputably reached past 90% in many departments. For membership estimates, see ibid.; CFL Minutes, 2 December 1917, 6-7; ibid., 16 December 1917, 45-46; ibid., 20 January 1918, 7-9; Keiser, 39. For disparities in black membership, see Chapter 3.
abolition of mandatory participation in “sick and death benefit associations”—essentially, company insurance programs—and a maintenance of current guaranteed weekly hours.

But the list of demands also reflected the ways in which the SLC had redirected the energies of the staid AMCBW. The union demanded not only an increase in the hourly rate, but an equivalent percentage increase for “piece workers,” the mass of overwhelmingly unskilled workers who performed one segment, or piece, of a particular process. Additionally, the union asked for “equal pay for men and women doing equal work,” which was a tremendously progressive proposal for the time, particularly given the craft orientation of the AMCBW and the fact that nearly all female stockyards employees were unskilled piece workers. The SLC’s influence on the AMCBW’s demands was clear: the diverse mass of unskilled workers would have as much of a voice as skilled operatives. For the better part of a decade, “people working in the packing plants, have had nothing to say about the conditions under which they shall work,” in Foster’s words. With the arrival of the SLC, “they have been able to raise their hands and say they want something.” 46 Foster and the CFL had succeeded in building a diverse, dynamic labor organization within the stockyards. To consummate the promise of the campaign, the union would need to go on the offensive and take on the packers directly. Before that would be possible, however, the SLC would need to solve its “one big problem”: the organization of African American workers.

As the CFL campaign wore on, it became increasingly defined by its appeals to black workers. At all turns, the union sought not only to recruit African Americans, but to pay them special attention—to assure them that their presence in the union was both welcome and necessary, that white workers would accept them as brothers, that an interracial union could

46 Report of Stockyards Labor Council CFL Minutes, 4 November 1917, 21-22; ibid, 18 November 1917, 4-6; Bigham, 49.
transcend oppressions of both race and class. To many in the union, this latter point was most critical. If a united, interracial CFL were to survive, it would need a united, interracial effort. A delegate from the Hotel and Restaurant Employees union noted that black wait staff and cooks “are working for salaries as low as $2 and $3 a week” in conditions so terrible they “cannot be described.” In some places, waiters took no salary at all, being forced to pay for certain advantageous positions; “it is no wonder,” the delegate concluded, “that the packers’ representative[s] go among them to secure strike-breakers.”

To fend off such offensives, the CFL would need to create a new type of unionism. That work became the central task of the Federation’s organizers and officials. From the beginning, CFL leaders knew that to “encourage the colored workers to join the labor movement,” they would have to prove their ability to “eliminate race prejudice…and secure a living wage and decent working conditions” for black workers. As a result, the union attempted special appeals to black workers. Advertisements touting the liberatory possibilities of union membership appeared in black newspapers. Mass meetings of African Americans were regularly held in the Black Belt, and were often led by Fitzpatrick or Foster themselves. In one such meeting, Foster told a crowd of five hundred black stockyards workers that “their only chance of obtaining decent wages and satisfactory working conditions lay through organization.” CFL officials took care to pursue black grievances as aggressively as possible—particularly those that involved racial discrimination—and even expelled locals that refused to remove the color bar from their constitutions. At every available turn, the CFL reinforced its message of racial equality and interracial solidarity.

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47 CFL Minutes, 4 December 1921, 12.

48 Ibid., CFL Minutes, 5 January 1919, 13-14; “New Angle in Yards Inquiry Taken Up Today,” Chicago Daily
Much of the success or failure of that message would depend on the union’s ability to promote it among the black community. The CFL engaged directly with the black community whenever possible, seeking to create the sort of connection between neighborhood and union that was prevalent among the immigrant residents of Packingtown. In 1919, the all-black Colored Local 651 opened a cooperative store in the heart of the Black Belt, allowing the union to promote its message within the community as well as at the workplace. CFL officials also attempted to obtain the support of black community leaders, particularly black ministers, knowing that their “aid and moral support” would “greatly aid the movement.” Though they met with only mixed success, it was not for lack of trying; such conferences were a constant feature of the campaign. CFL officials repeatedly met with the Colored Baptist Minister’s Alliance and submitted themselves to questioning before such bodies as the A. M. E. Sunday School Convention.49

Union leaders attempted not only to recruit members and support for organized labor, but also impress upon black community leaders the corruption of the packers. Packing bosses used donations to black churches and organizations such as the Urban League and Wabash Avenue Y.M.C.A. as a sort of bribe to turn black community leaders against unionism. Thus CFL leaders spent much of their time recounting tales of the packers’ coldness to the plight of rank-and-file workers. A favorite was the attempt of one packing concern to sell company bonds to a group of two hundred black women workers; when the women refused to buy, the “good-hearted foreman, through sympathy for them,” revoked their lunch break and sent them home without pay. The


packers, in other words, used both the carrot and the stick to control black workers. Such tactics created a “great feeling of race animosity” among workers, which could be “used by the employing class to give them the advantage of all workers.” The only defense against such a fate, the CFL argued, was for worker to “mak[e] use of their economic power by joining an organization of Labor, and bargaining collectively in the interest of the working class,” regardless of race. The ability of labor “to secure a statement or an acknowledgement of the merits of the movement from various recognized leaders” would “enhance the progress of the workers and add materially to their opportunities.”

With that fact in mind, the CFL worked tirelessly to obtain the support of black community leaders.

The heart of the campaign, however, remained the organizing campaign on the shopfloor—a campaign of direct worker-to-worker connection. Foster and Fitzpatrick realized that white organizers’ life experience and perspective would render them ineffective in appealing to black workers. At the urging of black hog butcher and SLC delegate A. K. Foote, the SLC hired and trained a cadre of black organizers to work within the African American community. In addition to black make organizers obtained from the AFL and United Mine Workers, the SLC also enlisted the aid of Irene Goins of the Women’s Trade Union League to organize the increasing number of black women hired to do piece work in the yards. Despite Foster’s lamentation of the rarity of a black organizer “who is thoroughly qualified to represent the trade-union point of view,” the SLC secured several gifted and energetic organizers. The organizers held a series of educational meetings within the Black Belt, speaking directly to black workers in meeting halls and on street corners. Their efforts were richly rewarded: it is estimated that of the 12,000 black workers in the stockyards, at least half belonged to the SLC at some point. The mass character of

50 Ibid.
the campaign was its centerpiece—the hope, as with white workers, was to organize all of the
stockyards workers into the CFL, regardless of skill.51

They also appealed to black workers through the press. Black organizer Andrew Holmes
wrote a number of pieces for the Chicago Whip, detailing the union’s dedication to interracial
principles. The union’s “policy of no racial discrimination,” he explained, “is a means to the end
of obtaining some of the equal rights in the industrial arena” for “progressive colored people.”
Holmes “solicit[ed] the approval and aid of all constructive sentiment molding agencies of the
race in boosting its cause of [organizing] the colored workers in the Stock Yards along with the
other workers.” Black female organizer G. W. Reed, in a guest editorial for The Butcher
Workman, was even more direct. She recalled “when the Negro was barred from the union,”
when “he was not admitted to a union hall unless he was there to scrub and clean.” In contrast,
the SLC “stand[s] with outstretched waiting hands, inviting you to come and enjoy the
democracy that has been built up with walls that can not be pierced with discrimination and race
hatred.” Reed argued that “there will be no peace until the white man learns that the black man
must be considered,” a result that could only occur through the union, the instrument “through
which discrimination and race hatred may be driven out of this country.”52 The work of black
organizers helped shape the message of the SLC, helping to fulfill its promise of interracial
unionism.

51 Foster, 210-212; CCRR, 413; John H. Riley, “Suppression of Free Speech on the South Side of Chicago,” c. July
1920, John Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 25, Chicago History Museum; Signed agreement between Stockyards Labor
Council and President’s Mediation Commission, c. June 1919, John Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 8, Folder 60, Chicago
History Museum; Grossman, Land of Hope, 212; Herbst, 41; Horowitz, 39-41; Coit, 75; Barrett, William Z, Foster,
80.

The federated structure and progressive orientation of the SLC allowed union leaders to carry on a mass organizing campaign among the city’s stockyards workers. The campaign’s direct appeals to unskilled workers created an energetic and dynamic union that frequently displayed its power in mass meetings and demonstrations. Most importantly, the CFL made strong efforts to create an interracial union that could resist not only class oppression, but racial discrimination as well. Union leaders engaged directly with the black community, deployed black organizers, and held mass meetings to recruit African American workers into the union. The broad-based organizing strategy of the CFL resulted in a tremendous level of success, making the SLC a major power in the stockyards. In late 1917, the federal government gave the union the opportunity to translate that power into a major breakthrough.

**Breakthrough: The Alschuler Award**

The revitalized CFL had made a number of major breakthroughs. By redefining itself as a federated union, it was able to transcend the barriers of ethnicity and craft and reach the great mass of unskilled workers. It engaged in a major, and largely successful, assault on the open-shop fortress of the Chicago stockyards. It had even swept away decades of white supremacist doctrine within the AFL and made legitimate inroads among the city’s African American population. Yet despite the inroads the SLC had made in the yards, the demands produced by the AMCBW and mechanical trades conferences had been ignored by the packers. The SLC had not yet confronted the packers directly.

Their chance would come from an unexpected place. In 1918, the President’s Mediation Commission, headed by federal judge Samuel P. Alschuler, would travel to Chicago to arbitrate disputes between the SLC and the packers and avert a threatened strike. The very presence of
Alschuler signaled a victory for the union: the SLC had made sufficient progress organizing the yards that a threatened strike compelled President Woodrow Wilson to take action—the power of the SLC, in other words, forced his hand. Moreover, the hearings themselves gave voice to stockyards workers for the first time, revealing the disgusting conditions within the yards, the squalor of the tenements of Packingtown, and the heartless indifference of the packing bosses. Finally, the arguments of CFL attorney Frank P. Walsh reflect the union’s ongoing dedication to industrial unionism and the organizing of black workers. The resulting award was a complete victory for the workers; not only did it grant them the vast majority of their demands, it enhanced the local prestige of the SLC and led to a swelling of its ranks.

The demands that arose out of the November conferences of the AMCBW and the mechanical trades enlivened the SLC. Though other AMCBW locals were not necessarily following the federated model, it was clear that they looked to Chicago for leadership and guidance. With the nationwide organizing campaign progressing and the unions having found common ground on their demands, Foster felt confident in submitting them to the packers. The packers, unwilling to negotiate with organized labor, refused even to read the demands. Foster, undaunted, assembled a committee and requested an audience with the packing bosses. Again he was rebuffed. But Foster understood that the SLC was a major force in the meatpacking industry and would not be ignored. Late in November, the SLC called a strike vote of its members. It passed with 98% approval. The union alerted AFL leadership to the strike vote, to the horror of AFL president Samuel Gompers and other conservative AFL leaders. Gompers was in an untenable position. If the strike failed, unionism would once again be driven out of a basic industry in a major city. If the strike succeeded, it would be a major victory for federated unionism and, potentially, a threat to the power of the AFL’s craft-organizing model. In fact,
Gompers, preaching support for the war effort, was hoping to avoid strikes altogether. Using his political contacts, Gompers managed to secure an audience in Washington for the SLC.\textsuperscript{53}

The meetings in Washington reflected the growing power and influence of the SLC—a testament to the tremendous organizing work the union had accomplished in mere months. The committee enjoyed an audience with both President Wilson and Secretary of War Newton Baker. With the power of the SLC behind them, the committee convinced Wilson and Baker that the threatened strike was a very real possibility, and that its consummation could cripple the meatpacking industry—a major fear of the Administration during wartime. Wilson ordered the President’s Mediation Commission to Chicago. These meetings with the Commission again reflected the SLC’s power: the two sides met deep into Christmas Eve, finally concluding talks at 3:30am Christmas morning. The Commission arbitrated a number of concessions to the SLC, a $1 per day wage increase and the eight-hour day chief among them. The packers, however, refused to abide by the agreement, with at least one report holding that they stormed out of the room when the decision was handed down. Stockyards workers, meanwhile, complained that they were suffering more abuse than ever. Libby dismissed twenty union men without cause, and refused to allow them to discuss the matter with their foremen or superintendents. Rumors emerged that “a number of girls had been approached and told that if they would take off their buttons and tear up their union cards they would be given [a] substantial increase in wages.”\textsuperscript{54}

The union was infuriated. It appeared that even the intervention of President Wilson was insufficient to secure decent treatment in the stockyards. The committee returned to Washington and issued an ultimatum to the President: take over operation of the packinghouses, or the SLC

\textsuperscript{53} CFL Minutes, 2 December 1917, 7-8; Clark, 153-162; Grossman, \textit{Land of Hope}, 211; Barrett, \textit{William Z. Foster}, 80-81.

\textsuperscript{54} CFL Minutes, 6 January 1918, 18-21; ibid, 20 January 1918, 2-3; Walsh, 80-81; McCartin, 82-83.
would go through with the strike. Wilson managed to talk the union off its threat and offered to listen to their concerns. The union submitted a list of eighteen demands. Wilson brokered a compromise: if the SLC agreed not to strike, Wilson would refer six of the union’s demands to a special session of the President’s Mediation Commission. Unlike the previous meeting between the SLC and the packers, this new arbitration would involve extensive testimony by both packing representatives and rank-and-file workers. The resulting decision would be binding and carry the full weight of the United States government. As the previous administrator had since resigned (and had proven ineffectual in any event), the union would have input into the selection of the arbitration’s new head. Finally, and most critically, Wilson agreed to immediately grant twelve of the union’s demands. Several of these represented major breakthroughs. Wilson agreed to establish a formalized grievance procedure and seniority system, stipulated that workers could only be fired for just and demonstrable cause, declared that union membership was not grounds for dismissal, and banned “discrimination against any employe [sic] or prospective employe [sic] because of creed, color or nationality.” The SLC also won the right to “proper dressing rooms, lunch rooms, wash rooms, and toilets,” a major victory for workers inured to toiling in the fetid filth of the meat industry.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, CFL Minutes, 3 February 1918, 6-11.} The second round of meetings was a major victory for the union.

But the real work lay ahead. The six unresolved issues were the most crucial to the stockyards workers, as most of them dealt with wages and other monetary concerns: the eight-hour day, overtime pay for Sundays and holidays, lunch breaks, a wage increase for both hourly and piece workers, equal pay for men and women, and a minimum guarantee of weekly hours. With the agreement of both the union and the packers, Wilson appointed federal judge
Chicago native Samuel P. Alschuler as Administrator.\textsuperscript{56} His task was an immense one. The decision of this new iteration of the President’s Mediation Commission would determine not only the battle between the packers and their employees, it would also reflect the degree to which the SLC had succeeded in its campaign. Though the mission of the President’s Mediation Commission was to avoid conflict and ensure smooth functioning of the wartime economy, a victory for the SLC would confirm the union as a major force in the industry and guarantee it recourse against the abuses of the packers—not to mention improve the lives of tens of thousands of workers. On February 11, 1918, the hearings that would determine the future of the stockyards began.

The hearings were a fascinating, even cinematic affair. For three weeks, the Commission, along with representatives of the packers and the SLC, huddled within the Chicago Federal Building and conducted interviews with hundreds of subjects, ranging from CEOs of the packing companies to superintendents and foremen to unskilled rank-and-file workers. For many workers, the hearings came to define the battle between labor and capital, with real-life heroes and villains clashing within the Federal Building for supremacy at the yards. The SLC’s hero was lead counsel Frank P. Walsh, a self-taught attorney from Missouri who became nationally famous as a champion of progressive causes. As head of the federal Commission on Industrial Relations, Walsh critiqued the low wages and poor conditions under which most workers toiled, as well as the massive and centralized profits that resulted, referring to American industry as “industrial feudalism.”\textsuperscript{57} Walsh was so dedicated to the cause of the SLC that he counseled the union free of charge, declaring that assisting the SLC was “a service to humanity.”\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.; CFL Minutes, 17 February 1918, 15-18.

\textsuperscript{57} Predictably, this point of view was not without controversy. The Commission was so rent by internal dissension
But the struggle of the SLC needed a villain as well. Walsh adroitly recognized that he could play the profit-obsessed coldness of the packers to his advantage. To that end, Walsh took the hearings outside the federal building and into the yards. He took Alschuler and the Commission on numerous tours of packing plants, showing them the full horror of the grueling physicality, the unforgiving pace, and the relentless monotony of stockyards work. Walsh’s gamble succeeded: Alschuler was horrified. One worker who accompanied Alschuler recalled their attempt to visit “that part of the plant where the offal is cooked.” The visit, in fact, never happened—Alschuler reached the entrance and stopped, as his “sense of smell would not permit him to go any further.” The Commission also visited Packingtown, witnessing firsthand the disease-ridden squalor in which the mass of low-paid unskilled workers lived. By revealing the desperation with which most stockyards workers were forced to live their lives, Walsh added real stakes to the hearings—no more were they about dollars or hours or lunch breaks, but about the lives of real human beings. One by one, as contemporary scholar Edna Louise Clark explained, “characters [from] ‘The Jungle’ appeared before the arbitrator and…exposed the dreary, hard lives they were forced to live.” These witnesses helped turn the tide of the arbitration.

As witnesses, Walsh prioritized unskilled workers, men and women who performed the lowest-paid and most unpleasant work at the yards. Both on his tours of the yards and in testimony at the Federal Building, Alschuler was confronted with a staggering level of human misery. The judge encountered black employees working more than twelve hours a day for the

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59 Ibid., Clark, 163; Barrett, *William Z. Foster*, 81-82; McCartin, 83.
common labor rate of twenty-seven and a half cents an hour. By some standards, these men had it easy; at Armour, Alschuler spoke to a man “about sixty-five years of age,” who was working eighty hours a week in the subzero pickling room for the same rate. Alschuler’s experience in the yards was perhaps best summed up by the words of a carpenter, who claimed “he would rather be a janitor in hell than a worker in the Stock Yards.”60 With the destitution of Packingtown and its residents firmly in the mind of Alschuler and the Commission, Walsh could make his case for the SLC.

Much of that case consisted of contrasting the villainous machinations of the packers with the abject poverty of the workers. Packing bosses repeatedly attempted to conceal the conditions of work in their houses, but to no avail. Dennis Lane, local secretary of the AMCBW, accompanied Alschuler on a visit to the Swift plant, where “the machinery was being run at considerably less than the usual speed.” When Lane pointed this out and returned the machinery to normal, “it was very apparent that the work was much more laborious than it seemed at first.” The packers also attempted a scheme in which they planted superintendents in shops and had them offer pro-company testimony as skilled workers. Walsh, catching wind of the plan, used his folksy Missouri manner to simultaneously deride the packers and charm the Commission. “A trick mule,” he said, “when you go to grab him by the head turns and shows his heels and for every move you make he has a move to block you no matter what you do.” Crooked superintendents and foremen, Walsh argued, were the trick mules of the packers.61

Perhaps the most damning testimony came from the packing bosses themselves. Walsh relentlessly grilled packing executives, explaining to J. Ogden Armour that he could double his

60 CFL Minutes, 17 February 1918, 15-18; Clark, 163; Barrett, William Z. Foster, 81-82; McCartin, 83; Herbst, 37-39.

61 CFL Minutes, 17 February 1918, 15-18; ibid., 3 March 1918, 22-24; ibid., 17 March 1918, 23-24; Conner, 52-53.
employees’ wages and still make a hefty profit. The packers generally responded to such lines of questioning with shocking coldness. During the examination of a Morris executive, Walsh inquired about cost of living. When he produced an average household budget, the conversation became increasingly awkward. Noting that the budget only allowed for one hat per year, Walsh asked whether the executive believed “one hat [was] too much for one year.” The executive replied simply, “I don’t wear any myself.” Walsh, infuriated by the executive’s indifference, demanded to know “in…determining what you are going to pay these people…don’t you consider what it costs them to live at all?” Against all available evidence, the executive insisted that his employees “seemed to get along all right.” Walsh, seeking to get to the heart of the matter, referred to the budget for a final, poignant question: “do you think that three pairs of shoes for a child for a year would be too much?” The executive sealed his own fate by coolly replying, “off hand it would look like it might be one too much.”

With Alschuler fully aware of the horrors of the yards and of Packingtown, and of the cold indifference of packing bosses to the suffering of their employees, Walsh proceeded to his closing argument. His address was a stirring five-hour oration that encompassed the history of the United States, the ways in which unions brought together workers from disparate ethnic and racial backgrounds, and the ways in which a living wage could secure American liberty. Walsh’s argument also reflected the values of the SLC. In discussing perceived splits among workers along the lines of skill and race, Walsh claimed, “I see in the packing houses the men and women sitting side by side…in the greatest harmony.” For Walsh, as for the SLC, “the whole question of discrimination between the races is a financial and economic question.” Racial discrimination,

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62 “Arbitration of Wages and Hours of Labor in the Packing House Industry,” 19-22 February 1918. Samuel Alschuler Papers, Chicago History Museum, Box 1, 1293-1302, 1683-1685; Clark, 163; McCartin, 83; Barrett, William Z. Foster, 81-82; Conner, 52-53.
which caused Walsh’s “emigrant ancestors...[to be] called ‘Micks,’” and modern packinghouse workers to be insulted as “damn Polocks,” was a product of Irish and Polish workers being “forced down in the social scale.” The elimination of economic barriers—the organizing of skilled and unskilled, white and black, native and immigrant into a single union would ameliorate social conflict and make for a more prosperous nation.

Walsh also took care to address the situation of black stockyards workers, declaring that they were the heart of the SLC’s new unionism. The entrance of masses of black workers into the SLC was a revolution in the labor movement, Walsh argued, telling the packing bosses that interracial unionism broke down “the last barrier in your defense against the American working men.” Reiterating the SLC’s argument that unions were the most efficacious way for African Americans to achieve social and economic freedom, Walsh noted that “colored men brought from the south are going into these unions by the hundreds” and that unions, in turn, pledged “to stand shoulder to shoulder and side by side to get [for them] the same financial benefit and...the same economic benefit as the white man.” Indeed, some of Walsh’s address had the air of a recruiting speech given in the Black Belt: “from this point on the white man's unions are going to show that they are as loyal to the rights of the black man as they are to a white man.” But whatever Walsh’s rhetorical flourishes, his argument echoed that of the SLC: as a result of interracial unionization, the packers would be forced “to emancipate them with the white people.” Walsh concluded his address with an air of confidence. The packers’ power “is slipping,” he claimed. With African American workers joined in the SLC organizing drive, “every negro is going to have a grievance, every negro can make a fight.” To back his words, Walsh brought dozens of black workers into the hearings to testify to the discrimination they had...
faced from packing bosses, and the ways in which the union had ameliorated it.\textsuperscript{64} Walsh’s speech became legendary in labor circles. When the Alschuler award was handed down, many unions printed copies of it alongside a full transcription of Walsh’s address.

Walsh’s tactics worked. On March 31, 1918—Easter Sunday—the Commission issued its award. It was a total victory for the union. Alschuler granted the eight-hour day and the forty-hour week, overtime pay for Sundays and holidays, lunch breaks and proper dressing rooms, an immediate pay increase (to be followed by another increase in May), and equal pay for men and women. Most importantly, Alschuler established a revised grievance procedure under which the President’s Mediation Commission, and Alschuler himself, would be the final arbiter of labor-management disputes. Chicago workers were jubilant. Even in its wildest dreams, the SLC could not have predicted such a resounding victory. As historian Valerie Jean Conner has argued, “the outstanding thing about Alschuler’s award was that it put considerations of equity above the laws of supply and demand.” Indeed, Walsh praised Alschuler by saying that if the judge were made labor administrator of the United States, Walsh and other labor activists “could all go home, quit our foolishness, and go to work.”\textsuperscript{65} Though it had required assistance, the SLC had taken on the packing companies and earned a major victory for its vision and its principles.

Unlike the ill-fated Christmas arbitration, the Alschuler award was a firm declaration of worker rights. There would be no packer shenanigans—no summary dismissals, no cajoling to remove a union button, no threats against organizers. Smaller, non-“Big Five” packers initially

\textsuperscript{64} Walsh, 32-33, 95; Herbst, 40.

\textsuperscript{65} Stock Yards Wage Award and Appendix to Stock Yards Wage Award, reprinted in CFL Minutes, 7 April 1918, 14-14d; see also Walsh, 107-120; “Eight Hour Day and More Adequate Wages for Workers in Yards,” “Judge Alschuler Award,” “Award an Inspiration for Freedom, Justice and Democracy,” and “Complete Transcript of Judge Alschuler's Findings,” \textit{The Butcher Workman}, Vol. 4, No. 4 (April 1918); McCartin, 83; Brody, \textit{Butcher Workmen}, 80-100; Herbst, 39-40; Street, “Swift Difference,” 22; Keiser, 39-41; Clark, 166-170; Barrett, \textit{William Z. Foster}, 82; Conner, 52-53.
resisted the award and refused to abide by it. In June the smaller packers met with Alschuler and Fitzpatrick, and were quickly brought to heel. According to a CFL members, Fitzpatrick, buoyed by the SLC’s success, “presented his case in such a splendid and uncontradictable manner that the attorneys for the packers gave up…and [agreed that] they would abide by Judge Alschuler’s awards.” The award also had a material effect on the SLC. Almost immediately, the union claimed credit for the award; though obviously it was not solely responsible, the relentless organizing of the SLC had put the union in a position to demand federal intervention in the first place. By November 1918, nationwide membership in the AMCBW had reached nearly 70,000.66

Workers’ reaction to the award reflected the success of the CFL campaign. The crowning achievement of the organization of the black workers was a massive interracial parade and demonstration in July 1919. The pending expiration of the award in 1919 occasioned a “100% unionization campaign” that would allow the union to negotiate the benefits provided by federal mediation—the eight-hour day, the wage increase, the grievance procedure, and others—with the packers directly. At LaSalle and Thirty-Third Streets, in the Black Belt, a series of speakers exhorted the assembled crowd to organize. SLC secretary J. W. Johnstone remarked on the “checkerboard crowd,” a mass “not standing apart in groups, one race huddled in one bunch, one nationality in another,” but rather “standing shoulder to shoulder as men, regardless of whether your face is white or black.” Other speakers followed—T. Arnold Hill of the Chicago Urban League, CFL organizers Andrew Holmes and John Kikulski, and the wife of imprisoned labor cause célèbre Tom Mooney—and the rally ended “with three rousing cheers of ‘100 per cent

66 CFL Minutes, 16 June 1918, 9-10; see also ibid., 19 May 1918, 15; Dubofsky, “Abortive Reform,” 211-212; Bigham, 50-52; Brody, Butcher Workmen, 82; Grossman, Land of Hope, 211.
union or bust.” Despite the racial tension that wracked the city, it appeared that the CFL had succeeded in creating an atmosphere of interracial cooperation and solidarity. The Alschuler award represented the first major victory of the SLC, and it was well-earned. Though Judge Alschuler had proven sympathetic to the plight of stockyards workers and their families, the union’s tireless organizing, as well as the declaration of its principles by attorney Frank Walsh, was similarly instrumental to the victory. Though it required assistance from the federal government, the SLC had built a union movement on its terms—dynamic, diverse, and democratic—and won major concessions from the packers. The coming challenge of the CFL would be to maintain the gains proffered by the award, to consolidate their inventive union structure, and to hold together their multiracial coalition. The Federation’s first task, however, was to mobilize politically.

**The Labor Party Ascendant**

In addition to its successes in organizing the stockyards and in federal mediation, the CFL also made a strong showing at the polls. The growth of the Labor Party, particularly in Cook County, reflected the CFL’s success in harnessing the energy of unskilled workers and channeling it toward a common goal. Like the campaign of the SLC, the Labor Party’s structure and platform reflected an abiding concern for unskilled workers and their issues. Whenever possible, the party engaged workers directly and encouraged them to participate in the

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67 CFL Minutes, 3 August 1919, 19-20; “Giant Stockyards Union Celebration,” The New Majority, Vol. 2, No. 2 (12 July 1919); John Riley, “Big Parade by Stockyards Workers Features Big Drive for Members,” Chicago Whip (19 July 1919), 2, 7; “Black and White Workers Are Fighting the Same Battle Say Labor Chiefs,” ibid. (15 August 1919), 3; Grossman, Land of Hope, 208-212; ibid., “The White Man’s Union,” 87; Herbst, 41; Horowitz, 39-41; Coit, 99-100; Strouthous, 63. Despite the turnout, the parade was not entirely a success; in many ways it reflected the declining fortunes of the CFL, particularly in regards to black workers. For more, see Chapter 5.
democratic process. Moreover, the Labor Party made efforts to secure the support of African American workers and dedicated itself to supporting social equality. The party’s relative success in the Chicago municipal election of 1919 reflects the major breakthroughs the reformed CFL had made with the city’s workers.

The creation of the Labor Party was perhaps the most heretical act of the CFL. Interracial unionism was one thing—the AFL expressly forbade racial discrimination, both individual AFL unions and the AFL itself had made overtures toward racial inclusion. But Gompers was steadfast in his opposition to independent political action. As early as 1891, the Federation recommended that unions “stand by the advocates of labor measures and reward them…or punish at the polls those who are inimical to their interests,” but claimed that an independent political party “has no right to representation in the Trade Union councils.” By the 1910s, this policy had ossified into a deep suspicion of any political affiliation on the part of organized labor. “It is not [an] independent party,” Gompers argued, “but independent voting that will accomplish beneficent and speedy results.” This policy was firmly in line with the AFL’s prioritizing of craft union autonomy and supremacy. For Gompers and other leaders, “there is not an action which the unions can take” that was not “a political act,” from securing wages and hours to improving conditions to modifying factory rules. Thus “the economic function and power of trade unionism” itself was “by far its greatest instrument for good,” and could not “be endangered by the attempt to identify it with a partisan political movement.” Labor, in the eyes of Gompers, “is not partisan to any political party,” but was rather “partisan to principles.”68 This stern opposition did not deter the CFL.

If anything, the Labor Party’s mission and structure openly defied the AFL’s longstanding opposition to both independent political action and organization of the unskilled. The party was organized similarly to the SLC. It was a relatively weak coordinating body whose power—both human and financial—rested entirely with local unions. As a result, the party focused much of its energy on engaging the sympathies of rank-and-file workers. Local unions affiliated with the party by paying yearly dues, so members of those locals were automatically members of the party. Party officials never ceased reminding membership of the inclusiveness of the group. *The New Majority*, established as the official organ of the party in 1919, referred to members as “real citizens of Chicago.” Party propaganda established the Labor Party as the ultimate “big tent” political organization. Party literature boasted that its membership consisted of “all men and women who perform useful labor with hand and brain,” including “mothers and workers in the homes and all workers on the farms.” The only people excluded were “the shirkers, parasites, and plutocrats” who had spent their lives “fattening [themselves] on the labor of others.”

But Labor Party leaders also actively sought to involve workers in the political process, recruiting them to serve on local ward committees and attend party conventions. One of the earliest actions of the party was to hold a speakers class “for all who are ‘up and coming’” with the party’s campaign. The party hired a former University of Chicago professor to tutor party members in oratory, allowing them to host meetings, create and disseminate literature, and thus “over-come the conspiracy of silence…which the trust press and old party politicians are maintaining toward the Labor Party.” No qualifications were necessary; in fact “every man and

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69 Untitled editorial, *The New Majority* (4 January 4 1919); Memo from Labor Party of Cook County, 10 February 1919, John Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 8, Folder 56, Chicago History Museum; Letter from Labor Party Campaign Committee, 17 February 1919, ibid.; Shapiro, 94-95; Horowitz, 26.
woman who desires to speak and to work for the Labor Party in this campaign” was strongly urged to attend.  

Much like the SLC had done in its stockyards campaign, the Labor Party paid particular attention to the concerns of black voters. As in the stockyards, blue-collar African Americans represented a powerful and influential group within city politics. Moreover, much of the militant cadre within the CFL, particularly the SLC, was composed of recent immigrants who were ineligible to vote. As a result, the importance of black voters was greater than their proportion of the population. Just as crucially, black Chicagoans quickly developed a sense of racial solidarity and tended to vote in a bloc; securing their votes, as a result, could easily swing an election. Perhaps most importantly, the party recognized the fact that the ballot box represented a critical symbol of freedom for African Americans—particularly migrants from the South who had long been denied the franchise. If party leaders could tap into the black community’s racial solidarity and political engagement, they could build a crucial and lasting power base in the political life of the city.

As a result, the party appealed directly to African American voters whenever possible. In addition to the party’s avowed antiracism and its support for social and economic equality, the Cook County party’s first executive committee included black AFL organizer John Riley, while the 1919 Labor Party slate included an African-American candidate for alderman: William Robert Wilson, president of a black local of the Coopers’ International Union. Party officials also attempted to drum up support from within the black community itself. A black member of the national Labor Party, in Chicago on business, was recruited to write a guest editorial in the Chicago Defender. In it, he claimed that “we as a Race have been used long enough as a political

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70 Ibid.
issue,” and claimed that African Americans could gain “every right...politically, civically and economically,” through support of the Labor Party.”\(^71\) Much like the SLC, the Labor Party defined itself through its direct engagement with rank-and-file workers, including African Americans.

That engagement paid almost immediate dividends. By March 1919, 175 local unions had affiliated with the Illinois Labor Party. Most of those were based in Chicago, where party organizing had been a rousing success: 116 local unions composed of nearly 60,000 members had affiliated with the Cook County party. That membership was meaningless, however, unless it could be put to use at the polls. The party had a chance to test its strength in the municipal elections of 1919. CFL officials were hopeful that fighting between the candidates would split the mayoral vote and hand Fitzpatrick a plurality. This was certainly possible; the administration of Republican incumbent William Hale Thompson was wracked by charges of corruption, and Democrats remained divided after a bitter primary campaign left Robert Sweitzer as the party’s nominee and fellow Democrat Mackay Hoyne as an independent challenger. Party leaders were also buoyed by their success in organizing the city’s workers into the SLC and hoped that such energy would cause a late groundswell of support for the party. As early as 1918, CFL secretary Edward Nockels predicted that the party would receive “at least 300,000 votes.” Nockels was far too optimistic. Thompson retained office by earning a 37.6% plurality, barely edging Sweitzer’s 34.5% but trouncing Hoyne’s 16%. Fitzpatrick had polled only 8% of the popular vote.\(^72\)


\(^72\) Resolution No. 41, *Proceedings of the 36th Annual Convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor*, 1918, 134-154; see also Resolutions 71 and 76, ibid 317-319; *Proceedings of the 37th Annual Convention of the Illinois...
But Fitzpatrick’s campaign was by no means a failure. Though his 8.1% of the vote appeared unimpressive, that percentage represented the votes of nearly 56,000 Chicagoans. In the areas of the CFL’s greatest influence—namely, the city’s heavily blue-collar northwest and southwest sides—Fitzpatrick competed gamely with the other candidates. In the 5th, 29th, and 30th wards, which encompassed the stockyards and its environs, Fitzpatrick earned 11%, 16%, and 13% of the vote, respectively. Other candidates performed respectably as well. SLC president Martin Murphy gained 20% of the vote in his aldermanic campaign in the 29th ward. In the far southeast 8th ward, home to thousands of steelworkers, South Chicago Trades and Labor Assembly president T. J. Vine earned 13% of the vote in his campaign for alderman, while Fitzpatrick earned 12.5%.73

Though disappointed with their lack of victories, party officials took heart in the strong response from working-class communities. The campaign had clearly succeeded in securing support for the party and its candidates among SLC and CFL members. By defining itself as an organization dedicated to the support of rank-and-file workers, the Labor Party had created a base of support within the city’s union community. Additionally, party leaders had reached out to African Americans and attempted to convince them of the efficacy of independent political action. The party’s respectable but disappointing showing at the polls in April 1919 displayed the party’s need to broaden its base beyond the existing CFL membership and to engage more fully with the black community—problems that would soon come to define the SLC as well.

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State Federation of Labor, 1919, 42; Dolnick, 5; Fine, 397; Horowitz, 3, 31-33; Simonson, 22, 74-82; Shapiro, 92-113; Street, “Working in the Yards,” 272.

73 Ibid.
Conclusion

Chicago’s workforce was transformed between 1904 and 1916. Packing bosses brutally consolidated their power, rolling back union gains, preying on ethnic and racial differences, and crushing unionism out of the stockyards entirely. The increasing diversity of the yards as a result of mass immigration from southern and eastern Europe and the Great Migration of African American workers rendered attempts at organizing the yards unsuccessful. But in 1916, John Fitzpatrick and William Z. Foster reconstructed the CFL as a dynamic, progressive federation with mass appeal. By transforming stockyards unionism from a collection of skilled locals into a federated committee of unions representing all workers, the CFL was able to organize the huge numbers of unskilled workers who had previously been neglected. Just as importantly, the CFL actively recruited black members, and sought to define unionism as an agent for interracial unity as well as class solidarity. The CFL’s efforts to create a large and powerful union succeeded to such a degree that the Federation defeated the meatpacking bosses in federal arbitration and won many of their demands. With a strong showing by the Labor Party in the 1919 municipal elections, it appeared that the CFL was on the rise.

But buried within this success was the germ of discontent. As Chapter 3 will demonstrate, the federated structure of the CFL replicated rather than destroyed many of the racial issues that had long plagued the AFL. Such issues helped stymie the union’s efforts to create a truly interracial labor movement in Chicago. Indeed, as Chapter 4 will reveal, many black workers initially responded with enthusiasm to the CFL appeal, but became disillusioned and left. Other African Americans distrusted the union and its message from the beginning and declined to join at all. The CFL had staked much of the success of its campaign on the organizing of black workers, and
on an alliance with the black community. Despite its earnest efforts, those goals would prove increasingly elusive to the CFL and its leaders.
Chapter 3: “Demoralized by its Own Weaknesses”: The Structural Limits of Federated Unionism, 1916-1921

John Fitzpatrick’s dream of creating a militant, diverse, interracial union centered on a reimagining of craft unionism—a set of reforms intended to replace trade union exclusionism with cooperative federated control. Such a system allowed the CFL to make major headway in Chicago’s stockyards and secure a victory with the President’s Mediation Commission. Combined with the respectable showing of the Cook County Labor Party in the municipal elections of 1919, it appeared that federated unionism might permanently alter the labor landscape of Chicago. More importantly, it appeared that the CFL’s organizing of black workers would transform the city’s labor movement. By the close of World War I, black workers represented a significant portion of Chicago’s workforce. As of 1920, industrial work had replaced domestic service as the predominant source of black employment, and the city’s manufacturing workforce was one-sixth African American. This transformation was most deeply felt in meatpacking; more than 12,000 black Chicagoans found employment in the stockyards, with the major plants at least 20% black by the end of the war. Given this vast unorganized workforce and the CFL’s stated dedication to interracial organizing, one would surmise that the Federation would have found great success in its campaign.

In fact, however, the opposite was true. The CFL was unable to organize a significant number of black workers. As Forrester B. Washington of the Department of Labor’s Division of Negro Economics lamented, “while the whites in a large proportion are joining the trades unions only a small percentage of Negroes have done so.”

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1 Smith, 20; Greer, 49; Street, “Plant Loyalty,” 660; ibid., “Working in the Yards,” 291; Smith, 19; Lewis, 25; Grossman, Land of Hope, 183; Zieger, 71; Halpern and Horowitz, Meatpackers, 27; see also Rev. L. K. Williams, “A Square Deal for the Negro,” Chicago Whip (27 March 1920), 6.
the SLC vary, with some claiming that as many as 50% of black stockyards workers—around 6,000—were members at some point. In 1920, the union itself estimated that “the percentage of the organized colored workers has been very insignificant” and had not exceeded “15 per cent at any time.” More damning was the fact that white membership was estimated as peaking at close to 90%. Membership data for individual locals do not exist, but the primary local union of black workers, Colored Local 651, rarely exceeded one thousand members. A sister union composed of black women, Local 213, maintained a membership of less than two hundred.

Those African Americans who did join were often less than enthusiastic in their embrace of unionism. Many joined the union and quickly defected, realizing that the guarantees of the Alschuler award applied to them regardless of whether or not they remained members of the union. As Foster lamented, “although the unions kept a crew of negro organizers in the field, and won many concessions for the packing house workers, including the eight hour day, right of collective bargaining, large increases, in wages, 40 hour weekly guarantee, retro-active pay, seniority rights, etc., they have never succeeded in organizing the negroes.” Membership estimates bear out this sad fact. It is entirely possible that 6,000 black workers joined the union at some point, but the membership rolls for Colored Local 651 reveal barely two thousand “members in good standing”—that is, members who were current on their dues payments. The other four thousand likely lapsed in dues payments. As James Grossman has argued, the “apparent statistical discrepancy” of Colored Local 651’s membership “suggests the pattern of

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3 Grossman, Land of Hope, 219-220; Cohen, Making a New Deal, 45-46; Fogel, 30; Street, “Working in the Yards,” 260; Lewis, 26-33; Bigham, 48-49.
black union membership: black workers joined readily, but let their dues lapse just as freely.” In other words, African Americans “were interested in unions, but not committed to them.”

The following two chapters explore the reasons for the CFL’s failure to organize black workers. The first issue lay in the structure of the CFL’s organizing campaign and its roots in the AFL’s tradition of federal labor unions (FLUs). Although the AFL publicly denounced segregation and pledged itself to interracial unionism, its reluctance to engage in industrial organizing and its reactionary racial ideas kept the AFL from aggressively organizing black workers. To organize the unskilled, the AFL created FLUs—locals composed of unskilled workers that were affiliated not with a skilled international union but with the AFL itself. Despite the shortcomings of such a system, the FLU model was adopted, with some modifications, by the CFL and employed amongst Chicago’s workers.

But the CFL was proceeding from a faulty premise. The failure of the CFL to successfully recruit black workers was rooted in a narrow-minded view of racial conflict. CFL leaders viewed interracial union organization as the only true path toward racial cooperation. They assumed that racial animus was the result of material conditions, specifically segregated workforces being paid and treated differently. If such divisions could be eliminated, so too would racial discord. The CFL’s saw federated unionism—specifically the creation of so-called “neighborhood locals”—as a way to organize black and white workers while avoiding the pitfalls encountered by FLUs. Unfortunately, the shortcomings of neighborhood locals—namely, their powerlessness within the larger union structure and their tendency to reinforce, rather than break down, existing racial prejudices—were far greater than their strengths. Though the Alschuler award had been a major

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4 Foster, 210-211; Grossman, 220-221, 244; Zieger, 84; see also Andrew Holmes, “Labor Organizer Says Race Must Spurn Charity,” Chicago Whip (14 February 1920), 1, 5; ibid., “Why Colored Workers Are Generally Anti-Union,” Chicago Whip (28 February 1920), 1, 6.
boon for the SLC, its benefits also made the union beholden to the government, rather than a radical shopfloor cadre. As a result, employers were able to take aim at the union. Foremen and superintendents intimidated and threatened union organizers and members and actively sought to hire non-union workers. As a result, rank-and-file SLC members engaged in a series of failed wildcat strikes that reveal both the depth of workers’ anger and the powerlessness of neighborhood locals in the face of an employer counteroffensive.

More critically, the use of a federated structure resulted in the creation of a de facto segregated SLC local, Colored Local 651, that found itself marginalized and impotent to effect change within the CFL. Black workers also bitterly resented Colored Local 651’s identity as “the black local.” The segregation that resulted from the neighborhood locals system undermined the CFL’s claims to interracial organizing and unity, and provided yet another barrier to the organization of white and black workers. The CFL’s racial ideology was far more progressive than that of the AFL, but Chicago unions suffered through similar travails, revealing major weaknesses in progressive unionism and hampering the CFL’s ability to organize black workers.

The AFL and the Historical Structure of Black Unionism

Though the CFL’s proposal of federated unionism allowed for the organization of the unskilled, and gained some critical early victories, the particular structure of that organization would prove problematic. Despite the CFL’s numerous breaks with the AFL, the structure of Fitzpatrick’s federated unionism owed much to AFL traditions. The organization of unskilled workers—particularly African Americans—into federated local unions had deep historical roots in the AFL’s system of federal labor unions. The AFL’s policies toward race, particularly its use of FLUs to organize black workers, revealed the limits of a federated structure and presaged the
later problems of the CFL’s neighborhood locals. Specifically, the structural weakness of FLUs prevented them from truly affecting change. More crucially, FLUs tended to reinforce, rather than undermine, racial discrimination within unions. Both of these issues ultimately divided white and black workers more than they united them, and would later plague the CFL campaign.

The CFL’s policy on the organization of unskilled immigrants and African Americans was born out of the American Federation of Labor. A review of the AFL’s problematic relationship with race, and its methods for ameliorating racial conflict, is crucial to understanding the methods later employed by the CFL. Though the AFL is most often noted for its awkward, even confrontational relationship with immigrants and African Americans, that relationship was more complex than it initially appears. Much of the AFL’s official policy toward race was informed by the traditions of the Knights of Labor, which the AFL overtook in the 1890s. The Knights attempted to organize all workers into a massive union that might retake not only American industry, but influence politics as well. As a result, the Knights were open to the organization of unskilled workers, including African Americans.5 Though the AFL was a craft federation concerned solely with the organization of skilled tradesmen, AFL leaders realized the potential threat that unorganized black workers might pose.

As a result, the AFL adopted the Knights’ policy toward organizing and installed it as official dogma. In 1893, the AFL constitution was amended to demand “that the working people…unite and organize, irrespective of creed, color, sex, nationality, or politics.” Such sentiments were echoed in countless resolutions and public statements; the AFL frequently reassured immigrant

and African American workers “that its best efforts have been, and will continue to be, to encourage the organization of those most needing its protection, whether they be in the North or the South, the East or the West, white or black.” Samuel Gompers and other AFL leaders never tired of repeating such boilerplate to black and immigrant leaders who complained of the AFL’s intransigence in pursuing interracial organization.

In practice, of course, the AFL’s racial policies were highly problematic. The Federation’s attitudes toward immigrants are instructive. AFL leaders repeatedly hurled invective at immigrant workers, and openly lobbied for the passage, and later the extension, of the Chinese Exclusion Act. AFL conventions rang with resolutions decrying the “multitudes of peoples from foreign shores,” which “increase[d] the army of the unemployed; intensified the prevailing distress; lower[ed] the standard of living, and [made] more difficult the organization of the working people.” One resolution submitted by AMCBW leader Homer D. Call complained that “the low wages for which [immigrants] labor and the deplorable conditions under which they exist is practically establishing the standard of living for the American laboring man.” Despite its avowed commitment to organizing all workers, the AFL clearly feared the expansion of the nation’s immigrant population and its possible effect on labor.

Though AFL leaders feared and resented immigrants as competition for native white labor, anti-immigrant sentiment was also rooted in genuinely racist feelings that permeated the

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6 Resolution No. 160, *AFL Proceedings* (1893), 56; ibid. (1897), 78; ibid. (1910), 237; Resolution No. 120, ibid. (1919), 228; see also *AFL Proceedings* (1918), 130-131; Resolution No. 37, ibid. (1920), 272; “Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor,” *The Broad Ax* (3 December 1910), 3; Mandel, 34; Lewis, 84; Taft, 313-314.

7 *AFL Proceedings* (1882), 17-18; Supplementary resolution, ibid. (1881), 4; *AFL Proceedings* (1881), 20; ibid. (1886), 7, 17; Resolution No. 20, ibid. (1887); *AFL Proceedings* (1889), 15; ibid. (1893), 13; Report of President Samuel Gompers, ibid. (1894), 12; *AFL Proceedings* (1900), 27; Resolutions No. 9 and 11, ibid. (1905), 86-87; Report of Committee on Resolutions, *AFL Proceedings* (1905), 192; Report of Committee on President’s Report, *AFL Proceedings* (1912), 344-345.
Federation. The AFL claimed to be most concerned about “unfit immigrants” and halting “the flow of undesirable immigration.” AFL leaders supported the passage of a literacy test as a prerequisite for entrance by immigrants, claiming the organization could now “complacently view, or quietly submit to the operation of any influence or the existence of any means the continuation of which would inevitably break down and eventually destroy the conditions of social life in America.” Such racial chauvinism was commonplace within the AFL. Immigrants, Federation leaders argued, not only provided low-cost competition for native white jobs, they threatened the United States by bringing with them a “low standard of living” as well as “their prejudices, their disposition towards violence, their contempt of law and order.” Such deficiencies rendered immigrants entirely unfit for union membership. Without the innate understanding of American ideals shared by native whites, immigrants had “no means of becoming imbued with ideas of trade unionism.” Such rhetoric became positively venomous when applied to Asian immigrants. AFL leaders lamented the admission of “Mongolians” to the United States, fearing the nation would fall victim to “the systematic colonization of…Oriental races.” Such a fate would not only result in lower wages and living conditions for native whites, but also “the deterioration of the people of the Caucasian race.” Gompers, himself a virulently anti-Asian racist, claimed that that “Chinese coolies and laborers can not assimilate with our race,” because “their civilization, and ours as well, can not co-exist.” The very presence of Asians and Asian-Americans on U.S. soil would inevitably result in “the physical conditions, the standard of life, [and] the progress of our people” being “endangered…undermined and

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destroyed.”

Giving lie to its claims of interracial organizing, the AFL’s fears of job competition, and the outright racism that pervaded its membership and leadership, prevented the AFL from committing to the organizing of immigrant workers.

Black workers were a thornier problem. Because they were native-born, African Americans could not be marginalized through immigration exclusion. Nonetheless, black workers presented a major issue for the AFL—much like immigrants, they were often unskilled workers. With the advent of mechanization and deskilling, they represented potential competition for jobs traditionally held by native whites. More critically, blacks were frequently used as strikebreakers; AFL leaders lamented the fact that “the negro man of the South is taken to the North to take the places of the white man on strikes.” The AFL’s motivation to organize African Americans, therefore, was because the alternative “has only made it easily possible for the unscrupulous employer to exploit the one against the other to mutual disadvantage of each.”

AFL leaders feared African Americans for much the same reason they feared immigrants: for their potential to drive down wages for native white workers.

But the AFL’s discussion of black workers also frequently contained the same bigotry that animated its treatment of immigrants. Black workers were regularly upbraided for not showing proper enthusiasm for unionism. One resolution called for increasing the Federation’s activities in the South, claiming “the conditions throughout the State of Virginia regarding colored organized labor is not as satisfactory as might be desired.” The fault for this problem, however,

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9 Resolutions No. 22 and 23, *AFL Proceedings* (1904), 100-101, 171-172; Resolution No. 91, ibid. (1905), 122-123; Resolution No. 57, ibid., 101-102; Resolution No. 19, ibid., 89; Resolution No. 109, ibid., 109; Resolution No. 103, ibid., 143; Resolution No. 30, *AFL Proceedings* (1907), 108; Resolution No. 37, ibid., 109, 314; Resolution No. 53, ibid., 122-123, 315; Report of President Samuel Gompers, *AFL Proceedings* (1906), 24; Resolution No. 11, *AFL Proceedings* (1911), 298; see also Resolution No. 115, *AFL Proceedings* (1900), 163, 318; Barrett and Roediger, 21-23.

10 *AFL Proceedings* (1897), 78-79; Resolution No. 126, *AFL Proceedings* (1901), 112, 175; Resolution No. 120, *AFL Proceedings* (1919), 228.
lay not with AFL leadership or organizers, but with the “thousands of colored workers of Virginia who just don’t understand the great benefits of organized labor.” Another resolution complained of the “millions of negro workingmen” who were “ignorant of the benefits of collective bargaining” and thus “militat[ed] against the successful operation of the Federation in its fight for a square deal for labor.” Left unsaid, of course, was the fact that most white workers refused to accept African Americans as apprentices. When such rhetoric fell short, Gompers went on the attack, deriding blacks for strikebreaking—which, of course, was generally their only means of entry into skilled jobs—and for possessing insufficient drive and ambition to join the union. Gompers essentially claimed that due to their historical conditions, blacks were all but unfit for union membership. Being “but a little more than half a century from a condition of slavery,” he argued, African Americans “could not be expected…[to] have the same conception of their rights and duties as other men of labor have in America.”

Of course, the complaint that black workers were at fault for their low representation in the AFL was laughable. As William Z. Foster wrote in 1919, “for the tense [racial] situation existing the unions are themselves in no small part to blame.” The fact that many international unions “sharply draw the color line” only fanned “the flames of race hatred.” Foster lamented the fact that such “discriminatory practice[s]” violated the basic tenet of the AFL, “which demands that all the workers be organized, without regard to sex, race, creed, politics or nationality.” Indeed, Throughout the 1890s, the Federation retained only two black organizers, both of whom were eventually discharged—one for refusing to organize black workers into separate locals, and one for “agitat[ing] for racial equality.” Thus, as Bernard Mandel has argued, Gompers effectively

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11 Resolution No. 90, *AFL Proceedings* (1907), 154; *AFL Proceedings* (1910), 237; Foster, 209.
barred African Americans from the labor movement, “and then declared that they deserved no better” because they had failed to make “common cause” with white workers.\(^\text{12}\)

The AFL’s problem was quite simple. Its member unions were skilled and craft-oriented. Their memberships were largely composed of native white tradesmen who enjoyed relatively high wages and job security, and thus their primary concerns were the enforcement of job rules and union control on the shopfloor. The AFL was, in historian Jeremy Brecher’s words, “safe, sane, and conservative.” Unskilled workers and the accompanying threats of mechanization and deskilling terrified many skilled workers; such feelings were only augmented by extant racial bigotry. As a result, “most AFL unions were…more interested in preserving their own organizations than in responding to the broader needs of [unskilled] workers.” Most member unions shunned unskilled organizing. Those unions that permitted interracial organizing did so only on a segregated basis. Most AFL unions, however, refrained from organizing black workers, and many barred African American membership by constitutional provision. Such policies became self-reinforcing. Craft unions that gained a foothold in an industry barred blacks from membership. In closed shops, where union membership was a condition of employment, blacks were therefore excluded from the industry entirely. Such isolation helped to confirm the superiority of white labor in the minds of union leadership—blacks were disqualified from taking certain jobs, and then blamed for their inability to do so.\(^\text{13}\)

The racial ideology of AFL unions was not the only barrier to black membership. The structure of the Federation and the limits imposed by the AFL constitution vested tremendous power in the international unions. As a result, the authority of Gompers and the AFL Executive

\(^{12}\) Ibid., Mandel, 43-46, 60; Resolution No. 48, *AFL Proceedings* (1920), 276-277.

\(^{13}\) Brecher, 116; Northrup, 1, 237-238; Keiser, 23; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 3.
Council was relatively minimal; its authority to police the membership policies of individual unions was nonexistent. The fundamental, unifying principle of the AFL was craft autonomy—the right of each international union or organize and police its own trade. Complaints to Gompers and the Council regarding the exclusionary policies of individual unions thus fell on deaf ears. In historian Oscar Hutto’s words, Gompers claimed that the Federation “did not compel its international affiliates to accept colored workmen, any more than it compelled [them] to accept those of any other race or nationality.” Although the AFL constitution declared the Federation’s dedication to organizing all workers “irrespective of creed, color, sex, nationality, or politics,” the amendment was a statement of purpose, not a mandate. Thus it did not carry the weight of constitutional provisions that enforced, for example, the collection of dues or the election of officers. The right of individual unions thus “became so sacred a doctrine…that a union might judge a whole class of workers ineligible for membership without the Federation intervening.”

The entire situation was tragically self-perpetuating. When black or immigrant workers raised concerns regarding the policies of a given union, Gompers would issue a statement regarding the AFL’s commitment to interracial unionism, but quickly note that he had no power to impose membership restrictions (or lack thereof) upon any affiliate. In 1918, a group of African American leaders wrote Gompers, pleading with him to force all of the AFL’s unions to open their doors to black members. Gompers’ response crystallizes the Executive Council’s powerlessness. “It is difficult,” Gompers wrote, “for the national organization to control the actions of local unions…inasmuch as the National body is made possible by the delegates appointed by the locals.” That said, Gompers pledged to use his influence “to break down

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14 Hutton, 18-19; Taft, 311-313; see also Henri, 153; Spero and Harris, 53; see also Letter from Eugene Kinickle Jones and Fred R. Moore to American Federation of Labor, dated 6 June 1918, AFL Proceedings (1918), 198-199.
prejudice, on account of race, color or previous conditions of servitude.”

Lacking both the motivation and the power to force international unions to accept black members, Gompers and the AFL Executive Council were content to issue ineffectual statements that gestured toward interracial unionism rather than attempting to reform the AFL’s policies.

At times, member unions attempted reforms on their own, with little success. A resolution at the 1890 AFL convention excoriated the machinists union, which specifically forbade the membership of African Americans. The resolution noted that the Federation “looks with disfavor upon trade unions having provisions which excludes from membership persons on account of race or color,” and “most respectfully request[ed]” that the Machinists “remove from their constitution such conditions, so that all machinists shall be eligible to membership.” The resolution met with sufficient response from the convention that Gompers felt compelled to visit the machinists’ 1891 convention. There, according to Gompers, union leaders “declared that in all probability” the call to open membership to African Americans “would be complied with at their next session.” What followed was a long and complex affair during which the machinists were split into two unions. The splinter faction “pledged…that, when the older organization shall eliminate the objectionable clause and be willing to amalgamate, the new one will be pleased to do so on an honorable basis.” Gompers, who deplored dual unionism as the sole mortal sin of organized labor, intervened and reunited the two sides. Though the color bar was removed from the machinists’ constitution, the act was purely a formality—the union refused to organize or accept black members. The machinists’ situation shows both the shortcomings of the AFL’s

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16 AFL Proceedings (1890), 31; Ibid. (1891), 12; Report of Committee on President’s Report, AFL Proceedings (1891), 39-40; Mandel, 34-37, 51. The AFL would encounter similar issues among blacksmiths and any number of
structure and the racial ideas held by many of its leaders. Gompers lacked the power to force the machinists to accept black members—but even when presented with an opportunity to influence the union, he chose to accept a purely cosmetic solution.

Despite the AFL’s organizational inertia and the racism that suffused its leadership and member unions, the Federation realized that black workers could not be totally neglected. In 1905, the Niagara Movement issued its Declaration of Principles. Among them was an excoriation of both white employers, for “importing ignorant Negro-American laborers in emergencies,” and white unions, for “proscribing and boycotting and oppressing thousands of their fellow-toilers, simply because they are black.” Progressives within the AFL also protested the Federation’s ongoing policy. Leaders of various unions harped on the ability of employers not only to hire black workers to compete with white, but to foment racial discord on the job. As Foster claimed, racial discrimination “injures Labor's cause greatly.” So great was the effect of AFL racism, and the resulting hostility of black workers, that it prevented African Americans “from joining even the organizations willing to take them in.” Gompers feared that the AFL’s adherence to craft autonomy might be limiting the union’s influence at the workplace. As Sterling Spero and Abram Harris have noted, the Federation was “presented with the choice of remaining a militant body true to its ideals, or of compromising for the sake of increased membership.” Recognizing the foolhardiness of neglecting black workers altogether, the AFL chose the latter course.17

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17 Niagara Movement, “Declaration of Principles” (1905); Foster, 209; Spero and Harris, 88; see also Cohen, Racketeer's Progress, 141-142.
The problem of how black workers could be organized, however, remained a sticky one. Historian Bernard Mandel has noted that Gompers’ decision to organize black workers was borne entirely of pragmatism: to protect the wages and standing of white workers, the threat of black competition needed to be neutralized. But most black workers were unskilled and thus had no place in AFL craft unions. Several unions proposed the possibility of industrial unionism—that is, the organization of all workers in a given industry into one union, regardless of craft boundaries. Thus all workers in a meatpacking plant, from butchers to tanners to blacksmiths, would be under the jurisdiction of a single union that controlled the entire industry. Each of these proposals, however, was rejected; Gompers contemptuously dismissed industrial unionism as an abdication of trade union principles to mob rule. Still another alternative was the organization of all-black unions, affiliated with all-black city central committees, in crafts where existing trade unions excluded African Americans from membership. Though some trades organized all-black unions, local central committees often refused to seat African American delegates. Gompers claimed that the AFL was powerless to compel the committees to seat such delegations.¹⁸ Unwilling to abandon craft autonomy but unable to organize black workers within its limits, the AFL was at an impasse.

The answer was federal labor unions. These organizations were small local unions composed of unskilled workers that were affiliated not with a specific craft union—butchers, coopers, etc.—but with the American Federation of Labor itself. The AFL had made use of FLUs since the 1880s, primarily as “recruiting stations for the trade union movement” among unskilled white workers in mass-production industries. Though they were not designed to house black workers,

¹⁸ Mandel, 57. Report of President Samuel Gompers, AFL Proceedings (1900), 22-23; American Federationist (April 1901), 118-120; Taft, 312; Hutton, 20. For the AFL’s response to industrial unionism, see Resolution No. 102, AFL Proceedings (1904), 133, 175-176; AFL Proceedings (1920); Mandel, 44-45; Brecher, 116; Keiser, 23; Cohen, Making a New Deal, 3.
FLUs represented a compromise between the AFL’s dedication to craft autonomy and its recognition of the importance of African American labor. It appeared that Gompers had solved the problem of unorganized black workers. He provided avenues for organization through the establishment of city central bodies “composed of representatives of negro workers’ unions exclusively,” but avoided the issue of dual unionism by chartering local FLUs through the AFL Executive Council rather than specific international unions. Such a solution circumvented the thorny questions of racial exclusion and craft jurisdiction: the AFL essentially took responsibility for the organizing and governance of black workers. As a result, they gave African Americans the ability to “protect and defend themselves against the rapacity and cupidity of their employers” while preserving the rights and privileges of white unions and fulfilling the Federation’s dictum to organize regardless of “creed, color, nationality, sex, or politics.”

Some creative maneuvering had allowed the AFL to transform FLUs from “recruiting stations” for white unskilled workers into the solution to the volatile problem of black labor.

Despite the seeming ingeniousness of FLUs, they were rife with problems from the very beginning. For one thing, the federal unions did nothing to materially change the central problem: the institutionalized racism that pervaded AFL unions. If anything, the decision to relieve international unions of responsibility for organizing African American workers was a decision made to protect craft autonomy above all else. As such, their deployment was a tacit endorsement of the racial exclusion of AFL member organizations. Gompers intimated as much in his speech establishing the use of FLUs to organize African Americans. He described

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19 Ibid.; Spero and Harris, 95; Report of President Samuel Gompers, *AFL Proceedings* (1897), 15-16; see also *AFL Proceedings* (1887), 10.

20 Spero and Harris, 91-93; Tuttle, 144; see also Report of President Samuel Gompers, *AFL Proceedings* (1900), 22-23.
the organization of black workers as a purely practical matter. “Unless we continue the policy of endeavoring to make friends of them,” Gompers argued, referring to African Americans, “there can be no question but they will not only be forced down in the economic scale and be used against any effort made by us for our economic and social advancement.” It is difficult to ignore Gompers’ pointed use of “us” to refer to white unionists and “them” to refer to unorganized black workers. Despite Gompers’ own tremendous influence over the Executive Council, and thus the AFL himself, he made it understood that the Federation was in no way supporting social equality. “We do not necessarily proclaim that the social barriers existing between the whites and blacks could or should be felled with one stroke of the pen,” Gompers argued. FLUs, in other words, were organized not to uplift African Americans to a new standard of economic, let alone social, opportunity. Rather, they were a convenient way to preserve the power and jurisdictional boundaries of white craft unions against the perceived onslaught of unskilled African American workers.\footnote{Report of President Samuel Gompers, AFL Proceedings (1900), 22-23; American Federationist (April 1901), 118-120; Taft, 312; Hutton, 20; Herbst, 31; Clark, 151; Spero and Harris, 269-270.}

Gompers’ narrow-minded approach to the racial problem—his feeling that racial exclusion was, in his words, merely an administrative “anomaly” that required correction—was reflected by the relative powerlessness of the FLUs themselves. Because the AFL’s governance was based on the autonomy and control of the international unions, the FLUs’ affiliation with the Executive Council rendered them practically impotent within the Federation. Unlike internationals, federal unions had little say at conventions and little power over AFL affairs, including their own. Although the AFL was ostensibly responsible for organizing black workers, negotiating their contracts, and handling their grievances, the Executive Council proved rather ineffectual in its efforts to pursue justice for the FLUs. Disputes were generally referred to the international union.
that claimed jurisdiction within the industry—since the exclusionary policies of these unions were the reason for the creation of FLUs in the first place, it is unsurprising that they rarely ruled in favor of black workers.

Just as critically, the structure of the FLUs made them virtually powerless within their own communities. The central bodies that governed union activity in most cities were composed of delegations from union locals. Because black workers were affiliated with the AFL rather than those locals—and because the AFL constitution forbade the establishment of more than one central body in a given city—FLU members had no real representation in these bodies and were subject to the whims of white unionists at the local level. Consequently, black workers, despite being organized by the AFL, were regularly pushed out of jobs where their presence might threaten white workers.\(^2\) Despite their stated purpose—the organization of black workers—the powerlessness of FLUs indicated that their real purpose was the protection of white labor.

Indeed, it quickly became clear that the FLUs, if anything, buttressed the racial bigotry of the Federation and its unions. The organization of African Americans into segregated unions devoid of genuine power within the AFL only “institutionalized and legitimated the exclusionary policies of the national unions,” as James Grossman has argued. The black FLUs, rather than “recruiting stations for the labor movement,” functioned as toothless repositories for black workers. The original purpose of FLUs was as a temporary stop on the road to organization—unskilled workers would be placed in FLUs, then moved into locals affiliated with international unions rather than the AFL. For black FLU members, this process never occurred. This is unsurprising—the creation of all-black FLUs was due to the exclusionary policies of

\(^{22}\) Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 216; Northrup, 8-9; Spero and Harris, 95-98; see also Report of President Samuel Gompers, *AFL Proceedings* (1900), 22-23; Report of Committee on President’s Report, ibid., 112; Report of Committee on Law, ibid., 129.
international unions, which did not waver from their position. As Spero and Harris argued, FLUs represented the various international unions’ policies of exclusion and “afforded little protection” to black workers, “since the internationals which did the excluding were the only groups in a position to bargain with the employers.”

As a result, black workers were technically affiliated with the American Federation of Labor but remained outside the labor movement. Lacking the vital power conferred by an AFL international charter, FLU members—segregated and marginalized into a small, powerless corner of the Federation’s vast structure—languished. Inevitably, the FLUs began to crumble under the pressure of their own powerlessness. Black workers, growing wise to the AFL’s scheme, quickly lost interest in the Federation’s unkept promises. In 1919, the AFL reported a total of 92 FLUs nationwide. That number jumped to a high of 136 in 1922 and quickly declined: 79 in 1923, 67 in 1925, and 38 in 1926. By 1927, the AFL reported only 21 federal unions still in existence.

In a way, the fate of federal labor unions within the AFL was not surprising. FLUs were created solely as a pragmatic compromise. Their structure and function sought to appease the Federation’s longstanding tradition of white supremacy while still marginalizing the threat posed by unskilled black workers. Though FLUs certainly succeeded in rendering black AFL members powerless, the unions were beset by structural powerlessness and the systemic racial bigotry of the AFL and collapsed. Though major differences existed between the AFL and the CFL, including on matters of basic philosophy and ideology, the AFL’s experience with the specter of black labor, and its response to it, presaged the struggles of the CFL to build an interracial labor

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23 Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 216; Spero and Harris, 102-104.

24 Spero and Harris, 102-104, 269-270; Herbst, 31; Clark, 151; Foner, 169; Report of Committee on President’s Report, *AFL Proceedings* (1900), 112.
movement. The CFL would begin its campaign from an entirely different ideological orientation than that of the AFL. But Fitzpatrick and the Chicago movement would borrow heavily from the structure and spirit of FLUs in structuring their campaign, with similarly problematic results.

**The CFL Compromise: Neighborhood Locals**

Given the AFL’s problematic racial history, its use of FLUs primarily as a means of legitimating racial exclusion, and the fact that FLUs failed to organize black workers, it may seem odd that the openly interracial CFL would adopt federated organizing as an organizing model. But just as Gompers’ use of FLUs differed from their original purpose, so too did the CFL adjust the federated model of organizing to suit the needs of Chicago stockyards workers. For the AFL, the organizing of black workers was a marriage of convenience, and its use of FLUs allowed the AFL to marginalize the threat posed by black labor competition while maintaining a façade of interracial cooperation. By contrast, as Chapter 2 showed, the CFL was not only interested in the organization of unskilled workers of all races, but felt it a moral and practical imperative to do so. Indeed, interracial unionism was among the fundamental tenets of Fitzpatrick and Foster’s vision of a reformed CFL.

But the CFL’s use of a federated organizing model would ultimately fail, just as the AFL’s experiment with FLUs did. The SLC’s federated structure and use of community-based organizing shifted the power of the union away from the shopfloor, weakening the unions. This problem was only exacerbated by the Alschuler award, which made the President’s Mediation Commission, and not a strong, militant union movement, the determinant of relations between the packers and the SLC. As a result, the packers moved to disrupt the SLC, resulting in a series
of abortive wildcat strikes that revealed the powerlessness of the union and the anger of rank-and-file workers.

Despite the differences between the AFL and CFL, the latter quickly recognized the potential of federated unskilled locals. Since the majority of the unorganized workers in the stockyards were unskilled, the CFL had no need to create a special class of organizations such as FLUs. Instead, SLC leaders borrowed the spirit of FLUs—their federated structure, their organizing of the unskilled, and their openness to ethnic and racial diversity—and channeled it into the formation of “neighborhood” locals that represented the values of the CFL. As a union newspaper put it, “this form of organization would be most democratic, for it would not segregate the races or nationalities and at the same time...provide a good way to handle the wants and needs of all workers in all departments.”\(^{25}\) Fitzpatrick’s federated model prioritized mass organization over craft autonomy, an ideal positively embodied by FLUs. Moreover, the CFL sought to create local unions that were strongly engaged with their neighborhoods and tied to their members’ race and ethnicity. Such ties, it was thought, would strengthen workers’ commitment to the union and reinforce a sense of solidarity and fellowship, and would be possible only by circumventing traditional craft organizing. Finally, the CFL saw the organization of African Americans as a central goal of its campaign—a goal that could be best accomplished through the mass organizing of the unskilled permitted by organizations like FLUs. As a result, the CFL pursued federated organizing through a modified form of FLUs: neighborhood locals.

CFL leaders recognized the central importance of unskilled workers, particularly African Americans, to the success of their campaign. Unable to organize such workers by the dictates of

traditional craft unionism, the CFL turned instead to non-traditional organizing, which fit perfectly within the CFL’s federated model. Rather than using FLUs, the CFL organized unskilled workers, white and black, into “neighborhood locals” with ties to their ethnic or racial communities. Such locals allowed the union to avoid the division and disempowerment of traditional craft organizing, which Foster felt had led to the “disunity and ‘scabbing’” that had destroyed the 1904 stockyards strike. Not only did craft unionism divide workers by skill and department—thus reducing solidarity throughout the yards—it also excluded unskilled workers entirely. The use of neighborhood locals allowed the CFL to circumvent concerns of craft autonomy in favor of a mass organizing campaign that included all stockyards workers. Such a campaign would ultimately permit mass solidarity and, it was hoped, worker governance of the yards.26

The CFL’s neighborhood locals also allowed the union to tap into the energy and solidarity of local ethnic and racial communities. CFL leaders felt that traditional craft organizing not only separated workers from one another at the workplace; it also broke critical ties to their neighborhoods and communities. By organizing workers along the lines of their skill and trade, trade-union organizing privileged the experience of work. Fitzpatrick and CFL leaders recognized that given the vast influx of ethnic immigrants and African Americans, such ties would be far less significant to workers than connections to their communities. As Lizabeth Cohen has argued, “many workers were politicized” not on the shopfloor, but “within neighbors’ kitchens, ethnic club-rooms, and corner saloons. The goal was to “build on the solidarity of ethnic communities to better discipline and empower the unskilled.” Consequently, the neighborhood organizations were headquartered in blue-collar communities and organized

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workers by ward. Many of the locals retained foreign-language organizers and even conducted business in Polish and other languages. Perhaps the greatest statement as to the SLC’s dedication to organizing ethnic neighborhoods was made in its choice of headquarters: Columbia Hall (better known to Polish workers as Slowacki Hall) at 48th and Hermitage Streets in the heart of the so-called Polish Quarter. The CFL’s adoption of a federated model for local organizing, akin to the AFL’s use of federal labor unions, afforded the Chicago federation the flexibility to create neighborhood-based locals that preserved ethnic and community connections.

Despite the SLC’s largely successful efforts to organize unskilled stockyards workers, the neighborhood locals could not withstand the efforts of employers to erode their influence. In addition to employers stonewalling the union—making it “impossible to get up where the business end is run”—employers also took advantage of the union’s lack of a vital, militant shopfloor cadre. For one thing, the SLC’s use of neighborhood locals redirected the energies of class-conscious unionists from the workplace to the community. As Paul Street has argued, such a structure deprived the SLC of “the militant shop-floor presence” that had animated the AMCBW’s 1904 campaign. Though local unions based on neighborhood and ethnicity served to unite workers and elide the importance of craft divisions, they also diluted the importance of job control and workplace militancy.

As a result, union workers had little ability to exercise control over their work, making them easy prey for the informal oppressions employed by discriminatory foremen and superintendents. The Alschuler award further complicated the union’s position. The formalized structure of the award served to “stabilize daily class relations on the killing and cutting floors,” co-opting the militancy of the union itself. Moreover, the award pushed the center of working-class activity

even further from the shopfloor. By relying on the government for the resolution of grievances, workers redirected their energies toward the hearings at the Federal Building, and later toward the enforcement of the award—not toward the construction and maintenance of a militant cadre of rank-and-file unionists who could govern the shopfloor.\textsuperscript{28} The tactics of the CFL had once more proven problematic: though the Alschuler award had been a major victory for the union, it had also sapped much of the vital shopfloor energy required to build a powerful, long-lasting labor organization.

With the SLC campaign progressing, packing bosses took advantage of union weakness. Although the Alschuler award had provided union members with protection from unfair discharge, employers used a variety of informal means to circumvent the award and intimidate workers. As Fitzpatrick said during an investigation into the packers’ behavior, “even since the United States Government has taken the question of the packers dealing with their employes out of the hands of the packers…still there is a decided fear among the employes…up in the stock yards.” Many meatpacking workers, Fitzpatrick agued “have not got the courage to put on the Union button.” Fitzpatrick’s suspicions were borne out by the testimony of stockyards workers. AMCBW officer Dennis Lane complained that “non-union men are protected by the company,” but that “the union man is made to toe the mark…so far as the privileges of the [Alschuler] agreement will allow him to extend himself.” Union workers frequently received the worst assignments, while non-union men were promoted and even protected from punishment. Lane recalled a case in the Wilson plant in which a non-union man broke the jaw of a union member

\textsuperscript{28} CFL Minutes, 2 December 1917, 11; Street, “Working in the Yards,” 273-279; McKillen, 86.
with an iron pipe. After recovering from his injury, the packers had the union man arrested; the non-union man was defended free of charge by the company attorney and set free.\(^{29}\)

Packers also openly disregarded the benefits of the Alschuler award. B.H. Rendell of the machinists union complained that “men are intimidated from the fear of losing their positions.” Despite the Alschuler award’s guarantee of protection for union men, Rendell claimed that foremen and superintendents constantly threatened workers: “You had better keep your mouth shut if you want to hold your job.” Any employee who was found to have “a little more independent spirit” was immediately discharged. Foremen openly defied the Alschuler award, “advertis[ing] through the shop” that the offending employee had been fired for union activity. Discharged union activists were frequently the victims of violence as well. A CFL delegate lamented the presence of company guards, who were “officered in the uniform of policemen and carry clubs.” When a union activist was fired, he, claimed “he is escorted to the gate and if he makes any effort to get a consideration of his grievance he gets a rap over the head with a club.” Union officials complained of the difficulty of attempting to get past such guards. “It is absolutely impossible to get up where the business end is run,” one delegate said, wearily concluding, “we are not able to negotiate.”\(^{30}\) Packing bosses used both informal intimidation and open defiance of the Alschuler award to weaken the union’s influence on the shopfloor and drive its members out of the yards.


\(^{30}\) Testimony of Rendell, Alschuler Papers, Box 1, CHM, 1735; CFL Minutes, 2 December 1917, 11.
Union members responded with fury to such tactics. Lacking the ability to negotiate directly with the packers, and unwilling to await the decisions of Judge Alschuler, workers regularly engaged in spontaneous job actions to protest the presence of nonunion workers. In June 1919, a union official in the hog offal department at Hammond complained to foreman S.C. Calef that two men in the seventy-five-man gang were not members of the union, and that Calef must “get them to join or discharge them.” Calef responded that workers could not be compelled to join the union, that the company “could not discriminate for him,” and that the company would have no hand in organizing workers. The SLC could organize on its own time. In response, the entire gang walked off the job. Within an hour, the entire pork house—between seven hundred and nine hundred men—joined them in protest.31

Similar events took place elsewhere. At Wilson, the union steward of the cellar gangs complained that several workers from the sweet pickle and dry salt departments were nonunion. The union members demanded their dismissal and threatened to stop working if the nonunion men were kept on. When the superintendent refused, union members shut down the machines in the dry salt department and told their coworkers “to stop work at once.” SLC leaders Martin Murphy and J.W. Johnstone arrived and ordered the men back to work, but the spirit of rebellion had spread. That same day, union members in the freezer department demanded that “if [the foreman] didn’t discharge all the non-union men in the department, they would stop the entire floor from working.” When their demand was not met, they briefly walked out the next morning; a group of union workers in the sausage room soon followed. A beef killing gang posted a sign on the shopfloor that read “Final Notice: Everybody must have their union button on [tomorrow] morning when they come to work or they cannot work…Go to the hall and get your buttons

tonight. This means everybody.” The workers’ own words reflect their growing frustration with the presence of nonunion workers. Louis Michora, who helped lead the wildcat strike in the dry salt department, complained that despite the organization of nearly five hundred men in his department, the sixty-three scabs were able to undermine their work. Michora complained that scab workers “take…sick” too often, cursed at union members, and even pulled knives on union organizers. Though Michora recognized that the wildcat strike was illegal, and tried to stop it, it was to no avail: “everybody say ‘stop the scab’…[they] no want to go and work with the scabs.”

The packers’ intimidation of union employees provoked ferociously bitter actions by the workers.

These wildcat strikes at the reveal the extent to which union workers resented the presence of nonunion employees in the stockyards. But it also reflects the relative powerlessness of the union as an agent of shopfloor protest and collective bargaining: all of the strikers were eventually ordered back to work, with no substantive changes made. Though the Alschuler award had provided a number of benefits to the union, the union shop was not one of them. Because the union could not negotiate such rights and benefits, it was powerless to prevent the unemployment of nonunion workers. Even open defiance of the contract by the packers involved a cumbersome grievance procedure arbitrated by the President’s Mediation Commission. Despite the efforts of the SLC to create an independent, militant union, its federated structure and reliance on federal largesse left rank-and-file workers powerless against the predation of employers. As John Kikulski testified as to the anger of the rank-and-file workers, who “never voted” to approve the no-strike pledge within the Alschuler agreement. Many of the union members had begun to feel “that they have no rights.” The rank-and-file, Kikulski concluded,

32 Testimony of George Williams, FMCS, Box 42, 39-54; Testimony of Louis Michora, FMCS, Box 42, 83-109.
“want to have something to say about their own future instead of leaving it to their officers.”

The failed wildcat strikes, then, reflect the anger of workers at the packers, but also at the impotency of their organizations.

**Neighborhood Locals and the Problem of Race**

The organization of African American workers presented still another problem. Because many of the skilled stockyards locals were members of discriminatory international unions that excluded black members, the SLC considered it problematic to organize them into established neighborhood locals. Much like the AFL, the SLC came to a compromise. A neighborhood local known as Local 651 was established in the Black Belt with a “monster meeting” in late November 1917. In theory, Local 651 served the same purpose as the other neighborhood locals: it served a specific community and organized its membership accordingly. SLC officials initially maintained this impression, referring to Local 651 as a “miscellaneous” neighborhood local. In reality, of course, 651 was an all-black union. Because it was headquartered in the Black Belt, its “neighborhood” constituency was necessarily African American workers. For this reason, the union quickly became known as Colored Local 651. Though the SLC’s organization of black workers followed a similar structure to that employed by the AFL, its racial policies were far more progressive. As such, Colored Local 651 was not technically a segregated union—because of the SLC’s federated structure, stockyards workers were free to join any SLC local, and in so doing received membership in the Council as a whole. Given its racial progressivism and its

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34 Ibid.
structural flexibility, it is tempting to believe that the CFL had solved the problem that plagued the AFL—the organization of a racially and ethnically diverse group of unskilled workers into federated locals.

Unfortunately, CFL leadership was operating from a faulty premise. The ultimate failure of the neighborhood locals was due in part to a narrow-mindedness regarding the causes of, and solutions to, tensions between white and black workers. CFL leaders presented racial discord as essentially a material problem: employers had fomented racial conflict through differential wage scales, employment of black strikebreakers, and racially charged antiunion propaganda. The solution, clearly, was interracial union organizing. If black and white workers were organized together, the divisive tactics of employers would be neutralized and racial tension would naturally dissipate. The CFL’s campaign was thus presented not only as an effort to strengthen the labor movement, but also to uplift the city’s African American workers. Indeed, the unique challenges faced by black workers and the unique opportunities offered by federate unionism led the CFL to view itself as the best avenue toward economic and social equality for black Chicagoans. A resolution presented to the Illinois Federation of Labor (IFL) makes clear this belief: “the negro question can be better handled in the labor organization than without it…we believe that it is for the best interests of organized labor and the negro race that the negro be organized.” Indeed, CFL officials made clear that the abuses suffered by black workers would go on unabated unless they organized. “Of course the colored people are just as good as the white people,” another IFL resolution read. But “unless the trade unions help them they will not get fair play.”

Such rhetoric was often centered around the union’s idea that a shared experience of class would inevitably transcend differences of race. Since black and white workers were both exploited by employers, it was felt that union organizing would allow them to shed racial preconceptions and organize together. Fitzpatrick made this point most clearly in an early meeting with black stockyards workers. His appeal was simple: an interracial union would lead to interracial cooperation. Blacks, in other words, should join the union “to deal with the bosses as we do.” An editorial in the progressive black newspaper, the *Chicago Whip*, made the case for interracial unionism, noting that the SLC campaign was critical since “more of our group are employed in the Stock Yards than in any [other] industries.” More importantly, the editorial argued, “the Negro…has more in common with organized labor…than he does with capital.”

The CFL viewed racial discord as the result of material relationships at the workplace. As a result, it cast itself as the primary means toward equality and uplift for black workers, and interracial cooperation for all workers.

The intention of Colored Local 651 was not to marginalize black workers—quite the contrary, it was intended to function as a neighborhood local equivalent to those in white ethnic communities. It was thought that the creation of an all-black local would preserve community and racial ties; at the same time, the SLC’s federated structure would allow Colored Local 651 to bridge gaps between white and black workers and thus eliminate racial discrimination among union members. In essence, however, the union was presenting a class-based solution—union organizing—to a racial problem; where the AFL suffered from bigotry and white supremacy, the CFL suffered from mere narrow-mindedness. As such, the same community connections that provided the impetus behind the immigrant neighborhood locals left the all-black community

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local isolated and powerless. Its status as “the black local” only served to heighten African Americans’ suspicions that the CFL was not sincere in its dedication to interracial unionism. Ultimately, Colored Local 651 presented the same problems as the AFL’s all-black FLUs: namely, it proved largely impotent, and it tended to reinforce rather than reduce racial discrimination.

One primary shortcoming of Colored Local 651 was similar to that of the federal labor unions: black workers’ power and influence within the SLC was nowhere near that of whites. As contemporary observer Catherine Elizabeth Lewis stated, the “influence of Negroes on union policy was negligible at this time,” since they were newcomers both to unionism and to the industry (and often the city) itself. In a procedural complaint that speaks to the relative powerlessness of Colored Local 651, many black members claimed that the union’s claim of federated reciprocity—that membership in one local was as good as membership in the next—was a lie. A number of black workers complained that they were unable to use their union cards in shops outside the yards; that is, members of Local 651 who left the stockyards and sought employment in other butcher shops were not recognized as union members by external AMCBW locals. Members of the white neighborhood locals, meanwhile, could obtain employment at any union shop and be recognized as AMCBW members in good standing. In another case, a black CFL delegate and his constituency made accusations of the Federation in regards to a meeting in Washington. The president of a black stockyards local was unavailable for the meeting, so in his stead the CFL sent a United Mine Workers organizer named Joe Bell, who was assisting with the organization of the black stockyards workers, as a representative of the black workers. Though CFL leadership defended the decision as being purely one of convenience, the black workers
were incensed by the Federation’s apparent mistrust of its black members’ ability to represent themselves.\footnote{Lewis, 33; Foster, 210-212; CFL Minutes, 20 January 1918, 13-15; see also Letter, Cyrus Miller to Samuel Gompers, 20 January 1918, John Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 6, Folder 45, Chicago History Museum; Report of Delegate to Convention of the American Federation of Labor, CFL Minutes, 7 July 1918, 32-35; Cohen, \textit{Making a New Deal}, 45-46; Street, “Working in the Yards,” 260; Grossman, \textit{Land of Hope}, 219-220; Lewis, 26-33; Bigham, 48-49.}

As Clark put it, “there seemed to be little realization on the part of the officers” of the CFL that the incorporation of African Americans into the union’s structure could not be an organic process of acculturation, but must instead be triggered by the union itself. Without this realization, Colored Local 651, through no ill will or bigotry on the part of the CFL, increasingly resembled an AFL-style FLU: marginalized and powerless. Because of the federated structure of the SLC, its leaders could not compel individual unions to admit black members. Thus, while neighborhood locals were converted into AMCBW locals, or received new AMCBW charters, Colored Local 651 remained in an agonizing in-between state: affiliated with the SLC, but subject to \textit{de facto} segregation within it and lacking the power to affect change. Their grievances could not be handled by a local delegate, but had to be brought to the Council itself, where they were arbitrated by the leaders of the white locals.\footnote{Ibid.} Despite its promises of interracial cooperation, the structure of the CFL campaign held many of the same pitfalls as the AFL’s use of FLUs.

A larger problem was the resistance of black workers themselves to federated unionism. The CFL’s use of neighborhood locals was born out of the AFL tradition of federal labor unions. Similarly, black workers’ reticence in embracing the CFL’s structure was rooted in their ferocious resentment of the labor movement’s longstanding practices of discrimination and exclusion. The bankruptcy of FLUs, and the promise of interracial equality revealed by efforts of
progressive unions such as the CFL, resulted in a series of efforts by black workers to push for reform within the AFL. In 1919, a letter from a group of prominent black leaders, including National Urban League executive secretary Eugene Kinckle Jones and NAACP secretary John Shillady made a number of suggestions to AFL leadership. Among them were the creation of a special committee that would network with black community leadership, the hiring of black organizers, removal of the color bar in all affiliated unions, and the issuance of a statement in favor of interracial unionism by Gompers. Though the letter was read into the official program of the Federation’s convention, no substantive action was take; Gompers and AFL leaders maintained that their power was limited—that they could “only recommend” that international unions remove their color bars and organize black workers. A year later, a group of sixty black delegates attended the AFL convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. At least three of the delegates, representing Virginia and Alabama, attempted to propose a resolution condemning lynching and demanding the creation of an organizing committee for black workers. Another noted that it was “impossible for Colored Men to obtain a charter from the Metal Trades Headquarters of any craft,” and demanded that the AFL demand that “the colored brother [be] entitled to any charter according to his trade.” Both proposals were promptly voted down.  

The refusal of the AFL to consider such proposals resulted in a firestorm of criticism from African Americans. Black newspapers regularly railed against the exclusion of African Americans from white unions. Particularly galling was the labor movement’s condemnation of black scabs even as most unions denied entry to African Americans. Roscoe Simmons, a black Chicago politician and editor, anticipated the day when “labor unions will open their doors to

ALL men,” and “a scab will be a scab.” Simmons professed to be an “ardent believer in unionism,” but excoriated the AFL for its discriminatory policies, claiming that “a Colored man is not a scab, because so many union doors are closed against him.” In a sarcastic jab, he praised Samuel Gompers as “a great union leader; that is, if union labor doesn’t want THINKING leaders.”

Many black workers agreed. Chicago-area black newspapers were full of advertisements for the Railway Men’s International Benevolent Industrial Association, an all-black alternative to the infamously exclusionary railway trades. The black worker, the ads argued, must “be present, not only as a workingman, but also as a distinct Racial factor, since the conditions of employment on railroads are predicated largely on color rather than on fitness for the job and the citizens’ right to work.” Other black workers followed a similar tack. Members of the Hotel Alliance and Restaurant and Hotel Workers’ International union requested the affiliation of the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters with their union, and by extension, with the AFL. The offer was quickly shunned. “It was made clear,” the Whip reported, “that the purpose...was not to fight the idea of unionism represented by the American Federation of Labor.” Instead, it was a principled stand against the “keeping [of] colored men out of work in the skilled crafts” and the subsequent prevention of “the proper advancement of the race in educational and home life.” The porters declared “decisively and without contradiction that the A. F. of L. through the hotel workers' union or no other source had ever done anything for colored railway workers.”

41 Advertisement, Chicago Defender (21 June 1919); ibid., (27 September 1919), 3; ibid., (1 November 1919), 18; ibid., (11 September 1920), 6; see also “How Wage Award Affects Our Men,” Chicago Defender (24 July 1920), 12.
Such denunciations of Gompers and the AFL were common. In a letter to the Defender, a black undertaker named Daniel Jackson demanded to know “how labor unions ever expect to attain what they strike for if 10,000,000 men in this country are refused trades-union benefits.” Jackson wondered at the illogic of the AFL’s criticism of scabs, considering that many unions refused membership to blacks: “what a club in the capitalist hands would Negroes be to beat organized labor with!” The most impassioned such editorial was written by Robert Abbott. In a ferocious piece entitled “Come Now, Lord Gompers!” Abbott declared that the union button “marks the American white man [as a] freeman,” and as a result must be available to “the Race upon whose labor…civilization…was built and upon which it is now maintained!” Declaring that “there is no color line in the handiwork of labor, and there should be none in the councils of labor,” Abbott concluded that “whatever progress the Race has made in the world of labor in the free states has been in spite of and not because of the American Federation of Labor.” Abbott denounced the AFL for accepting “the foreign laborers…whose particular mark is their universal apprenticeship and their inability to speak the English language.” Until and unless the AFL “accepts and considers the Race man at least as much of a citizen and man” as immigrant workers, African Americans could not in good conscience support it.43

The AFL’s racial policies left many black workers suspicious of the motivations of organized labor. Despite its claims to interracial unity, such suspicions applied to the CFL as well. Black Chicagoans remembered all too well the “double-crossing” they had suffered during the waiters’ strike of 1903. Many black workers regarded the CFL with tremendous suspicion. CCRR interviews with several black workers reveal significant misgivings as to the CFL’s claims to

43 “ Undertaker Daniel Jackson…” Chicago Defender (26 November 1910), 1; “Come Now, Lord Gompers!” ibid. (23 February 1918); ibid., Box 6, Folder 45, Fitzpatrick Papers, CHM; see also Untitled editorial, Chicago Defender (19 February 1916), 8; “Gompers Addresses Longshoremen,” ibid., 1.
interracial equality. A foreman in a box factory claimed “unions ain’t no good for a colored man, I’ve seen too much of what they don’t do for him.” The man claimed he had worked at the stockyards, where he was recruited by the AMCBW, but said “I wouldn’t join for nothing.” Another man, who migrated to Chicago in 1894, lamented, “I wish it was so you could join a union regardless of your color.” Black workers, he claimed, “need protection on our jobs as well as the white man.” Nellie, a young woman who worked as a clerk for a major mail-order company, believed that “unions don’t mean anything to colored people,” and that unions that admitted black members only did so to prevent African Americans from scabbing.44

Black workers carried such feelings into the CFL campaign. In 1919, George Downing, a black Chicago butcher and a member of Colored Local 651, made an impassioned plea for racial equality to the convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor. In a resolution, he decried “the policy of some of our International and locals to discriminate against the colored brother” and urged the convention to “register [its] united protest against such actions.” During the ensuing discussion, a number of delegates raised the issue of strikebreaking and noted that black workers hurt their own cause by scabbing. Downing’s reply is an instructive reflection of the feelings of black workers toward white labor. “We, as a dark race of Americans, are getting tired of…that word ‘scab,’” he said. Black workers, he declared, were not “scabs by our own making, but we are scabs by your making.” Downing had been a member of various unions for more than two decades, and lamented that all of them “hand[ed] the capitalistic people a club to hit them on the head with.” With black workers excluded from many unions, and subject to prejudice and hatred in others, unionism itself was subject to failure. “You may fight Armour and all of them,” he declared, but “if you don’t tear down that part of your constitution that won’t let us in because

44 CCRR, 424-426; Grossman, Land of Hope, 217; see also Andrew Holmes, “Labor Organizer Says Race Must Spurn Charity,” Chicago Whip (14 February 1920), 1, 5; Tuttle, 108-156; Meyers, 500.
we are colored you will not only have to fight Armour…you will have to fight about nine million good workingmen.”

Robert Abbott had a similar problem with Chicago’s labor leaders. Following a meeting with the city’s union heads “to secure co-operation in the labor movement,” Abbott declared flatly, “the Chicago Defender is not a labor organ—it is a newspaper.” Abbott refused to endorse the CFL after its leaders “admitted that the big union organizations discriminated against our workers.” Fitzpatrick’s explanation for this disparity was rather unconvincing to Abbott: he claimed that the AFL, “lacking strong executive privileges, was powerless to punish or correct Jim Crow labor unions.” As a result, many of Chicago’s black workers held the same attitude as Abbott. Blacks would not support the CFL “as long as its house was dirty.” Abbott was not shy about expressing his criticisms of the CFL. “People who were born and raised in Chicago, who have never visited the intelligent cities of the East, call Chicago a civilized city,” he once wrote, arguing, “I don’t.” Abbott felt that “the weakest point” in the city’s “conflict between money men and union laborers in Chicago is that both parties are wrong, ignorant, stubborn and revengeful.” Labor in particular was “demoralized by its own weaknesses,” acceding to the demands of “the money man [who] says for spite that [he] will not employ a Negro.” Abbott concluded that if the CFL did not work to create a truly interracial union, Chicago labor would inevitably “go to ruin,” and “foreigners and Negroes will be obliged to keep from starvation by work of any kind because the white American boy of Chicago puts all his trust in Gompers.”

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45 IFL Proceedings (1919), 132-137.

46 “Labor Leaders Confer With Defender Editor,” Chicago Defender (12 November 1921), 3.

47 Untitled editorial, Chicago Defender (27 May 1911), 4.
The historical discrimination faced by black workers in organized labor made African Americans reticent to embrace the CFL campaign.

Indeed, the result of such history was a widespread suspicion that the CFL’s efforts to organize black workers for the sake of convenience, rather than a genuine spirit of racial cooperation. Black organizer Andrew Holmes noted this apparent “un-Belief in the sincerity of the White man’s invitation to come into Organized Labor.” Articles in the black press frequently expressed this suspicion. The Defender worried that the CFL campaign might suffer the same fate as “feeble efforts at organization in the past.” Because black workers “really do not know what they are to get from organized labor in the face of past injustices,” there was little reason for African Americans to believe that the CFL campaign would be different than previous efforts, all of which “miscarried…because our workmen were suspicious of the benefits of the unions as applied to them.” Foster lamented such feelings. “We found that we had tremendous opposition to encounter,” he later recalled. CFL organizers confronted an “attitude…that the colored man would not be allowed to join the unions at all.” Despite the best efforts of the union, Foster found that history ensured that such feelings persisted. “The colored man as a blood race has been oppressed for hundreds of years,” he said. “The white man has enslaved him,” and as a result black workers “don’t feel confidence in the trade unions.”

Such concerns were occasionally substantiated by unions themselves. In a series of lengthy pieces in the Chicago Whip, black SLC organizer Andrew Holmes attempted to explain why African Americans were leery of union organizers. Holmes excused the exclusionary policies of racially discriminatory AFL unions by claiming that such internationals “generally assume an

48 Andrew Holmes, “Why Colored Workers Are Generally Anti-Union,” Chicago Whip (28 February 1920), 1, 6; “Readjustment of Labor,” Chicago Defender (23 March 1918), 16; M.O. Bousfield, “Union Labor and the Race,” ibid. (4 May 1918), 16; Fogel, 31; CCRR, 404, 428-429; see also Smith, 31-32; Herbst, 60-61; Schneider, 27; Henri, 155; Tuttle, 145; Spero and Harris, 462; Foner, 127.
apologetic attitude rather than a boastful one for their narrow and backward stand.” As to the earnestness with which white unions sought to organize blacks, Holmes was blunt. “The white man’s invitation to colored workers is an experiment,” he argued, “and its sincerity will be commensurate with the success of the experiment.” The seemingly suspicious timing of the campaign was due to the forces of history: “the colored man is now…in a position to aid organized labor in its fight against the avaricious capitalists who have no regard for laws, customs, [or] traditions of humanity.” Black workers, in other words, were being offered a unique opportunity; whether it was enjoyed or squandered was entirely up to the black workers themselves. If they shunned the union, Holmes argued, African Americans would “feel…the power of organized labor turned against [them] in an effort once more to eliminate [them] from whatever sphere of industry” in which they might “endanger the working-man’s recognized standards of life.” In other words, black workers were compelled to accept the offer made by white unions, otherwise union members were justified in maintaining whatever prejudices they like. Such discrimination, “more harsh and rigorous…than ever before,” would be “a necessary measure” undertaken in “self-defense.” The black worker, he concluded, must get into the movement and become a potent factor ever ready to fight vigorously for the good of all the workers.” Only them “will he merit respect and recognition from others.”

Many black workers feared that unions were open to them only as a matter of convenience. Even when black workers could be persuaded that union membership was indeed earnestly open to them, their suspicions as to the motivations of white workers often lingered. African Americans were well aware of the deeply problematic racial policies of most craft unions. Moreover, black workers rarely progressed beyond the semiskilled level within the stockyards,

49 Andrew Holmes, “Why Colored Workers Are Generally Anti-Union,” Chicago Whip (28 February 1920), 1, 6; see also ibid., “Why Colored People Don't Organize,” (21 February 1920), 1, 6.
an injustice the union had done little to rectify. The racial animus of many rank-and-file whites toward black workers, too, made unions seem less than welcoming. African American workers found it difficult to reconcile such facts with the CFL’s racial policy. The Federation’s stated goal of interracial unionism was so out of step with the values of its peers that it appeared too good to be true. As the CCRR found, many black workers felt “that the unions, recognizing their importance to the accomplishment of union aims, are making appeals to them for membership, not out of a spirit of brotherhood, but merely to advance their own purposes.”

That unfortunate fact was borne out by constant accusations that Colored Local 651’s isolation only served to reinforce, rather than discourage, racial prejudice. Such accusations reflect a second major problem. Though CFL leaders were genuinely dedicated to interracial unionism, they shared the AFL’s narrow-mindedness. In the case of the SLC, they naively believed that the creation of an interracial union with a federated structure would eradicate racial prejudice among workers. Though the SLC could honestly claim that it was an unintended consequence of the neighborhood structure, the fact remained that Colored Local 651 was in essence a segregated union. Nevertheless, the SLC defended its structure. Foster argued that black workers preferred “their own local meeting with their own local officials in charge,” despite the lack of any official or unofficial statement of such belief by black workers themselves. Though black workers certainly appreciated the opportunity to lead a local union of their own, the fact that said union was isolated within the SLC made it seem like a familiar case of segregation.

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50 CCRR, 404, 421; Solomon, 45; see also Fogel, 31; Smith, 31-32; Herbst, 60-61; Schneider, 27; Henri, 155; Tuttle, 145; Spero and Harris, 462; Foner, 127.

Black workers bitterly resented the use of FLUs by the American Federation of Labor. To many African Americans, the very idea of segregated unions was anathema. Rather than being a gateway to industrial progress and interracial cooperation, FLUs were simply a way for the AFL to marginalize black workers while claiming a progressive racial policy. The Defender called separate unions “the spirit and the essence of Jim Crow,” and declared itself as being “resolutely opposed to its infamy in church and state, and...immovably pledged against it in the labor unions.” For Abbott and other blacks, segregated locals not only did not advance the progress of the race, they actively impeded it. As such, Abbott instructed his readers “to stand by every labor movement which tends to raise the standard of living wage,” but also cautioned them to be vigilant as to discrimination. “Be sure that you are treated as other workmen,” he wrote, “and if you find that you are to have a union all to yourself, just quit.” For black workers, the segregation of unions was an abrogation of the basic democratic principles upon which the United States—and unions in particular—were built. “Keep your eyes on the bull’s-eye of freedom,” the Defender argued. Blacks were “giving [their] life’s blood” for their nation during World War I, “not for a colored union, but for a mixed union, or a 50-50 break.”

The disgust with which many black workers regarded FLUs made the CFL’s choice to adopt a federated organizing structure risky and even dangerous.

Among black workers, reaction to the creation of Colored Local 651 was mixed. Though a number of African Americans joined the union (particularly during its most successful periods—the drive that accompanied the founding of the SLC, and the aftermath of the Alschuler award), many were angered by the fact that Colored Local 651 was essentially a segregated union. Foster

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52 “Labor Federation is Now Seeking Our Organization,” Chicago Defender (16 February 1918), 3; “Come Now, Lord Gompers!” ibid. (23 February 1918); ibid., Box 6, Folder 45, Fitzpatrick Papers, CHM; see also “Undertaker Daniel Jackson...” Chicago Defender (26 November 1910), 1; Untitled editorial, ibid. (19 February 1916), 8; “Gompers Addresses Longshoremen,” ibid., 1; Barrett, William Z. Foster, 80.
later remembered the difficulty that the SLC campaign encountered when organizing black workers. “The Jim Crow cry was raised that the whites wanted the blacks to herd by themselves,” Foster recalled. Indeed, the accusation that Colored Local 651 was a “Jim Crow local” became pervasive within the Black Belt. Foster noted that 651’s headquarters on State Street was the subject of derisive snickering among locals. “It was quite general along State Street that [Colored Local 651] was a ‘Jim Crow’ proposition,” he argued. Regardless of the CFL’s efforts to convince blacks of the sincerity of their interracial ideals, Foster recalled that “it made no difference…there was always an argument against it.”

Black workers’ bitter experience with FLUs rendered them distrustful of the CFL’s use of neighborhood locals—particularly when one such local consisted only of black members.

These suspicions are amply conveyed by the minutes of a Chicago Commission on Race Relations conference held in 1920. The conference, held between various members of the Commission, black community leaders, and local union officials, concerned “Trade Unions and the Negro Worker.” The Commission and black community leaders asked a series of questions of each union leader. The questions themselves are inflammatory, even accusatory, and highly reflective of the suspicions black workers held toward the CFL’s neighborhood locals. George W. Perkins, president of the Cigar Makers International Union, was asked about FLUs:

2. How many of the Internationals or Nationals bar the Negro by constitutional provision or in practice?
3. a. What is the purpose of a Federal or auxiliary union?
3. b. Are there not at present a large number of Federal and auxiliary unions?
3. c. Do you think organizing the Negro in these cases into Federal or auxiliary unions will really break down the bars in these National and International unions which exclude him? In what way?
3. d. Will the Negro obtain just as fair treatment in these Federal and auxiliary unions as the whites do in their own unions?”

The first question reveals the lingering resentment of racial exclusion in craft unions, but it is the other questions—particularly the latter two—that are even more revealing. The phrasing used, specifically the interrogation as to whether or not FLUs would “really” ameliorate racial discord among workers, reflects significant doubts regarding both the equity and the utility of FLUs. Another question, posited to Illinois Federation of Labor secretary-treasurer Victor Olander, undermined Foster’s claim that black workers desired to be organized into segregated all-black local unions: “Is there any basis for the statement that Negroes prefer their own separate locals?” Once more, the questioning revealed the narrowness of thinking that led to the creation of a segregated body in the first place, and implied that Foster’s justification was merely a retroactive rationalization of a decision made out of convenience.

John Fitzpatrick was similarly needled. The Commission stated that “there seems to be a common impression among colored people today that they cannot get a square deal from the unions,” a sentiment based primarily in the bitter legacy of the 1903 waiters strike. Though the Commission invited Fitzpatrick to defend the CFL from accusations that black waiters were “double-crossed,” it also noted “the fact that Negroes are not taken into the Waiters' union today” as a point that would “tend to confirm this impression” among black workers. Like Perkins, Fitzpatrick faced questions regarding the usefulness of neighborhood locals. Specifically, the Commission asked, “Is not local [C]olored #268, (Sleeping car porters and diners) a sort of ‘Jim-Crow' union, from the Negroes' point of view?” These questions reveal the cynicism with which Chicago’s community leaders, particularly African Americans, viewed the AFL’s use of FLUs, the CFL’s use of neighborhood locals, and the prospect of interracial unionizing more generally.

54 “Chicago Commission on Race Relations Conference on Trade Unions and the Negro Worker,” 16 August 1920, Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 25, CHM.
Even more revealing are the words of black union members themselves. The separation of white workers from black workers charged otherwise ordinary grievances and disputes with racial peril. As Lizabeth Cohen has pointed out, even when such conflicts lacked roots in ethnic or racial tension, “they were easily interpreted that way.” Many black workers accused the union of “Jim Crow unionism,” claiming that the CFL sought to preserve white trade unions above all else, and turned against the SLC altogether. At a July 1918 CFL meeting, black workers railed against the AFL’s refusal to grant separate charters to dozens of all-black unions, including brakemen, machinists, and laundry workers. The discussion became a general critique of segregated unionism. “The colored workers themselves are the first to object to Jim Crow organizations,” one delegate argued. “They insist, and rightfully so, that if they are to come into the trade union movement they should come into it upon the basis of equality,” and not through segregated locals.55

Black workers repeatedly and stridently criticized the structure of the CFL and its campaign as inimical to the organization of African Americans, let alone the construction of interracial unity. At another CFL meeting, a black delegate named Sims, who was organizing an all-black local of waiters and bartenders claimed that “since their organization was chartered…they had met with considerable difficulty” in organizing and maintaining their local. With little monetary or moral support from the CFL, their local was forced to fend for itself against the predation of employers and the discrimination and hatred of their white coworkers. Sims declared that “this Federation of Labor was defeating the purpose of their efforts to organize the colored workers,” noting that white leaders had asked him to leave the organizing campaign. In response, the delegate offered a withering screed against the Stockyards Labor Council. The creation of

55 Report of Delegate to Convention of the American Federation of Labor, CFL Minutes, 7 July 1918, 32-35.
Colored Local 651, he declared was done only out of “a ghoulish desire for the income that the [AMCBW] International would get out of such a local organization.” If “the approval given [delegate] Sims’ remarks by [other]” serves as any evidence, black workers resented the existence of an all-black local as discriminatory and damaging both to the labor movement and to the CFL’s hopes for interracial cooperation.56

Another resolution provides similar insight. Introduced by a series of black locals, including Sleeping Car Porters, Railroad Coach and Car Cleaners, and Colored Local 651, condemned the use of FLUs, and segregated unions more generally. Federal charters were issued, the resolution claimed, only because “the potent body having jurisdiction over [the FLUs] are so blind to justice, and so imbued with that kind of spurious unionism which has retarded the American labor movement.” The black locals resolved that the CFL approve “this progressive move of these militant locals to enhance their power to combat the unscrupulous forces that would deny them life.” Taking aim at the CFL, the resolution concluded that the Federation must “suggest ways and means of intensifying the interest these workers are showing in the labor movement, to the end that they will be granted a status in the labor movement equal to any other group of wage earners.”57 Black workers were clearly aware of the limitations of a federated structure, particularly the ways in which it countervailed the CFL’s interracial ideals by to segregating white and black workers.

CFL leaders responded with resentment and fury of their own. In response to delegate Sims’s complaint, the meeting’s chairman claimed that if Sims “had come here as the direct agent of the packers…he could not have been of more service to them.” Sims himself was accused of being

56 CFL Minutes, 20 January 1918, 13-15; see also letter from Cyrus Miller to Samuel Gompers, 20 January 1918, Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 6, Folder 45, CHM.

57 Resolution No. 3, CFL Minutes, 1 February 1920, 13-14.
“the biggest obstacle in the way of the organization of the colored workers in the Yards,” and that his “policy was to rule or ruin an organization.” Regardless of the veracity of such claims, CFL leadership’s resultant attacks on black workers are more telling. A teamster argued that the CFL “had endeavored to get the colored workers in the Yards here to become a part of the labor movement but that they had not taken advantage of the opportunity offered them.” Meanwhile, he claimed, in other meatpacking centers—Denver, Omaha, Kansas City—“the colored workers belonged to the established unions and were wearing their union button.” Sims attempted a rebuttal, but the chair refused his appeal and denied him the floor for the remainder of the meeting. The CFL minutes report that he was later removed from office. Though it is eminently possible that Sims was indeed a bad leader who did not have the best interests of his constituency at heart, his criticisms reflect the very real concerns of black workers that the CFL’s use of neighborhood organizations did not match its stated commitment to truly interracial organizing. Similarly, the quickness with which CFL officials blamed blacks themselves for failing to join the union reveals a basic misapprehension of the potentially divisive nature of neighborhood locals.

Indeed, such comments were commonplace at CFL meetings. During a discussion of an organizing campaign among waiters, several delegates made pointed note of the hotel industry’s strategy of employing “alien enemies” at low wages to help break the campaign. A delegate from Colored Local 651, sensing that the waiters’ prejudices might be sabotaging their efforts, meekly asked as to whether or not any of their organizations discriminated against African Americans. Various white CFL members leapt to the defense of the union, noting that “it has been explained to the colored workers [that they] might improve their conditions by joining the union,” but that

58 Ibid.
they black workers allowed themselves to be “used by the employers against the organized workmen.” In a far harsher rebuke, CFL secretary Ed Nockels—in what appeared to be a direct shot at the concerns of Colored Local 651—“called attention to the Stock Yards where every effort has been made to organize the negroes and show them that their only hope of emancipation is to join the labor movement and they have not responded.” Evincing a failure to grasp the problems of neighborhood locals, Nockels noted that “only 2,500 of the 12,000 in the Stock Yards belong to the organization and it cannot be said that they have been discriminated against in any manner.” The fault for this state of affairs, CFL leaders concluded, fell on both black workers themselves and on black “preachers and politicians,” as well as the packers, “who have used the Y.M.C.A. to influence them.”

59 Black workers’ complaints and concerns regarding the CFL’s commitment to equality were met with vociferous defenses of the Federation as well as denunciations of African Americans’ reticence to join it.

Though the CFL did not make use of federal labor unions, its federated structure owed much to the policies of the AFL. Like the national Federation, the CFL organized unskilled workers into large unions under the aegis of a single coordinating body—in this case, the SLC. However, the CFL saw another advantage of the FLU strategy. Rather than tying individual locals to craft or industry, the CFL tied them to neighborhood, allowing the union to strengthen ethnic and community ties and reinforce the power and influence of the union. Unfortunately, the CFL’s use of a federated structure had several drawbacks. For one thing, it shifted the center of union power from the shopfloor to the neighborhood—a fact exacerbated by the CFL’s reliance on Judge Alschuler to arbitrate disputes. A counteroffensive by the packers, and a series of failed wildcat

59 CFL Minutes, 5 January 1919, 13-14.
strikes in response, reveal the anger of rank-and-file union members at both the brazenness of their employers and the powerlessness of their union.

Race was another major pitfall encountered by the federated unions. The CFL proceeded from the faulty assumption that interracial federated unionism was a panacea for racial tension. On the contrary, if anything the use of neighborhood locals limited the power of African Americans within the union and led to resentment against the CFL. The use of neighborhood locals in the black community resulted in the creation of a de facto segregated local. The isolation and relative powerlessness of this local mirrored that of the FLUs employed by the AFL. Like FLUs, the creation of Colored Local 651 seemed to reinforce rather than break down racial prejudice. Black workers in particular felt perturbed by the union’s apparent dedication to trade union principles above interracial solidarity.

**Conclusion**

The CFL’s efforts to build a diverse, interracial union were complicated by factors within the organization itself. The history of interracial unionizing was fraught with the problematic efforts of the AFL, which used federal labor unions to organize black workers. FLUs, however, came with a price: they were largely powerless within the larger structure of the AFL, and they tended to reinforce segregation rather than undermine it. Despite its decidedly more progressive policy regarding race, the CFL suffered similar pitfalls. CFL leaders took their cues from FLUs, particularly in their organization of “neighborhood locals” centered around the community. Like the AFL, the CFL confronted the shortcomings of federated organizing. Neighborhood locals not only exerted little power within the CFL, resulting in resentment and rebellion from the rank-and-file, they also tended to reinforce existing patterns of racial segregation. As a result, African
Americans resented the federated structure and questioned the legitimacy of the CFL’s dedication to interracial unionism.

The most critical error made by the CFL was its view of union organizing as a means of eliminating racial conflict. White unionists viewed racial discord as a class problem—an issue of employment and wages and conditions. If these inequalities were leveled, racial prejudice would be eradicated. Such an idea was dangerously naïve. This was reflected in the union’s problematic structure—though nominally the same as white locals, Colored Local 651 was composed only of black members and had lesser power within the SLC. The CFL, then, had greatly misapprehended the fact that black workers would not respond favorably to what was essentially a purely class-based appeal. This was particularly true within the context of a union whose structure resulted in segregated and marginalized black locals. In addition, as the next chapter will show, the enduring mutual distrust between white and black rank-and-file workers only emphasized the shortcomings of the CFL approach and widened the gap between the races.
Chapter 4: “The Gang Stopped Itself”: White and Black Workers and the Challenge of Interracial Unionism, 1916-1921

The CFL’s use of a federated structure provided a major impediment to the organizing of African American workers. But the problems of the Federation ran deeper than the construction of the union. The racial divisions that divided white and black workers were rooted in conflicts among the union’s rank and file. Traditional white attitudes regarding African Americans, particularly in regard to work and union membership, resulted in discrimination among white unionists. The so-called “specter of the black strikebreaker” lingered in the minds of white workers. With the CFL’s federated structure serving to marginalize black workers, whites were free to indulge their prejudices. Despite the efforts of Foster and Fitzpatrick to improve race relations in the stockyards, many white unionists derided African Americans as a “scab race.”

The racial enmity that had animated previous strikes returned to the shopfloor, as an array of stereotypes caused blue-collar whites to resent black workers as degenerate invaders, an immoral “scourge” upon the city. White workers derided blacks as slipshod workers unfit for union membership, heightening tensions between the races and undermining the CFL’s efforts to create an interracial union.

Such divisions were only deepened by the actions of employers, who breathed life into the specter and made white perceptions both tangible and destructive. Sensing an opportunity to divide the CFL, packing bosses spread antiunion propaganda among African Americans, both in the stockyards and among the black community. The antiunion, pro-employer stance of many middle-class black community leaders seemed to vindicate blue-collar whites in their feeling that blacks were a “scab race” seeking to destroy unionism altogether. The packers made extensive use of nonunion black labor, hoping not only to undermine the union but to ignite racial conflict.
as well. The hiring by the packers of black scabs, including a number of antiunion “agitators” only augmented this perception and complicated the CFL’s efforts to recruit black workers.

Ultimately, such divisions erupted into workplace violence. The success of the packers’ strategy, particularly in the context of a series of violent racial confrontations at the workplace, was a testimony to the CFL’s failure to effectively recruit black workers. Conflict between white and black workers in the context of CFL drives grew increasingly bloody. Events beyond Chicago also heightened white fears that black workers were seeking to destroy unionism. The bloody race riot that struck East St. Louis in 1917—though it was a massacre directed against the city’s black population—was blamed on the presence of black strikebreakers. Such events seemed to reinforce the idea of blacks as not only non-union, but actively and violently anti-union. Despite these admonitions of black workers, CFL members and leaders also critiqued black workers for failing to join the union in sufficient numbers, creating a loop of prejudice: African Americans were derided by union members, then derided further for not joining the union. As a result, black workers, alienated by white intolerance, turned away from the union’s class-based organizing and toward racial organizations—a phenomenon typified by the Labor Party’s utter inability to recruit black voters in significant numbers. With rank-and-file workers battling one another on the shopfloor, the CFL faced yet another blow to its efforts to organize an interracial union.

White Workers and the Specter of the Black Strikebreaker

The organizing of black and white workers was made more difficult by the resentment and racism of rank-and-file white workers, whose bitter racial ideologies had been ossified by the
defeats of the past. In this way, the naiveté of the CFL was revealed once more. The union had attempted to seek an economic solution to a racial problem; CFL leaders felt that the creation of a progressive interracial union would eliminate racial tensions between workers. Unfortunately, such discord was not based purely in material conditions, but in historical memory and informal relationships. For many white workers, blacks represented the specter of strikebreaking, making them anathema to unionism. Anti-black fears were only augmented by the arrival of thousands of blacks into northern cities and accompanying concerns over housing, education, and public welfare. The bigotry of whites became manifested at the workplace, where black workers were resented as slipshod workers immune to the union appeal. Together, this tangle of prejudices attitudes made the construction of an interracial labor movement even more difficult and left the CFL open to a determined counteroffensive by employers.

The CFL’s ideals of interracial cooperation were not always shared by white workers. Many of these prejudices were based around what Eric Arnesen has dubbed “the specter of the black strikebreaker,” a pathological array of racial ideas regarding black nonunion labor as “alternately…ignorant and aggressive, manipulated and defiant, docile and violent.” In actuality, black scabs represented but a fraction of strikebreakers—as Arnesen notes, “white native-born and immigrant workers constituted a clear majority”—but African Americans’ racial identity charged strikebreaking with volatile prejudice. As Jonathan Coit has argued, belief in blacks as a “scab race” was the result of “a process of signification rather than…a direct (or mediated) outcome of a material conflict.” White workers’ view of black labor rested on an assumption that African American workers were “mere objects of capital.” Black workers were thus despised not only because they were perceived as job thieves, but because they were associated with a broad

1 See Chapter 1.
array of pathologies that made them unfit for inclusion in visions of independent white manhood.² These rank-and-file attitudes and their roots are crucial to an understanding of racism within the CFL and mirror the union’s difficulties in building interracial unionism. The CFL sought to construct a new unionism, only to find itself limited by existing structures of organization.

In the same way, the union sought to transform traditional white ideas about interracial organizing, but found those ideas extremely difficult to eradicate. It is critical, then, not to follow the lead of many white workers and “blame” African Americans for not joining unions in larger numbers; nor can one reduce racial relations to material ones and assume that a higher proportion of black union membership would have magically resolved extant racial difficulties. Prejudices were, and are, not merely a result of concrete economic and social interactions, but are also the product of constructed and signified relationships. As a result, the most enduring and dangerous bigotry confronted by the CFL resulted not from black strikebreaking, but the specter of black strikebreaking; not from the black community’s opposition to unionism, but fears regarding the implications of such opposition; not from racial violence, but terror regarding the possibility of its spread. Such ideologies both stymied the CFL’s attempts to create an interracial union and resulted in whites “hanging the charge, like a proverbial lynching rope, around the neck of the [black] race.”³

Black workers’ presence in the city gave rise to a tangled set of racial ideologies. None was more potent than the myth of the black strikebreaker. The violent, brutal defeats suffered by Chicago unions in the early twentieth century made remained fixed firmly in the minds of white

² Arnesen, “Specter”; Coit, 65-68; 82-84.
union workers. Despite the fact that the majority of strikebreakers deployed in such conflicts were native-born or immigrant whites, it was black workers who were most bitterly remembered as a “scab race.” Such distorted memories made white union workers wary, even resentful, of the presence of any African Americans among their workforce. As the Chicago Commission on Race Relations argued, the historical role of blacks as strikebreakers “center[ed] upon them as a racial group all the bitterness which the unionist feels toward strike breakers as a class.” Indeed, the use of black strikebreakers often conflated class and racial anger among white unionists.

Sterling Spero and Abram Harris summed up the situation thusly: because “the Negro always stands out in the crowd…the presence of a dozen black men in a force of strike breakers appears to the strikers like a hundred.” African Americans’ role as strikebreakers confirmed existing suspicions that black workers were tools of capital who could be easily duped into undermining unionism. During a 1916 waiters strike in Hammond, Indiana, organizers complained that “Negro strike breakers have been imported from the ‘black belt’ of Chicago to take the places of the employees on strike.” The scabs, in the waiters’ opinion, were but “poor black people” who were “led to believe that no strike or labor trouble existed and are kept in darkness as to the real facts in the matter.”

Such attitudes toward strikebreakers were relatively common. As James Barrett and David Roediger have argued, in “teaching Americanism, the labor movement also taught whiteness” through the promulgation of intricate and spurious associations of race, strikebreaking, and lack

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4 CCRR, 394, 403-404; “Kavanough Lies Exposed,” broadside from Joint Organization Committee, 11 August 1916, John Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 4, Folder 35, Chicago History Museum; Spero and Harris, 128-132; Schneirov. 188; Henri, 150; Zieger, 83.
of manly pride.” In an editorial whose basic content was repeated dozens of times in labor newspapers, a *Butcher Workman* writer summed up the situation of the black strikebreaker:

The pay is less than was agreed…and he soon learns that he has been made a victim of deception, but the show that is made by having the colored man on the ground has been the undoing of the foreign workman, who has struck for an improved condition, and the strikers go back to work, and the employer's object has been accomplished. Then the colored man is turned out upon the world to shift for himself, and in nine cases out of ten becomes a victim of the hospital and an object of charity, and the general public is contributing millions from year to year in support of these cases. When the colored man finds himself stranded in a strange country, with no home or friends, he becomes an easy prey to the sharks in all walks of life and compelled to accept any position or condition that will prevent starvation, and fall an easy victim to the political shark who uses him to stuff the ballot box at election time.

At a stroke, the *Butcher Workman* summed up an array of white attitudes toward nonunion African Americans. Blacks, ignorant of the work they would be asked to do, were brought to northern cities with the promise of a steady job, only to find they’d been duped into breaking a strike. With the strike defeated, blacks were immediately dismissed, leaving a legacy of hatred and resentment among white union workers. Devoid of the skills necessary to survive in the urban North, they quickly joined the public dole and became easy prey for the “sharks” of both the red-light district and City Hall.

The article reflects the pervasive idea of black workers as easily manipulated. More importantly, it defines white racism as the result of material economic conditions and the calculated attempts of packing bosses to divide the workforce. Such attitudes reveal the innate paternalism of the CFL’s vision. Interracial organizing, it was thought, would not only defeat capitalist schemes, but also protect blacks from their predisposition toward being manipulated and exploited and sinking into a life of degeneracy. As one union member testified, “the non

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5 Barrett and Roediger, 27.

union man...[is] so weak in mind that he doesn't have principle enough...to say, ‘I will join the butchers, and try to tear down this brutal way of living, and try to make an easier way of living for ourselves.’” A scab, he went on, simply “hasn't got the brains to think that way.” In short, white workers viewed African Americans as a naturally “servile race” that required the custody and care of union organizing to protect them from succumbing to the predation of employers and the temptations of the city. As William Tuttle concluded, white workers “thus conceived of the black person as either an unruly, unclean, contemptible creature...or as a meek, docile, nonresistant menial, or even combinations of the two.” Such prejudices regarding black morality made it extremely difficult for the CFL to convince white workers that interracial unionism could be a positive force. These paternalistic attitudes regarding the simple-mindedness of black workers revealed the limits of the CFL’s interracial vision and deeply complicated African Americans’ participation in unionism.

These fears were augmented by pervasive prejudices against the perceived immorality of African Americans, particularly southern migrants. As James Grossman has argued, many whites feared “that the thousands of victimized, rural, uneducated and racially inferior newcomers would have difficulty ‘adjusting’” to northern life, a fear augmented by the work of social scientists who questioned African Americans’ biological ability to be assimilated into “civilization.” As Khalil Gibran Muhammad has argued, northern cities “officially became the universally accepted proving ground of African American fitness for citizenship in modern

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7 Testimony of Frank Custer, “Violation of Agreement by Employes [sic],” Hearings before Judge Samuel Alschuler, 20 June 1919, Records of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, Record Group 280: Dispute Case Files, Box 42, 292; see also “Exploiting Negroes,” The Butcher Workman (July 1917); Proceedings of the 35th Annual Convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, 1917, 232; Schneirov. 188; Henri, 150; Zieger, 83; Spero and Harris, 128-132.

8 Tuttle, 106.
America.” Not surprisingly, blacks inevitably failed such tests of “fitness” in white eyes.⁹ Local newspapers reported that black migrants brought tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases with them to Chicago. As a result of “displaying a childlike helplessness in the matter of sanitation,” the migrants lived in “conditions…that threaten the health of the city.” Black newcomers were also portrayed as deviant and immoral. Whites were scandalized by reports of “six or eight” unmarried male and female migrants sleeping in the same room. Such reports conjured memories of the “degeneracy” of conditions within the stockyards, where black strikebreakers were lodged during the 1904 strike, and seemed to confirm whites’ opinion of blacks as unfit for city life.¹⁰

The public presence of the migrants served to enhance these feelings. With migrants crowding into the 2nd Ward, the Black Belt came to be seen as a haven for degeneracy, a diseased enclave that could threaten the moral life of the entire city. The press—including black newspapers invested in preserving the respectability of the city’s middle-class black community—criticized the “gambling of all kinds” that took place nightly along State Street. Whites complained that “nightly capers for dice, monte, and card games” represented a threat to the safety and morality of the city. One lamented that the impossibility of “keep[ing] a watchful eye over all who come within our gates,” and condemned black migrants for “disturbing their neighbors by pounding [on a] piano, dancing and singing far into the night…”[sitting] on their

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front porches half [naked], talking and laughing loud enough to be heard a block [away.]
Perceptions of black immorality and degeneracy only served to heighten tension between the
races.

Interactions between whites and blacks in public spaces became fraught with racial discord. Public transit in particular became the site of racial tension. Unlike white stockyards workers whose homes in Packingtown were within walking distance of their work, African Americans generally took elevated trains to the stockyards. Many of these workers were migrants, unaccustomed to industrial work and the niceties expected of them. The “deportment in public places and on common carriers” of this “lowest strata of society” was deemed “deplorable.” Men returning from work regularly used “loud, vile language that was disgusting and embarrassing to any reasonable person.” That such words were uttered in a public car filled with women (including white women) made the behavior all the more deviant. The Defender condemned such actions as “humiliate[ing]” to “others of the Race who are decent and respectable.” Whites regularly complained to city transit authorities, resulting in a commissioned report about the use of public transit by whites and blacks. White office workers in particular “objected to riding with stockyards laborers, mainly Negroes.” They recalled with fondness the prewar era, in which “the great majority of Negroes…were engaged in some form of personal service which did not require use of transportation lines.” By contrast, the migrants who worked in the stockyards were “rough-mannered and entirely unfamiliar with standards of conduct in northern cities.” Loud talking and laughter, vile language, and lounging in all areas of the car were cited as common complaints. Black stockyards workers were also castigated for neglecting to change clothes before leaving the yards. The Defender informed migrants that “it is not the custom in Chicago

for people to wear overalls…in places such as ice cream parlors, dance halls and theaters.”
Passengers on elevated trains complained of the odor of the men’s filthy clothes, which further cemented ideas of black migrants as unclean and degenerate. The CFL’s efforts to create an interracial union were intended to reduce such feelings of disgust, but by focusing on a purely class-based solution to racial animus, such a solution was difficult to achieve.

White fears of black migrants as deviant and immoral extended into attitudes about work. CFL leaders recognized that black migrant workers “represented the balance of power” in the city’s workforce. This was particularly true in the case of the stockyards, where northern-born blacks supported the SLC campaign at roughly the same rate as whites. It is estimated that more than 80% of northern-born black workers were members of the SLC. But white workers recognized that northern-born African Americans were both experienced in industrial work and familiar with the idea of unionization, if not its specifics. Southern migrants, on the other hand, had little to no experience with unions. Most of them traveled to Chicago from the rural South, and had lived their lives as farmhands. Those few who came from industrial cities—the steel center of Birmingham, Alabama, for example—had an overwhelmingly negative impression of unions. In the South, trade unions were even more discriminatory and exclusionary than elsewhere; to black southerners, unions represented nothing more than a system by which whites retained the highest-paying jobs at the expense of blacks. Such stories made their way through the black community. As James Grossman has noted, “the overwhelming majority of migrants” learned of organized labor “through general accounts of how unions kept the black man down.”

The CCRR interviewed a black paper worker called who traveled to the city from Georgia in

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1919. “Unions would be all right, in his opinion, if they let all of the men in who would do right, but when they don't, they do more harm than good.”

These attitudes served to reinforce white prejudices against blacks. Viewing them as victims of what William Tuttle has called a “rural psychology,” whites feared blacks as slipshod workers who had no conception of fair wages, class solidarity, or the principles of labor organizing. African Americans were thus feared as an invading army of low-cost workers immune to the union appeal. The Defender attacked many of the migrants hired by the stockyards as “shiftless” and “no-account,” men who “work three days a week and lay off” the rest. The migrant “newcomers” needed to learn “that in this section of the country three things go to hold a job, thoroughness, promptness and steadiness.” A survey by the CCRR found similar complaints among whites, who resented black coworkers as “irresponsible and shiftless.” The manager of a millinery house claimed that “our white people resented very much the fact of employing colored people in our business.” So great was the fear of blacks’ shoddy work and low wages that the manager “couldn’t overcome the prejudice enough to bring the people in the same building, and had to engage outside quarters for the blacks.”

White fears of black immorality and degeneracy were generalized into prejudices regarding African American work habits, further dividing white and black workers from one another.

The specter of the black strikebreaker proved to be the most durable and lasting of a tangle of prejudices held by white workers against blacks. Believing that black workers were a degenerate “scourge” upon the city of Chicago who brought with them disease and filth, white workers were skeptical of blacks’ place within the labor movement. Accordingly, their ideas about black

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unfitness for union membership extended into the workplace, where black workers were
criticized as lazy and undedicated. This tangle of prejudices would soon prove to be a major
boon for employers, and extraordinarily destructive to the CFL’s efforts to organize an interracial
unionism.

The Specter Made Flesh: Chicago Employers and Black Workers

Chicago employers eagerly sought to take advantage of these divisions between white and
black workers. Packing bosses in particular made great efforts to spread antiunion propaganda
among black workers. More importantly, employers sought to become an active part of the black
community, funneling money to organizations like the Wabash Avenue YMCA and the Chicago
Urban League in an effort to counteract the CFL’s use of neighborhood-based unionism. The
packers also succeeded in allying themselves with middle-class leaders, who spread an antiunion
message among the African American community. Such tactics infuriated union leaders, who
bitterly and publicly excoriated black leaders, widening the gap between white and black.
Delighted to see their plan working, the packers hired large numbers of nonunion African
Americans, including antiunion “agitators,” to intimidate SLC members and retake control of the
yards. These events, particularly the packers’ apparent alliance with African Americans, served
to confirm white prejudices and breathe life into the specter of the black strikebreaker, making
interracial unionism more difficult to sustain.

The packers did not just employ black workers as chess pieces to use against the union.
Bosses also actively sought to drive African Americans away from union membership. Once
hired, a CFL delegate claimed, the packers made every effort “to prevent the organization of the
colored workers.” To that end, “all kinds of propaganda was being distributed among them and
every conceivable method used to keep them out of the labor movement.”15 Indeed, the packers engaged in a wide variety of activities intended to win the fealty of black workers. Black workers were disproportionately hired in the killing rooms—the most powerful departments in the packinghouses. Though most black workers remained unskilled “common laborers,” the packers made sure that a suitably strategic number were promoted to skilled knife tasks. Breaking the hold of whiteness on the so-called “butcher aristocracy” reinforced white workers’ view that blacks were allied with bosses. The packers creation of what Paul Street has dubbed “a large-scale, strategic, and paternalized black presence” on the shopfloor helped bring that alliance to life.16

Such efforts to win the loyalty of African Americans extended outside the workplace as well. Packing bosses engaged in a wide variety of activities intended to make themselves—and not the CFL—a central part of black community life. Black SLC organizer Andrew Holmes noted that “many of the race's educational institutions were donated, and often times supported and maintained by capitalists,” and that black union membership could easily “be interpreted as ungratefulness to benefactors.” In Chicago, those benefactors were particularly active in allying themselves with the black community. CFL leaders regularly blamed “welfare clubs, company Y.M.C.A.’s, glee clubs, and athletic clubs” as being “supported by employers as a substitute for a form of organization which they cannot control,” and lamented “the subsidizing of [black] social movements and churches” as “one of the means employed by large employers to insure [a] reserve of strikebreakers.”17 The packers’ use of two major social organizations—the Wabash

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15 CFL Minutes, 21 October 1917, 22; Coit, 77.
17 Andrew Holmes, “Labor Organizer Says Race Must Spurn Charity,” Chicago Whip (14 February 1920), 1, 5;
Avenue YMCA and the Chicago Urban League—reflect the degree to which the packers sought to burrow into the life of the black community.

The Wabash Avenue YMCA was a major hub of social activity within the Black Belt. Sensing an opportunity, the packers flooded funding into the organization once African Americans became a major part of their workforce. By the end of World War I, the organization was, for all intents and purposes, a social arm of the packers. Armour, for example, offered black employees (and only black employees) free membership to the organization after a year of employment. At the club, workers could enjoy their free membership by joining the Efficiency Club Program, where they could learn butchering skills and time management techniques—and be fed antiunion propaganda. The packers also sponsored glee clubs and baseball teams—always with the company name front and center, of course. Wilson funded an organization known as the Wilson Club, which met at the YMCA. Black SLC activist Frank Custer reported that the club was misrepresented among black workers as an all-black union and an alternative to the SLC. In reality, however, “all the men that belong to this club…try to undermine the other men of their job.” SLC official J.W. Johnstone claimed that the club was nothing more than “a combination of non union colored men, where they are lectured and taught that the thing they have to do is to keep out of organized labor,” while Custer complained that superintendents regularly walked among black workers on the shopfloor and pressured them into joining. Once they were members, black workers were charged with distributing antiunion literature and with monitoring the activities of SLC members and reporting their findings to bosses, who could use the information to discharge union activists. These members could serve as “a reliable and fertile…leadership cadre” of antiunion activity within the black community, in James CCRR, 427; Street, “Working in the Yards,” 10.
Grossman’s words. Such tactics not only fostered black fealty to the packers, but also confirmed white suspicions regarding black labor and increased racial discord at the workplace.

The case of the Chicago Urban League is more complex. For much of the wartime period, the League’s activities consisted mainly of securing employment for black migrants. At this task, the League was largely successful; in the span of twelve months spanning late 1917 and much of 1918, the League found jobs for nearly 7,000 black Chicagoans. The League’s best interests were served by an avoidance of industrial conflict altogether. As a result, the League often attempted to stand “between capital and labor, insisting that each should recognize and do its duty by the Negro” and claimed that it “would welcome any effort tending to an amicable settlement of this vital problem.” The League held regular conferences with the CFL and Illinois Federation of Labor, as well as the Women’s Trade Union League.

That middle course, unfortunately, proved unsustainable. The League simply could not afford the bad publicity of entanglements with militant labor unions. Employers already “claimed to fear financial loss from inefficient [black] labor,” in the words of historian Arvarh Strickland. To succeed, the League already needed to convince the employer “that it was to his advantage to use Negro labor.” An alliance with unions would make such an argument impossible to sustain. Moreover, as historian Preston Howard Smith has noted, the League was forced to contend with threats to its own respectability. The League held a “negative stance toward any mass movement politics,” preferring that African Americans “channel…their discontent into manageable and respectable” avenues. As the SLC campaign grew more powerful and contention, the League

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18 CFL Minutes, 21 October 1917, 22; Testimony of Frank Custer, FMCS, Box 42, 267-269; Testimony of C.M. Smith, ibid., 508-510; Testimony of Frank Smith, ibid., 545; Grossman, Land of Hope, 200, 228; Cohen, Making a New Deal, 45; Spero and Harris, 268; Street, “Working in the Yards,” 295-296; Coit, 77.

began to extricate itself from the conflict altogether, preferring to resolve industrial disputes not through labor-management battles but through the intervention of the League’s social workers.\(^{20}\)

The packers also forced the League’s hand. By the middle of World War I, the packers had become a major benefactor. For packing bosses, the League served not only as an easy way to procure black labor—and thus reduce labor costs and union activity—but also as “a conservative stabilizing force in the colored community,” in the words of Spero and Harris. In 1917, for example—seeking to counter the community recruiting of Colored Local 651—the packers established the Stockyards Community Clearing House. A philanthropic organization with a heavy focus on the African American community, the Clearing House quickly became the second-largest single donor to the Chicago Urban League. The effect was nearly immediate. In that year’s annual report, the League announced that “efforts will be made to form a closer relation between the League and corporations employing large numbers of Negroes.” No longer “standing between capital and labor,” the League now sought only “to relate the interests of the employer and employe so that mutual benefit will result.” By 1919, donations from Chicago’s packinghouses were responsible for 20% of the League’s total budget, destroying once and for all any connection between the League and the CFL. In 1921, the League willingly supplied the packers with strikebreakers during a meatpacking walkout.\(^{21}\) Packing bosses’ involvement in black institutions helped them cement a link between themselves and Chicago’s African American community, while simultaneously undermining the possibility of interracial unionism.

Black workers were not drones manipulated by the packers for their own purposes. They, and the black community as a whole, made considered choices regarding their allegiances. Paul

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\(^{20}\) Strickland, 47-50; Smith, 2-3.

Street has examined the “logic of plant loyalty,” which he claims arose from multiple sources. It was not a “simple, undiluted expression of docile Black paternalism,” but rather centered on “a realistic calculation of black self-interest.” Many black workers, as the CCRR found, felt simply that they had “more to gain through affiliation with…employers than by taking chances on what the unions [could] offer them.” African Americans often believed that employers, not unions, provided them the opportunity to enter Chicago’s industries. As a result, many blacks pledged their “first loyalty” to bosses rather than unions.\(^{22}\)

Black community leaders’ rejection of unionism led many white unionists to resent the black community at large and deepened suspicions that African Americans naturally tended to ally themselves with capital—a particularly virulent prejudice that gave lie to the CFL’s claims that an interracial union could ameliorate racial tension. The opposition of the black middle class was not universal. Reverend Lacey K. Williams of Olivet Baptist Church embraced unionism, though he was a dedicated antiradical. For all his bluster, Robert Abbott of the *Defender* supported those unions that opened their ranks to African Americans, while the progressive *Chicago Whip* carried a regular column from black AFL organizer John Riley. But for the most part, black leaders—aldermen, social workers, and, especially, ministers—tended to side with influential African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Archibald J. Carey in his opinion that “the interest of my people lies with the wealth of the nation and with the class of white people who control it.”\(^{23}\) Employers, in other words, had given blacks their first opportunity in industry, and were thus owed the loyalty of African American workers.

\(^{22}\) Street, “Working in the Yards,” 327-328; ibid., “Plant Loyalty,” 667; CCRR, 404, 421.

Labor leaders frequently derided middle-class African Americans for their refusal to support unionism. Foster lamented the “large and influential black leadership, including ministers, politicians, editors, doctors, lawyers, social workers, etc., who as a matter of race tactics are violently opposed to their people going into the trade unions.” He recalled that during the SLC campaign, “no sooner had organizers begun the work than they met the firm opposition of the negro intelligenza [sic].” These “misguided intellectuals” suggested that African Americans’ “interest[s] lay in working with the packers to defeat the unions” and thus sought “to make a professional strike-breaker” of the black worker. Though he recognized that African Americans felt themselves in the middle of a constant “race war,” he castigated middle-class leaders for allowing “pernicious anti-union policies” to become “so deeply rooted among their people.” Andrew Holmes made a similar argument, claiming that the “duplicity of self-styled Race Leaders” was a major factor in black workers’ reluctance to join the SLC.  

Many union workers felt that black community leaders were engaged in an active campaign to destroy white unionism. In a resolution protesting black strikebreakers, the waiters union resented “the fact that Southern Negroes, Mexicans, peons and women are being imported and procured to take our jobs for less wages,” and called such actions “cause and reason to band us together in our common cause.” The implication was clear: nonwhite and female workers were not part of the waiters’ “common cause,” and were just as destructive and reviled an opponent as employers themselves. Much of this hostility found its root in the fact that “many race leaders condone, if they do not actually urge, strike breaking as a method of gaining entrance into industry.” Indeed, a waiters union delegate complained of the ease with which employers could summon strikebreakers from local black community organizations, particularly the YMCA and

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24 Foster, 210-212; Andrew Holmes, “Labor Organizer Says Race Must Spurn Charity,” Chicago Whip (14 February 1920), 1, 5.
YWCA. Black community leaders, many of whom genuinely were allied with the packers, supported such institutions. “The politicians and colored ministers of the churches in the black belt” were “supported by the big business interests” and were “a great factor in keeping the colored workers in submission and restraining them from joining the trade union movement with their fellow workers.”25

A discussion of the stockyards campaign at the 1917 convention of the Illinois Federation of labor was filled with similar laments. President John Walker noted that “there was considerable proof from colored men that circulars had been sent out to try and poison their minds against the trade union movement.” Such propaganda was written by the packers, but circulated by “some few mountebanks of colored men” who “pose as saviors of the colored race” yet “poison…the minds of their own people against the labor movement, and [make] it impossible for them to get together and work for their mutual protection.” The leaders of the black community, Walker concluded, were merely “living off the colored race at the expense of the colored race” and represented the worst “of all the enemies of” African Americans. Another resolution claimed that the CFL, “in its great work, has not been able to make much headway in the black belt, and the reasons are that the colored leaders are…preventing them.”26 Interracial organizing was deeply affected by white workers’ resentments of black workers as both the tools and allies of capital.

More sinister was the feeling that black workers were engaged in an open alliance with capital. Rather than see black workers as largely innocent dupes who were the victims of unscrupulous employers, whites viewed many black workers as partners in capital’s mission of

25 CFL Minutes, 20 January 1918, 9-10; CFL Minutes, 4 December 1921, 13; Schneirov. 188; Henri, 150; Zieger, 83; Spero and Harris, 128-132.

undermining unionism. Such attitudes were most often expressed in response to the
“importation” of black workers by white businesses. A March 1917 article in the Chicago
Tribune claimed that African Americans were arriving in the city by the hundreds each day.
White workers ferociously resented the arrival of “half a million colored laborers” who were
“taken from all walks of life, with no knowledge of…[northern] industry.” Such anger was
particularly directed at “labor agencies, stockyards interests, and Chicago Negroes” that were
“responsible for the flow of southern colored men to Chicago.” Particularly galling to the union
was the stockyards’ call for “10,000 to 14,000 men” to fill the labor shortage created by World
War I—thus undermining one of the union’s main weapons in its battle against the packers. Even
worse was bosses’ subsequent claim “to guarantee food and lodging for one week to southern
Negroes,” which conjured memories of the 1904 stockyards strike. In the minds of unionists,
such “importations” only served to undermine the CFL’s organizing campaign and marked
blacks as coconspirators with capital. At the first sign of trouble, one union writer claimed, “the
employer immediately wires to his agents in the S
orth and they ship on carloads of colored men”
who “threatened” the city “in such numbers as to menace wage standards and union
organization.”27

The packers knew that such racial divisions represented perhaps the greatest weakness of the
SLC, and exploited it relentlessly. As James Barrett has argued, “whatever racial antagonism did
exist between whites and blacks was accentuated by a conscious corporate strategy to keep the

27 “2,000 Southern Negroes Arrive in Last 2 Days,” Chicago Daily Tribune (4 March 1917), 1; “Reasons Why Negro is Leaving South,” The Butcher Workman (July 1917); “Southern Negro in the Meat Industry,” ibid. (November
1916); see also Resolution No. 1, CFL Minutes, 19 August 1917, 6-8; CFL Minutes, 20 January 1918, 9-10;
“Railroads Bring Colored Men Here,” The New Majority (2 August 1919); W.A. Evans, “How to Keep Well: The
Negro in Industry,” Chicago Daily Tribune (28 September 1921), 8. James R. Grossman has argued that the
influence of labor agents and the “importation” of black workers have been overstated. Though he acknowledges
efforts by northern companies such as Morris and Armour to recruit black workers, he argues that migrants “made
careful decisions, based on a variety of sources” and “did not need labor agents to instill in them a desire to find a
two groups divided and hostile to each other.” Black workers provided the packers with a uniquely effective means for achieving discord within the workforce. The use of black workers preyed on whites’ tangle of prejudices regarding the morality of African Americans, their history as scabs, and the fitness of their work. Additionally, black employment afforded the packers an opportunity to engage an underemployed, largely nonunion group that could be used counterbalance organized white workers. Black workers were uniquely suited to this task in meatpacking in particular. The vast majority of the city’s African Americans were concentrated in the Black Belt, which lay just a mile east of the stockyards. Lacking employment opportunities elsewhere, blue-collar African Americans were drawn overwhelmingly to the city’s packinghouses. Moreover, as Paul Street has noted, black workers lacked access to the stockyards’ “informal, largely ethnic- and foreman-based hiring networks,” making them far more dependent on the largesse of high-level managers and employment agencies.\(^{28}\) Taken together, these factors made African Americans an appealing workforce to packing bosses.

Employers began to hire large numbers of black employees in order to foment racial discord. In this way, the packers hoped to reinforce the long-standing idea of blacks as a “scab race” that actively undermined both white and union privilege at the workplace. The testimony of worker Frank Custer is instructive. “It seems as though Wilson & Company has a batch of men they can ship any place they want to,” he claimed. Many unionists held similar suspicions that the packers held a captive labor force that they moved “from one packing house to another, in order to discriminate against the union man” and “break down the union power if they possibly can.”\(^{29}\) Evidence suggests that such efforts were highly coordinated. During the Alschuler hearings,

\(^{28}\) Barrett, *Work and Community*, 224; Street, “Plant Loyalty,” 664.

\(^{29}\) Barrett, *Work and Community*, 224; Herbst, 33-34; Testimony of Robert Bedford, FMCS, Box 42, 182-188; Testimony of Frank Custer, FMCS, Box 42, 260.
Frank Walsh interrogated Swift superintendent John O’Hern, who admitted that the company moved employees throughout the country when necessary. “We have moved employes [sic] from one plant to another…both [white] and black,” he acknowledged. Though O’Hern maintained such actions took place only “when we wanted them for [a] particular line of” specialized work, such as fertilizer shipping, such actions confirmed for unionists the packers’ deployment of a mobile force of nonunion labor to undermine organizing efforts. A letter from Louis F. Swift was far more damning. The letter explained the opening of a new employment bureau outside Swift’s plant in Denver. The goal of the bureau was simple: “we shall start at once to increase the percentage of colored help [in] the plant with the intention of getting it to 15% or higher as soon as we possibly can.”

For black workers, strikebreaking was often “their first opportunity to break into a new industry…and even if they earned less than the union scale, their new wages were often higher than they had earned before,” as Eric Arnesen has argued. The replacement workers were not only “imported” from other cities or plants; many were plucked directly from the Black Belt. A number of them were hired to take the place of a white employee discharged for union activity, and were fully aware of that fact. Despite the efforts of the union, black workers still suffered from the discrimination of their coworkers, and viewed scabbing as a way to enter the industry. As a result, they had little compunction about taking white jobs. The Defender summed up the attitudes of many black workers by recalling “the changing in hotels and restaurants from colored to white waiters.” At first, the exclusion of black workers “seemed a hardship and an injustice.” It quickly proved to be “a godsend,” however, as it “drove [black] men into higher

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30 Ibid.; Testimony of John E. O’Hern, Alschuler Papers, Box 1, CHM, 2154-2156, 2399-2401.
and better paying positions” in other lines of work. As for the union, the paper concluded simply “the world moves on and owes both black and white a living, providing we work for it.”

The same attitude prevailed in the stockyards. In 1918, a group of checkers in the car storers’ department at Armour struck for overtime pay and more holidays. The packers moved quickly to entice black workers to take their place. A black foreman, J.M. Morse, was hired to organize a gang. Morse, a graduate of Talladega college, “lost no time and found the suitable men” from among the unemployed of the Black Belt. Despite the fact that his gang did not enjoy the advantage of the typical two-week apprentice period, the men “jumped in and made good” during their time on the payroll. After the strike ended, several were kept on, albeit in other departments. The Defender praised the men, lauding the situation as “simply another case where the opportunity came and the men were ready for it.” For black workers, the opportunity to gain a steady job at the stockyards was too good to pass up, regardless of the potential cost to the union.

For white workers, such situations were viewed not in the context of black advancement but rather the breaking down of white unionism. Hair spinners at Wilson, for example, found themselves being supplanted by black workers; when they struck in protest, the company hired a full gang of African Americans as replacements. Black union steward Robert Bedford claimed that foremen were “going through all the different departments, picking out non union colored men to put them in these men's places in the hair house.” When asked why the company would “replace strikers [with] non union colored men,” Bedford replied simply, “to start prejudice, and

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32 “Our Men Made Checkers and Foremen,” Chicago Defender (31 August 1918), 12.

33 Both hair spinners and car storers negotiated a separate contract with the packers and were thus not subject to the Alschuler agreement, including its no-strike pledge. See Testimony of Robert Bedford, FMCS, Box 42, 182-188.
to start white men to fighting colored men.” As Bedford concluded: “hiring non union colored men…naturally causes trouble between the two races,” which was “something the union is trying to avoid.” Unfortunately, avoiding such conflict was difficult. As organizer John Kikulski put it, the use of nonunion black workers only increased separation and friction between the races. “At the noon hour,” he claimed, groups of white workers would take their lunch break, leaving the black workers alone, furtively “looking out of windows and doors.” The result, Kikulski claimed, was “a kind of moral effect that…creates a dis-harmony and hard feelings among the races.” The packers’ hiring of increasing numbers of black workers, particularly to replace white union members, only increased distrust among the two races.

Such accusations were often combined with complaints of black “agitators” who stirred up antiunion sentiment on the shopfloor, reportedly under the orders of packing foremen and superintendents. Black union leader Robert Bedford recalled “agitation on the floor” by the black non-union men. Bedford’s gang was roughly 160 men strong, of which nearly 150 were SLC members. But a small group of 12-15 nonunion African Americans constantly instigated trouble among the black workers, attempting to get them to quit the union. Black union steward Frank Custer believed that such agitators were “imported” by the companies for that very purpose. Custer claimed that the packing companies were “taking my race up from Texas, using them as a big stick, using them as something to cut their own throats, to run themselves down lower than they are today.” Custer claimed Wilson had imported more than a dozen nonunion black employees from Texas, who “for 18 long months” had provoked antiunion sentiment among the other African American workers. Those who attempted to organize the Texans “catch what we call ‘hell,’ your honor,” in Custer’s words. The use of such agitators caused union men to quit

34 Testimony of Robert Bedford, FMCS, Box 42, 182-188.
shopfloor stewards’ committees “simply because they [were] scared” of the consequences they would face from other black workers, who were clearly close with management. The union men, as Custer poetically put it, “were standing between two fires, the company on one side and the non union men on the other.”

Workers at Wilson frequently complained of such tactics. Two of the Texans, Joe Hodges and Austin Williams, apparently led most of the antiunion campaign. Joe Hodges apparently told Bedford that he was “a God damn fool for joining that union.” Bedford tasked Custer with speaking to Hodges in the hopes of recruiting him for the union—or at the very least, convincing him to tone down the volume and vulgarity of his antiunion attacks. In response, Hodges claimed that he worked for the company, not the union, and that he would not sign an SLC card until Wilson president Thomas Wilson and superintendent Seward Frazee did so. Williams actually approached Bedford, who was briefly taken off SLC membership rolls when his dues were in arrears, and told him, “when they get after you about this union, don’t you join it.” When Bedford asked why, Williams replied “if you join the Union you are against the company…and you won’t last long.” Though Bedford defended himself by saying “you can’t talk to me, I am a man that uses my own judgment and I do as I please,” and pledged to pay his union dues when possible. Williams left him by saying “there ain’t anything to that union.” Such open attacks on the union frustrated white workers and increased racial tensions.

Despite the presence of stalwart black unionists such as Bedford and Custer, the antiunion agitators increasingly became defined by their race as well as their connection to the company.


36 Testimony of Bedford, ibid., 150-154; Testimony of Custer, ibid., 281-282; Grossman, Land of Hope, 212-213; Barrett, Work and Community, 215-216; Halpern, Killing Floor, 64; Tuttle, 153-156.
White union member Walter Gorniak recalled that he was fearful of working with “Barneys”—black nonunion workers who, he claimed, carried knives and guns. Gorniak claimed that a black splitter approached him and asked if he had a union button. When Gorniak responded that it was in his pocket, the black butcher called him “a fool,” and claimed “I wouldn’t put [a union button] on the end of my prick.” Gorniak claimed that such events were commonplace. “We got some fellows there that was criticizing the union all the time,” he claimed. Black nonunion workers even yanked union buttons off of members’ shirts, threw them on the floor, and stomped on them. “The men,” Gorniak deadpanned, “ain’t satisfied with that.” Other white unionists agreed that black workers were a problem. Union steward Louis Michora, a dry-salts worker at Wilson, was blunt. “I cannot stand working with…the colored fellow[s],” he claimed. Black workers “won’t obey our orders and they won’t get along with us.” Because “the colored fellows up there won’t get no [union] buttons,” Michora argued, “we cannot get along with them.”

Though white union workers were disturbed by blacks’ reluctance to join the union, they were more galled by active black agitation against the union. Such campaigning made scabbing a racial issue, as black nonunion workers became perceived as allies of the company.

The most infamous “agitator” was the mysterious Richard Parker, often known as R.E. Parker, owner of the so-called Race Publishing Company and editor of the black newspaper the Chicago Advocate. Despite his notoriety, no copies of the Advocate are extant, and specific historical details regarding Parker’s life are maddeningly scarce. Parker was a frequent topic of conversation among union leaders, however, for his persistent and well-organized opposition to the CFL and its campaigns, particularly in the stockyards. Parker described himself as “the man who was always with his race, right or wrong.” Frequently, that statement entailed a public

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37 Testimony of Walter Gorniak, 20 June 1919, FMCS, Box 42, 512-513; Testimony of Louis Michora, ibid., 91-92; see also Testimony of C.M. Smith, ibid., 502-505.
opposition to unionization. A black worker familiar with Parker and his methods told the CCRR that Parker made an appeal “to Negroes…that white unions would not admit them on an equal basis and that white employers preferred Negro non-unionists to white unionists and would…[afford them] better treatment.” Meanwhile, Parker went to white employers and “represented the Negroes as being opposed to…white men’s unions.” In 1916, Parker distributed an estimated twenty thousand pamphlets throughout Packingtown and the Black Belt urging black workers to shun the CFL and instead join his American Unity Labor Union (AULU).38

Parker was frequently derided by unionists as a tool of the packers; the charge was difficult to refute. Parker had long worked as a labor agent for the packers, and boasted that he had brought more black southerners to Chicago than any other man from the city. In testimony before the President’s Mediation Commission, bosses from several packing concerns claimed that they did not specifically remember employing Parker, though several recalled inquiring among the black community as to “who they had who could handle” the black migrant workers, “who knew them, could go to and talk to them, and listen to their grievances.” John O’Hern, general superintendent of Armour, recalled, that several community leaders had mentioned Parker, and that O’Hern had met with him at least once. It is likely that Parker worked for at least one packing company as a labor agent, and that the bosses claimed not to remember him in an effort to avoid controversy with the union.39 In any event, Parker had a well-deserved reputation for providing black workers to the packers by the time he founded the AULU in 1917.


Parker’s AULU served as a de facto company union for the packers and a fertile recruiting ground for antiunion black activists. Where SLC organizers were frequently tossed from the stockyards, AULU recruiters were stationed next to the timekeeper’s office and encouraged to speak with black workers as they punched in and out. Parker also pledged complete cooperation with the packers. AULU advertisements made clear that “this Union does not believe in strikes.” Instead, Parker argued, “we believe all differences between laborers and capitalists can be arbitrated.” Parker even pledged to supply black scabs to the packers in the case of an SLC strike. For the AULU, the strike weapon was “our last motive if any at all.” Instead, membership in Parker’s organization simply got black workers “in line for a good job.” Ironically, the “good jobs” Parker promised came at a steep cost to his members. Parker pledged that in return for steady employment and loyalty to the company, the AULU’s skilled members would work for 15% less than the regular skilled rate, while unskilled members would work at a 10% discount from the common laborer rate. Black workers also faced the same intimidation from Parker that they did from the dreaded union bulletin board. Though the AULU did not regularly collect dues, Parker—with the approval of management—told recruits that they risked forfeiting their employment if they did not join.40

Parker made several critiques of the SLC, primarily along racial lines. Through numerous advertisements in local newspapers, Parker urged black workers to join “a union of your own race with officers of your own race,” a union that would allow black workers to “get a square deal with [their] own race.” Parker promised that membership in the AULU entitled workers to “a card to work at any trade or a common laborer, as a steam fitter, electrician, fireman, merchants, engineers, carpenters, butchers, helpers, and chauffeurs…for Armour's and Swift's, or

other Packers.” These cards, he claimed, were redeemable “in Kansas City, Omaha and St.
Louis, or any other city where the [Big Five] Packers have packing houses.” Such rhetoric was a
clear shot at the SLC and the controversy over the redemption of union cards by black SLC
members in other AMCBW shops. “Time has come for Negroes to do now or never,” said one
ad. “Other races have made their unions for themselves,” another said, “make a union of your
own race; union is strength.” Another took on the SLC’s dues system, telling black workers they
should not “pay $33.00 to join a white man's union, when you can join the black man's union for
$5.00 and work on any building in Chicago.” When a black CFL delegate attended an AULU
meeting and presented a proposal that would have affiliated Parker’s organization with the CFL,
he was “hooted from the platform.”

Parker’s racial rhetoric made a case for black organizing at the expense of the CFL.

In fairness to Parker, the AULU in some ways represented a unique opportunity for racial
organization. The activities of Parker and the AULU were not viewed with wide favor among the
black community—not necessarily because of their antiunion bent, but because of Parker’s own
reputation as a “soldier of fortune” for the packers and a rabble-rouser among working-class
blacks. A fellow black newspaper editor “characterized [Parker] as ‘a public nuisance’ and his
story as ‘bunk,’” according to the CCRR. Several black ministers believed that Parker was
“willing to sacrifice the best interests of the race to serve his own purposes.” Parker ignored such
insults and pressed on with his efforts to “improve the quality of Negro labor by increasing
Negro pride in special and unmixed endeavors” At one point, parker led a group of unemployed
African Americans to City Hall, where they demanded to see Mayor William Thompson. When
they were told Thompson was out of the office, Parker responded, “well, it’s funny we can’t find

him,” since “he can always find us...when he wants us to vote for his bond issues.” Parker raged on, arguing that when Thompson needed black votes, “he promised jobs for all colored men.” Now that the bill had come due, he was nowhere to be found. When Parker raised his voice, the chief of police ordered the men out, calling Parker a labor agent and claiming that his “army of the unemployed” were recent migrants from Louisiana. Parker claimed that the men “are from Chicago enough to vote for the mayor...why aren’t we enough to get jobs?” The group left City Hall only when the chief threatened Parker with indictment unless he stopped “stirring up the colored folk.”

The AULU also vigorously protested white racism in any form. When whites responded to an expansion of the Black Belt by bombing black homes, Parker assembled a “flying squadron” that drove through black neighborhoods, holding street-corner meetings demanding that Mayor Thompson apprehend the bombers. Parker also held a meeting to protest the establishment of a Ku Klux Klan chapter in the Chicago area. Parker exclaimed that if the Klansmen were to open a chapter in the city, they should do so in the heavily black 2nd Ward, where he said a “warm party” awaited them. If the mayor and governor would not “unmask every member of this order and drive them from Chicago,” Parker said, “send ‘em down to the Second ward and we will.” Such racial appeals, combined with Parker’s alliance with the packers, allowed him to publicly undermine the power of the CFL.

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42 CCRR, 422-423; “Jobless Colored Callers Fail to Find Mayor In,” Chicago Daily Tribune (22 February 1921), 8.

Without any organizational records, it is impossible to estimate the strength of the AULU. Historians estimate the actual membership of the organization at no more than two hundred, with perhaps a few hundred more taking part in meetings and leafleting. But the reaction of Chicago’s unionists to Parker’s efforts is revealing. Parker’s work recruiting workers for the packers, combined with his antiunion campaign as head of the AULU, made him a feared enemy of the CFL. During a meeting, a CFL delegate referred to Parker as “one of the packers’ scab herders,” and claimed that he was in charge of an effort “to create race riots and...to force conflicts between the races in the event of a strike.” Such discord would furnish the packers with “an excuse to call in the militia to aid them in breaking the spirit of the packing house employees.” Johnstone agreed, claiming that the packers were “trying to use all the colored people as much as they can to break down the standards of living” and “bring out this Race prejudice.” Singling out the Wabash Avenue YMCA and the Wilson Club, Johnstone called Parker “the organizer of all the troubles, practically speaking, between the white and black men in the stock yards.”

The actions of employers made the specter of black strikebreaking a living, breathing monster. Packing bosses spread antiunion propaganda through the workplace and, more importantly, through the black community. As a result, white workers saw African Americans leaders at the head of a “scab race” that increasingly was not nonunion but antiunion. The perceived alliance between employers and African Americans became even more threatening as bosses hired—“imported,” in the minds of many whites—large numbers of nonunion black

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45 Testimony of Frank Smith, 23 June 1919, FMCS, Box 42, 545; “Hoot Union Organizer,” *Chicago Defender* (22 September 1917), 6.
workers. The very presence of black scabs was threatening to white workers, but employers augmented the effect of their presence both by employing them as strikebreakers and by deploying certain sets of the nonunion African Americans as antiunion “agitators” who could spread company propaganda throughout the workforce. The resentments fostered by these actions would quickly explode into violence.

The Specter Unleashed: Race and Workplace Conflict

The prejudices of white workers, combined with the efforts of employers to heighten racial tensions, resulted in violence on the shopfloor. The anti-scab wildcat strikes conducted by SLC members often involved a racial component, as white workers attempted to force nonunion blacks out of the stockyards. More damningly, white workers took any instance of violence that involved both race and work—such as the murder of a union worker by a black scab, or the East St. Louis riot of 1917—as evidence that nonunion African Americans were an immediate and violent threat to white unionism. Such antagonisms alienated black workers and pushed them further from the union, making the construction of an interracial CFL nearly impossible.

The SLC’s anti-scab wildcat strikes often carried a racial component to them. In July 1919, a hog-killing gang at Wilson dropped their tools and refused to work unless the company removed a black nonunion worker from their gang. Rumors spread that other gangs might strike in sympathy, so the superintendent pulled the black worker into his office for the remainder of the day. After some thought, the superintendent fired two union leaders, George Kosek and Stanley Jinnicki, for threatening the strike. In response, the entire 125-man gang walked off the job, as well as gangs from the hog butchering and sausage departments. One superintendent estimated that close to four thousand men took part in the action at one time or another. The structure of the
work stoppage reflected the anger of the union workers. Jinnicki testified that the union was infuriated because the black scab had said “to hell with the Union.” Union workers in the gang reportedly said “we ain’t going to work with one man like that.” The scab did little to help his cause. He met with several stewards, but still refused to join, claiming, “he didn't believe in the union.” At that point, union members “figured that he would be more of an agitator and make more trouble in the gang than he would out they refused to agree with him and let him go back to work any more.” Though Jinnicki admitted to asking the foreman to fire the black worker, he also explained to the union men that a strike would violate the Alschuler agreement. He was roundly rebuffed. “They don’t want [to hear] that,” Jinnicki said, noting that the feeling was that if “the colored fellow” was “going to work over there they ain’t going to work.” As a result, Jinnicki testified, no one person stopped the gang, “the gang stopped itself.”

Jinnicki claimed that the worker’s race was irrelevant. He argued that a scab was a scab, that it “it don't make difference whether it is colored fellow or white fellow.” But the workers’ response to the black nonunion worker reveals deep-seated resentment. According to a black employee, at least one man suggested “that they should carry [the scab] off the floor and then the gang would go back to work.” When the packers’ attorney attempted to confirm that “the question was as to his being a union or non-union man,” the witness intimated that other factors were at work: “I could not recall any particular man who said he would not work with him because he was not a member of the union.” Indeed, several different workers claimed that the issue was not a union issue at all. In fact, when the black scab relented and offered to join the union, workers responded by saying “we don’t know where he got it” and “we don’t want him.”

46 “Arbitration Between Libby, McNeil & Libby and their Employes Regarding the Discharge of Certain Employes [sic],” 14 August 1919, FMCS, Box 41, 2-9; Testimony of Stanley Jinnicki, ibid., 11-67; Testimony of Thomas Robinson, ibid., 68-74; Grossman, Land of Hope, 212-213; Barrett, Work and Community, 215-216; Halpern, Killing Floor, 64; Tuttle, 153-156.
Seeking to avoid further tension, one union member offered to pay the scab’s dues for him, but his union comrades refused to accept it. Even with the scab sporting a union button, the union workers wanted the man thrown out. “We have so much trouble,” they reportedly said, “we don’t want him in.”\(^{47}\) The employment of large numbers of African American workers, and the treatment they were afforded by packing bosses, infuriated the union members.

Some of the unionists responded by turning to violence. Judge Alschuler was sufficiently disturbed by the behavior of SLC members as to write a letter to John Fitzpatrick. According to a report received by Alschuler, crowds of union members were gathering at the stockyards gates every night, vowing “to make the stock yards 100% union.” This behavior was not a peaceable extension of the organizing campaign, however. “When the men leave for home,” the report claimed, “they are not only accosted by these crowds but are threatened with bodily harm, if they do not show union cards of union buttons.” Skilled workers and foremen were not immune to these attacks, and were ordered to join the SLC “or suffer the consequences.” The counsel for the packers, Carl Meyer, corroborated this statement. He produced sworn affidavits claiming that “the minute [workers]…get outside of the gates,” they were “hustled by force and duress against their will” into joining the union. Such attacks appeared to be particularly directed at black workers. Joe Hodges recalled that he “had a little trouble” with union members. Hodges left the yards during his lunch break and saw “6 or 7 or 8 Polocks grab…a colored fellow out there” and drag him by his neck onto a wagon. The union members yelled “you son-of-a-bitch, you will join the union.” When they saw Hodges, one of the men grabbed him and asked “Where is your button?” When Hodges replied that he was not a union member, the union men shoved him back.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., Testimony of Charles Jones, ibid., 99-108.
toward the plant, where “45 or 50” union members stood “cussin” Hodges as he walked by.48 Such violent exchanges reveal the depths of anger felt by white unionists at the presence of nonunion labor, particularly black nonunion labor, which they felt undermined the strength of the SLC.

Despite such attacks, white unionists generally blamed black workers for outbreaks of violence. The existence of violent racial conflict, even when it was perpetrated by blacks in self-defense, only confirmed to white racists that black workers were a dangerous “scourge” upon the workplace and the city. The irony of such prejudices, of course, was that they pushed black workers further away, further substantiating white fears and making racism a tragically self-fulfilling prophecy. Nevertheless, whites frequently blamed black workers both for their perceived violent proclivities, and for their failure to sufficiently support unionism.

African Americans were resented and even feared as agents of chaos and violence. Union members complained that Joe Hodges was “agitating around there, throwing out slurs against the union men.” Hodges allegedly “turn[ed] up his nose” at union members and treated them “as…a joke” because he worked the same job and “ha[d] good money and [didn’t] have to pay union dues.” Unionists also complained that Hodges instigated violence. A group of union men riding past the stockyards gates in a wagon when Hodges began throwing rocks at them. Apparently, Hodges screamed “what are them sons-of-bitches doing around here pulling off that stuff.” According to Custer, this was proof that Hodges “has it bitterly in his heart against the union men, and he means to get the [union] man out if he has to.” In another case, a nonunion black worker yelled “God damn that union” and claimed that “anybody that is in the union…[is] a lot

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48 Letter, Samuel Alschuler to Stockyards Labor Council, 12 June 1919, Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 8, Folder 60, CHM; Testimony of Thomas Robinson, 14 August 1919, FMCS, Box 41, 96; Testimony of Joe Hodges, 23 June 1919, FMCS, Box 42, 476-477.
of bastards.” The nonunion man personally attacked Bedford and another black SLC member, claiming that “you are nothing but a bunch of white folks’ niggers, or you wouldn’t be wearing that button.” Eventually, black union worker Charlie Jamieson challenged the nonunion worker to a fight, which ended with the nonunion man beating Jamieson into unconsciousness. When Bedford later requested a day off of work to testify at the ensuing trial, he was told “if you go off this floor and go to any trial, you wont have any job when you get back.” Bedford testified anyway and was not fired, the situation reveals the bitter divisions between union and nonunion men—divisions that were becoming increasingly racial in nature.

For some white unionists, the very presence of black workers was thought to create strife and chaos among workers. In 1917, the Local Joint Executive Board of the hotel and restaurant workers union presented a ferocious resolution to the CFL. The resolution discussed union waiter Joseph Brill of Local No. 7, who “lost his life from an assault committed by one of the colored porters employed at the Edelweiss Gardens.” The union made a direct connection between Brill’s death and the employment of black porters—an act, the union was quick to point out, that occurred “over the protest of the members of the Unions of our allied crafts.” Brill, in the union’s estimation, was “but another victim at the door of as greedy, as unscrupulous and as cruel a set of bosses as the entire capitalist class can boast, namely the Chicago Hotel and Restaurant Keepers’ Association.” More importantly, the union linked the avarice of the employers to the presence of black porters, claiming that Brill’s death was “the direct result of the system of encouraging and aiding colored workers to leave their homes in the South to come North and disrupt and

49 Ibid., Testimony of Bedford, 20 June 1919, FMCS, Box 42, 164-165, 220-229; Testimony of Custer, ibid., 280-289; Grossman, Land of Hope, 212-213; Barrett, Work and Community, 215-216; Halpern, Killing Floor, 64; Tuttle, 153-156; see also Testimony of Austin Williams, ibid., 449-454.
White workers thus paradoxically resented blacks not only as the tools of bosses, but as their allies and coconspirators. Such enmity toward blacks made the CFL’s promise of bridging racial gaps through unionism increasingly difficult. Fears of black violence were particularly toxic because they carried both a class and a racial component. Many white workers felt that blacks enforced the antiunion and even violent sentiments of employers. In 1915, local employers replaced striking lathers with strikebreakers, including a number of African Americans. Lathers formed posses that traveled to worksites, demanding that the replacement workers put down their tools. Those who refused were assaulted. In December, a black union lather named David Johnson broke the picket line and was shot in the leg during a confrontation with a union gang led by lathers union official Axel Alex. Soon after, Johnson’s brother Robert ambushed Alex, shot and wounded him, then pistol-whipped him into unconsciousness. A CFL delegate recounted Alex’s testimony to police before he died. “His words aptly describe the murder, and the murderer,” the delegate said, and quoted Alex: “That's the _____ shot me and never gave me a chance,” implying Alex’s use of a racial slur to describe Johnson. Though charges were filed, Johnson was released on bond due to inconsistencies in witness testimony. The lathers were infuriated. Much of their rage was due to Johnson’s status as a “negro scab.” In every recounting of the crime, the lathers made sure to specify Johnson’s race and status as a strikebreaker, as if to make the crime more heinous. They demanded that “organized labor may unite in making itself heard, against situations and practices both dangerous and damnable,” such as the questionable release of Johnson and the employment of black strikebreakers. The lathers eventually turned their rage against the black community itself. A CFL delegate recounted that at a meeting of the Universalist Church “when the Negro

50 Resolution No. 1, CFL Minutes, 19 August 1917, 6-8; see also ibid., 20 January 1918, 9-10.
problem was lectured on…it was shown…that the Negroes had no use for the white workers.”

One speaker, a “local Negro doctor,” reportedly condemned unions in favor of race-based organizations, and even “gloated over the killing of Alex.”

Such claims appear exaggerated, but in any case they reflect the deep resentment and anger that white workers felt toward black workers. Even more damaging were allegations that black workers did the violent bidding of employers. During a 1919 strike at the Argo plant, the company hired six hundred African Americans—not only as strikebreakers but as armed guards. That summer, a protest by white workers led to a scuffle in which the black guards shot dead two white strikers. The CFL howled in response, upbraiding “the colored strikebreakers” for “gleefully staging [the] murder of strikers.”

For many white unionists, the presence of black workers presaged chaos, conflict, and even violence.

One major instance of racial violence, the East St. Louis race riot of 1917, typifies the complex array of racial ideologies held by white workers. The bloody race riot that gripped East St. Louis in July 1917, in which dozens of black citizens were brutally murdered by white mobs, typifies the attitudes of white workers toward black labor. The fury that fueled the riot was rooted in the ferocious resentment of blue-collar whites against black workers, who had been “imported” from the South to break a strike at the Aluminum Ore Company and forestall union organizing.

White workers viewed the riot’s vicious brutality as confirmation that the migration

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51 Resolution No 1, CFL Minutes, 2 January 1916, 13-15; ibid., 4 June 1916, 4-8; ibid., 6 August 1916, 18-19; Cohen, Racketeer’s Progress, 215-216.


of black workers from south to north was inevitably accompanied by job competition, racial animus, and, eventually, violence. A House of Representatives investigation noted that “white men walked the streets in idleness, their families suffering for food and warmth and clothes, while their places as laborers were taken by strange Negroes.” The Illinois State Defense Council commissioned a report through its labor committee, which was headed by Illinois Federation of Labor President John Walker. Echoing the sentiments of his constituents, he claimed that the riot was “a warning to Chicago and other northern cities to which Negroes have emigrated.” More specifically, the riot was a warning to white workers: Walker grimly noted that 35% of black laborers who came to East St. Louis displaced white jobs. Such displacement was the result of an active campaign by bosses to undermine the union and create “a surplus of labor on hand in order that white labor might continue to be kept under the heel of the employing interests.”

Indeed, for labor leaders, the presence of black workers came to define the strike. Their rhetoric reflects the attitudes of white workers toward African Americans. Walker and other labor leaders claimed that “it was the influx of Negroes into East St. Louis that first cause murmuring on the part of working people” and that “the services of negro workers [were] used to destroy the standards of work established by organized labor.” Though they blamed the “devious methods” of employers for enflaming race hatred and “preventing the negro [from joining]…the white man’s union,” there was once more a widespread feeling that black workers were simpletons who had been tricked by capitalists. Walker claimed the riot occurred “because of the


methods adopted by the corporations in deluding and inducing poor ignorant colored men to leave their homes and spend their last few dollars to come to East St. Louis.” One report noted that with immigration closed off due to World War I, the employers could no longer recruit the “uninformed working men of Europe” and instead resorted to exploiting “the poor, unfortunate negro,” an “uninformed, unskilled, helpless” worker who came from “the cotton farms and the plantations, away from the industrial centers” and was “uninfluenced by the trade union movement.” Walker also upbraided the black community itself, criticizing the black press for running labor advertisements in their newspapers. Such statements echoed the beliefs of many workers that African Americans were simultaneously the tools and allies of capital. Once more, leaders acknowledged that a shift in material conditions could affect a shift in racial attitudes, and asked “all workers, black as well as white, to answer this pernicious and covert attack on the labor movement by uniting with each other.” Ultimately, however, the fears of labor competition between whites and blacks proved too much, and Walker’s labor committee—with the approval of other labor leaders—recommended the passage of emergency legislation “to discourage southern Negroes from emigrating to industrial centers of the north, and prohibiting northern employers from inducing them to do so.”

Black workers, of course, saw the riot differently. Though they recognized the central role employers played in fomenting the conflict, many African Americans blamed white unionists for the massacre. Though employers exploited racial tension at the workplace and in the community, such tensions existed in large part because of the racial exclusion of East St. Louis’s trade unions. Though white union members were no more likely to participate in the massacre than

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anyone else—in fact, most of the blue-collar whites who engaged in violence were either unemployed or unskilled and unorganized—they had excluded blacks from their ranks and actively sought their expulsion from the city. In this way, the East St. Louis riot foreshadowed the bloodshed that would overtake Chicago in the summer of 1919. As William Tuttle argued, the massacre at East St. Louis “touched off an explosion of indignation among Chicago’s black people” and represented “the event more than any other [that] destroyed the faith of Chicago’s black people in their state government’s ability and willingness to protect them.”

Despite the objections of black workers, the reaction of labor leaders to the East St. Louis race riot is instructive as to the attitudes of white labor. White union workers resented the “scourge” of black labor that flooded north during World War I, particularly its tendency to create interracial labor competition. Many workers believed that African Americans were easily duped into becoming the tools of capital, and that violence would inevitably result from their presence. Despite the feeling that labor organizing could ameliorate racial tension, the overwhelming conclusion was that black workers could not be trusted and their very presence was a threat to the existence of white unionism.

Paradoxically, despite white workers’ resistance to the presence of black workers, union members often blamed blacks themselves for being resistant to the union call. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations recounted the an encounter with white union members who felt that “union action and union money” had made the Alschuler award possible, but resented the fact that the agreement applied to all stockyards workers, whether they were union members or not. During a dues collection meeting, a CCRR investigator noted that “a number of the white members…showed, quite unsolicited, that considerable feeling existed because the Negro

56 Foner, 138; Tuttle, 231; see also Rudwick, 16-23, 142-153; Lumpkins, 56-104; McLaughlin, 29-64.
workers were not coming into the union” in sufficient numbers, allowing them to enjoy the benefits of the award while incurring none of the risks. Such feelings were at times manifested as open hostility toward blacks, who were viewed as pawns of the packers. A CFL delegate lamented the packers’ attempts to keep “these ignorant colored men” from joining the SLC. Black antiunion agitators were derided as “simply…ignorant and low-minded” tools of the packers’ avarice. At one point, the union even abdicated responsibility for organizing black workers, claiming it had done enough: an article in the New Majority detailing the mass interracial parade in July 1919 opened, “if the colored packing house worker doesn’t come into the union, it isn’t the fault of the Stock Yards Labor Council.” Despite their derision for black workers as a threat to public welfare, as tools of capital, as competitors for work, and even as violent enemies, white workers blamed African Americans for their reluctance to join unions, making their prejudices a grimly self-fulfilling prophecy and reinforcing the historical context for racial discrimination within unions.

Such clashes severely impeded the CFL’s ability to organize black stockyards workers. As the issue of race came to define the campaign, black workers became less likely to identify with the union’s class-based appeal. With white and black workers violently clashing at work, and white workers increasingly seeing blacks as allied with bosses, African Americans became defensive and even resentful toward the campaign. Despite his reputation as an antiunion “agitator,” Austin Williams claimed that he had no personal problem with the SLC. “The union is all right,” he said, “I have got nothing against the union.” Williams’ efforts to keep his fellow black workers from signing a union card were not due to a personal objection to unionism, but

57 CCRR, 413-414; CFL Minutes, 6 January 1918, 18-21; “Giant Stockyards Union Celebration,” The New Majority (12 July 1919); Testimony of Frank Custer, “Arbitration Between Libby, McNeil & Libby and their Employes Regarding the Discharge of Certain Employes [sic],” dated 14 August 1919, Records of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, Record Group 280: Dispute Case Files, Box 41, 131-132; Grossman, Land of Hope, 244.
rather with the way unionism manifested itself among white members. “When [union members] put on a button,” Williams argued, “it makes them think they are all of it.” The vigor of the SLC’s campaign, too, alienated Williams. Union members “try to run over you.” In fact, Williams claimed he had decided to sign a union card “two or three times,” but on each occasion, he found SLC members “sticking up something on the [bulletin] board to bully you with.” Union propaganda claiming that “if you don’t get in, we are going to put you out” not only antagonized Williams, it frightened off many black workers who lacked the money to pay dues. Confused by the union signs claiming “if you don’t have a button in the morning, no work,” many African Americans sought to stay out of trouble by avoiding the union altogether. The SLC, Williams concluded, would have more success “if they would go along easy.”

The increasingly racial component of the CFL campaign took its toll on dedicated unionists as well. Frank Custer argued vociferously that “the men are naturally working in fear…and the only way to get out of that fear is to get these agitators out of here.” Custer feared that their efforts would spill out from the workplace. “They are not only making agitators on that floor,” he said, “they are making them all over Chicago.” Custer and other unionists bitterly resented the packers’ efforts to turn black workers against the SLC—whether it was through the use of shopfloor “agitators” or through pressure on black community leaders. What is revealing, however, is Custer’s attitude toward race in regards to the union. “Supposing race trouble starts” as a result of the packers efforts, he said, “I am a colored man, and love my family tree, and I ain’t going to stand for no white man to come imposing on my color.” Custer left no doubt as to where his loyalties lay. “If he is imposing on my race,” Custer argued, “there is going to be a fight.” Such racial pride transcended his loyalty to the SLC. “I don’t care if the colored man

58 Testimony of Williams, 23 June 1919, FMCS, Box 42, 428-430.
wears a button or not,” he said, “he has that love in his heart for one another.” With the SLC campaign becoming increasingly defined by race, black workers began to resent the distinction between union membership and racial pride, widening the gap between white and black workers.

As the explosive element of race became central to the CFL campaign, white and black workers violently confronted one another, on the shopfloor and beyond. The CFL’s wildcat strikes increasingly became racial affairs that pitted white unionists against black scabs. Additionally, instances of racial violence, both within the city (such as the murder of Axel Alex) and outside it (namely, the East St. Louis race riot of 1917) caused many white workers to resent nonunion blacks as dangerous threats to the existence of unionism. Such bitterness contributed to the alienation of black workers, who were increasingly aware of the fact that union membership entailed pledging fealty to their class over their race. As a result, a number of black workers rejected unionism entirely and drifted toward racial organizing amongst themselves. This tendency was a significant factor in the Labor Party’s disastrous attempt to organize black voters.

Class-Based Organizing and the Failure of the Labor Party

The combination of a flawed union structure and the persistence of rank-and-file racism caused many African Americans to reject the CFL’s appeal entirely and opt instead for organizing and solidarity based on race. In the context of the CFL, this phenomenon is best understood through the failure of the Labor Party. Despite its legitimately progressive platform and aims, the party utterly failed in its attempt to recruit black Chicagoans. The flaws of the CFL’s campaign were exposed once more. The party was intended as a way to unite workers; as a result, much of its rhetoric and activity was centered on labor issues. The party undertook no

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59 Testimony of Custer, 20 June 1919, FMCS, Box 42, 293.
serious efforts to address black concerns. Perhaps just as notable is the fact that African Americans displayed a high degree of political involvement, particularly in their dedication to the Republican Party—which made significant, if limited, efforts to reward black loyalty. The failure of the Labor Party to recruit black workers typifies the CFL’s inability to translate its message of interracial unity into a workable plan of action.

To a degree, black workers rejected the SLC’s plea because it was based solely in the union’s ideal of class solidarity as a means for ameliorating racial tension. For black Chicagoans, class organizing was insufficient. As Paul Street has written, the growth of “a proud and famous ‘black metropolis’ within the womb of white Chicago” caused many African Americans to feel that the path toward liberation lay not with class-based organizations such as unions, but with racial organizations of their own making. Indeed, the shared experiences of work and class that reinforced existing ethnic ties in Packingtown were replaced in the Black Belt by a sense of racial unity above all else. Chicago’s African Americans—particularly migrants reared in a southern culture where racial and class discrimination were one and the same—“were exploited, they perceived, not because they were workers, but because they were black,” in James Grossman’s words. A rejection of unionism was thus not a rejection of economically progressive principles, but a conscious choice to embrace “the race-conscious, pro-migration rhetoric of northern black leaders” at the expense of the class-based arguments of the CFL’s argument that “the Negro’s plight is the plight of the working class in general,” albeit “aggravated by certain special features.”

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60 Street, “Working in the Yards,” 327-328; ibid., “Plant Loyalty,” 667; Grossman, “White Man’s Union,” 99; Barrett, Work and Community, 208-210; Tuttle, 146-147, 210-211; Zieger, 82; Spero and Harris, 463; see also CCRR, 421.
As a result, many black Chicagoans, even those sympathetic or even favorable to union organizing as a general principle, felt that the CFL did not serve their needs. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations noted that by the end of World War I, “a growing race solidarity” was evinced by the city’s black residents. As Chicago Urban League president Robert E. Park wrote, “race prejudice, in so far as it has compelled him to think always and everywhere in racial terms, has given the Negro a cause, and created a solidarity and a unity of purpose which might not otherwise exist.” Black workers, seeking “to see a fine race spirit take hold of our people,” participated in campaigns to patronize only black businesses and joined neighborhood organizations protected their interests and reaffirmed bonds of racial solidarity.\(^\text{61}\)

The Federation’s appeal was based solely on its intent to fight for black workers as vigorously as it did for white workers. For black workers—resentful of organized labor’s troubled racial history, embittered by the continued bigotry of white coworkers, and energized by a growing racial consciousness—such promises fell flat. The weakened position of the neighborhood locals and their tendency to reinforce existing patterns of segregation made them unable to demonstrate that they were truly interracial institutions that “offer[ed] blacks opportunities to access and power, in Grossman’s words. Despite their stated goals of interracial solidarity, CFL unions were largely seen as white organizations.\(^\text{62}\)

\(^{61}\) For more on racial consciousness among Chicago’s black workers, see “The 'Old Eight Regiment,” The Broad Ax (15 February 1919), 1, 4-5; “They Fought for the Flag,” ibid. (9 August 1919), 8; “The People Throughout the French Republic,” ibid. (6 September 1919), 1. For more on rising racial consciousness among black workers, see Keith P. Griffin, What Price Alliance? Black Radicals Confront White Labor, 1918-1938 (New York: Garland, 1995); Paul Clinton Young, “Race, Class, and Radicalism in Chicago, 1914-1936” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Iowa, 2001); Mark Robert Schneider, We Return Fighting: The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002); Arnesen, Brotherhoods of Color; Bates, Pullman Porters; Nelson, Divided We Stand, 3-45, 145-184; John H. Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds., Black Workers and Organized Labor (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1971).

\(^{62}\) Zieger, 82; Grossman, Land of Hope, 241; Tuttle, 210-211; CCRR, 192-193; Park, introduction to First Annual Report of the Chicago Urban League, 4; “Buy What You Must From Negroes,” The Broad Ax (11 January 1919), 8; “The Chief Aim of the Race,” ibid. (25 January 1919), 8; see also Grimshaw, 109; William Howard Taft, “Causes of
In regards to the CFL, this rejection of class solidarity in favor of racial solidarity was most clearly seen in black workers’ reluctance to support the Labor Party. To be sure, there was some support for the party among segments of Chicago’s black leadership. The party’s stated (constitutional, no less) dedication to interracial cooperation and an eradication of racism in all forms was appealing to many blacks. Many of the Labor Party’s central issues, such as public ownership of utilities, were also shared by the African American community. As a result, some blacks publicly supported the party. A guest editorial in the Defender claimed that “we as a race have been used long enough as a political issue,” and claimed that the only way for blacks to gain “every right…politically, civically and economically” was through an alliance with the Labor Party. The Broad Ax claimed that “Colored citizens of Chicago will have nothing to fear at the hands of…John Fitzpatrick, the labor candidate for mayor.” The Labor Party, the paper argued, has “[n]ever assumed a hostile attitude against the best interest[s] of the Colored people of this city,” and argued that black Chicagoans must “not permit themselves to become the abject political slaves of any political party” and “should cast some of their votes” for the Fitzpatrick. Fears of blacks as “enslaved” to the city’s Republican political machine were common in the Broad Ax, which was an outspoken critic of Thompson. Although the paper acknowledged Thompson was “very popular” and even “idolized” by “poor, ignorant, misguided colored people,” it criticized him for his failure to protect black citizens from house bombings.63

Unfortunately for the CFL, the Labor Party was unable to take advantage of the anti-Thompson insurgency. The party’s avowed antiracism did not match its actions. Like the CFL,

the Labor Party’s feelings on race rested on the assumption that the city had “no Negro problem,” only a class problem that happened to involve black workers. Such a political approach had little appeal for black workers. Unlike the CFL, the Labor Party made little effort to actively recruit black Chicagoans. Besides the inclusion of black AFL organizer John Riley on the Cook County party’s executive committee, and the running of black Coopers’ Union official William Robert Wilson on the party ticket for alderman, one would be hard-pressed to find any concrete attempts to appeal to black workers. The Labor Party had essentially staked its success on the success of the CFL: workers who were active in the union tended to be active in the party. With black workers displaying ambivalence regarding the SLC campaign, the Labor Party was never able to develop a cadre of black activists, nor articulate a platform that could appeal to black voters. This failure was blamed not on the structure of the party, nor on the unique discrimination faced by black workers at the hands of employers, coworkers, and city officials, but rather on the naiveté of black workers themselves, who were deceived by employers and “misleaders” in the black middle class.64

These shortcomings were particularly egregious given the strong bond Thompson and the Republican Party had managed to forge with Chicago’s black community. Thompson rewarded the political fealty of the city’s African Americans through an extensive spoils system that provided secure city government jobs to a black community ravaged by unemployment and poverty. By the end of the 1920s, black workers made up 4.4% of the plumbers, 5.7% of the teamsters, 8.2% of the elevator operators, and 27% of the janitors employed by the city. As a result, black community leaders praised Thompson as “a straightforward, honest man with but one purpose, and that is giving everybody a square deal.” Despite being white, Thompson’s

cultivation of relationships with community leaders like Ida B. Wells-Barnett marked him as a “race man” who would provide for the needs of African Americans in particular. The Defender noted that Thompson was “unalterably opposed to segregation of the school children in the public schools” and argued that “he should continue to enjoy the confidence and support of the Race in the city and state.” His opponents, on the other hand, were “unfit to be classed as law-abiding citizens. Such rhetoric reflected the degree to which Thompson appealed to black voters—in ways the Labor Party could not. Black workers backed such feelings with their votes. In each of the four primary elections of Thompson’s reign as mayor, he received at least 80% of the votes in the heavily black 2nd Ward. In mayoral elections, Republican candidates regularly received votes that reached more than 70% of the total cast in the 2nd Ward. Such pluralities were often decisive, including in the 1919 election that featured the candidacy of John Fitzpatrick.65

The Labor Party’s class-based appeal to African American voters left them unmoved, allowing Chicago’s Republican machine to continue its longstanding alliance with black voters. Despite the party’s efforts to promote a message of racial tolerance and cooperation, it was unable to make any significant inroads into the black community. As a class-based organization, the Labor Party quite simply had little to offer Chicago’s African American population. Significantly, blacks did vote in significant numbers—but overwhelmingly for Republican candidates, who offered them immediate and tangible gains through government jobs and desegregation. The Labor Party’s lack of attention to racial issues further reveals the limits of the CFL’s appeal to black Chicagoans.

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65 Cohen, Racketeer’s Progress, 218; Horowitz, 15-17; Strouthous, 62; Gosnell, 40-41; Untitled editorial, Chicago Defender (30 June 1917), 12; “Mayor Thompson Opposes Segregation,” ibid. (7 September 1918), 10.
Conclusion

The discrimination of white union workers, the paternalism of packing bosses, the opposition of black community leaders to unionism, and the violence that resulted all combined to reduce the effectiveness of the CFL campaign. The specter of the black strikebreaker was very real—not because African Americans were degenerate, or immoral, or a “scab race,” but because a broad array of factors conspired to make scabbing “thinkable” to black workers, to borrow James Grossman’s term. Though scabbing was, for white unionists, “unambiguously…evil,” black workers were forced to confront racial as well as class oppression. As a result, scabbing and all its trappings—alliances with employers, participation in paternalistic worker welfare programs, an open rejection of unionism—were acceptable costs of securing employment. What white unionists did not understand was that for African American workers, “strikebreaking had to be considered seriously—even if rejected.”

The CFL’s attempt to organize black and white stockyards workers, particularly its belief that such organizing would eradicate racial tensions, was complicated by the racial attitudes of white workers. Such attitudes represented a tangled bundle of fears and suspicions. The very presence of African Americans in the city was cause enough for many workers to view them as a “scourge” and a danger to Chicago itself. In the context of work, black laborers were considered both the helpless tools of, and the conniving allies of, capital. The spread of antiunion propaganda among the black community, and its propagation by black leaders, only deepened these feelings. As employers hired more and more nonunion black workers, such feelings became enflamed into violence. Not only did white workers attempt to expel black scabs, they

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also resented acts of racial violence, such as the East St. Louis riot of 1917, as evidence that blacks were both non- or antiunion and dangerous to the existence of white unionism.

Though such feelings were rooted in perceptions and significations, CFL leaders’ attitude toward the amelioration of racism was purely material—they felt that unionism was a prime solution for racial discord between workers. As a result, they failed to understand that blacks were reluctant to join organizations that so often vilified them; white workers interpreted such behavior as an expression of class, rather than race, consciousness, and blamed African Americans for their reticence, creating a destructive loop of discrimination and racial enmity. In short, white unionists perceived blacks both as intellectually infantile and as shrewdly devious, and resented them, paradoxically, for both. As black workers were pushed further from the union, many rejected unionism entirely and turned instead to racial organizations; such feelings account for the failure of the Labor Party to appeal to black workers. The CFL’s ability to organize an interracial union had encountered a series of devastating setbacks. In the summer of 1919, the Federation would experience a brutal blow from which it would never recover.
Chapter 5: “The Ordeal of the Jungle”: The CFL Confronts Racial Violence, 1919-1920

Though Chicago had withstood outbreaks of racial violence in the early twentieth century, nothing could have prepared the city for the brutality of the race riots of 1919. For seven days, black and white Chicagoans engaged in full-scale warfare, leaving thirty-eight dead, more than five hundred injured, and more than one thousand homeless.¹ The riot itself represents a unique case in American history. Whereas most race riots of the early twentieth century were akin to mass lynchings, the Chicago riots featured pitched battles between white and black citizens.² The resentments and hatreds that exploded into violence during the infamous Red Summer of 1919 were complex and multifarious. They originated, as historian William Tuttle argued, “not in high-level policy, but in gut-level animosities between black and white people” that were “nurtured on the killing floors in the stockyards, on all-white blocks threatened with black occupancy, and in parks and on beaches that were racially contested.”³ Scholars have generally focused their energies on precisely determining the extent to which those various causes informed the violence to follow.

In this chapter I re-examine the race riots from the perspective of the Chicago labor movement, breaking with Tuttle to examine not only the “gut-level animosities” of the rank and file, but also the decisions of union leadership. Chicago’s white and black workers faced off in a series of racial conflicts in the weeks preceding the riot. During the riot itself, the CFL attempted to restrain its members from participating in violence. In this effort, it was successful:

¹ CCRR, 1.
² Sociologist Allen Grimshaw has referred to the Chicago conflict as the quintessential “Northern-style” race riot, characterized by “assaults upon the accommodative pattern related to secular spheres: housing, recreation, transportation and employment.” See Grimshaw, “Three Cases of Racial Violence,” in ibid., Racial Violence, 107.
³ Tuttle, viii.
significantly, few union members took part in the riot’s brutality. But the riot sapped much of the CFL’s strength and all but ended its organizing drive.

Several factors—including the sheer chaos of the violence itself, the costs of supporting members aggrieved by the riot, and the difficulty of reconstructing the workplace in the wake of the riot—can account for this defeat. But the event that most severely deepened racial divisions was the CFL’s actions in the wake of the riot, particularly its attempts to control the reopening of the stockyards. The CFL’s failure to protest the deployment of militia in the yards alienated black workers and exposed the union’s essential vulnerability to employer predation.

Additionally, white workers grew more resentful of black nonunion men, while the black community grew increasingly convinced that racial unity—and not class solidarity—could best serve their interests. Workplace conflicts grew increasingly bitter than ever as the gulf between Chicago’s white and black workers widened into a chasm.

**Antecedents: Chicago in the Red Summer**

As historian James Barrett has explained, racial violence found its most virulent source in community relations. The explosion of Chicago’s black population due to the Great Migration, the expansion of black residential areas into traditionally white neighborhoods, and the emergence of militant racial activism on the part of black residents all contributed heavily to the hatreds that exploded into violence in July 1919. In the span of a decade, Chicago’s black population more than doubled, from 44,130 in 1910 to nearly 110,000 in 1920. Those numbers were augmented by the return of 50,000 black troops to the Chicago area after the Armistice in 1918—10,000 to the city alone. Though this flood of inexpensive labor helped fuel the economic

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4 Barrett, *Work and Community* 223; see also Drake and Cayton. 64.
growth of the city, it also strained resources and amplified tensions long extant in the areas of labor, housing, and politics.\textsuperscript{5} Such strains were not lost on contemporary observers. Former president William Howard Taft decried the riots in a newspaper editorial, noting that “the migration of southern negroes to northern cities, induced by the prospect of high wages, and stimulated by southern discrimination in educational facilities and the administration of justice, has created a congestion and a lack of proper housing in such cities.” He worried that employers who recruited southern blacks were “sowing seed plots of riots and lawlessness” by swelling the ranks of the city’s black population.\textsuperscript{6}

The population explosion created severe strains between the races, first and foremost in the area of housing. Because black Chicagoans were segregated into the city’s Black Belt, housing options were limited. The vast expansion of the African American population during the Great Migration created a problem of supply and demand: with housing in limited supply, rents in the Black Belt skyrocketed. A four-bedroom apartment in the Black Belt cost up to $4 more per month than an equivalent apartment in a white working-class neighborhood. Faced with little alternative, black Chicagoans expanded their traditional residential area, spreading east and west into working-class Jewish and Irish neighborhoods, respectively. The booming wartime industrial economy attracted more than African Americans, of course. As the Chicago Defender pointed out, the “rapid influx” of migrants included not only blacks but Polish, Italian, Greek,

\textsuperscript{5} Tuttle, 66; U.S. Department of Labor, Division of Negro Economics, \textit{The Negro at Work During the World War and During Reconstruction} (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1921), 68-73; “Chicago Race Riots,” \textit{The Broad Ax} (9 August 1919), 4; Henri, 51-52; Smith, 6; Merriam, 11; Strickland, 60.

\textsuperscript{6} William Howard Taft, “Causes of Race Riots,” \textit{Chicago Defender} (9 August 1919), 90.
Lithuanian, and Jewish Americans and immigrants, all of whom, in the paper's opinion, “present[ed] as much of a problem” for the city as African Americans.  

The reality, of course, was not nearly so simple. African Americans were often forced to pay exorbitant rents simply to acquire housing. As the Defender put it, white realtors were “anxious to get the Colored man's dollar.” So-called “blockbuster” realtors purposefully triggered real-estate panics by selling homes in all-white neighborhoods to black families for exorbitant prices. The cycle continued when the white families, seeking to flee the “decline” of their neighborhood, sold their homes at a loss. The agent then sold these vacant homes to other black families, again at well over market price. Although Chicago’s history of residential segregation resulted in a lack of social contact between black and white residents before World War I, this influx of black homeowners into white neighborhoods made such contacts became inevitable. Black residents found themselves the constant target of prejudice and even violence, as whites used any means at their disposal to prevent the expansion of black residential areas. Blacks thus found themselves, “not from choice but from necessity,” in an untenable position: unable to find housing within the Black Belt, but unwanted anywhere else.  

So-called “homeowner’s associations” began to appear in newly diverse neighborhoods. Though ostensibly geared toward protecting their communities from “undesirables of whatever brand or color,” such groups were thinly disguised white-supremacist organizations formed for

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8 Ibid.; “Chicago's Race Riots,” editorial, Chicago Daily News (29 July 1919), 8; “Chicago Race Riots,” The Broad Ax (9 August 1919), 4; Adair and Allen, 36; Drake and Cayton, 63-64; Tuttle, 74-107, 157-183; Strickland, 60; Philpott, 148-150.
the express purpose of “cleansing” their neighborhoods of African Americans.\textsuperscript{9} The most vocal and vituperative of these groups was the Hyde Park-Kenwood Property Owners’ Association on the city’s South Side. In the words of Thomas Philpott, the group functioned as “the middle-class equivalent of the ethnic gangs [that] protect[ed] the workingmen’s bungalow belt.” Playing on traditional fears of black social equality, the group united under the slogans “Our neighborhood must continue white,” “Stay out of Hyde Park,” and “We base our rights on priority, majority and anthropological superiority.” The group repeatedly lobbied for the city to pass segregation ordinances. In a letter to Mayor William Thompson, members complained that “the legal rights of Negroes have been placed above his moral obligation to the white people.”\textsuperscript{10}

Many of these groups’ arguments echoed the invective hurled at blacks during the strikes of 1903-1905. Black migrants were portrayed as uniquely degenerate—lazy, economically irresponsible, and morally deviant. One group distributed a flyer that painted a bleak picture of an interracial future: “what a reputation for beauty Chicago would secure,” they argued, “if visitors touring the city would see crowds of idle, insolent Negroes lounging on the South Side boulevards…filling the streets with old newspapers and tomato containers and advertising the Poro-system for removing the marcelled kinks from Negro hair in the windows of the derelict remains of what had once been a clean, respectable residence.”\textsuperscript{11} Joined by a group of realtors who feared a mass exodus of their white clients, white homeowners also produced publications and organized meetings and rallies to enflame their neighbors into an anti-black frenzy.

\textsuperscript{9} The largest such group, the Hyde Park Protective Association (later the Hyde Park Improvement Protective Club), was founded in 1890 with a pro-temperance, anti-vice mission; by the time of the Great Migration, the neighborhood's growing black population became its members' overriding concern. See Coit, 28-31; Philpott, 154-156.

\textsuperscript{10} CCRR, 589-592; Philpott, 164-167. These efforts continued well after the riot. See “‘They Shall Not Pass' Has been Adopted as the Slogan of the Hyde Park Property Owners Association,” \textit{The Broad Ax} (25 October 1919), 1.

\textsuperscript{11} CCRR, 589-592; Coit, 129-130.
Just as butchers and teamsters had done a decade and a half earlier, the homeowners portrayed black migrants as an invading army threatening to overtake the city. In another flyer discussing the New Negro movement, the homeowners decried the possibility of “the Negroes’ boldest and most impudent ambition, sex equality,” an objective the group claimed was “a universal ambition of the Negro race.” Another pamphlet, entitled “An Appeal of White Women to American Womanhood,” reprinted a letter (of questionable veracity) from German women complaining of “the bestial ferocious conduct” of black troops during World War I. The prospect of German citizens—who had been pilloried as brutish “Huns” in American newspapers during the war—being presented as innocent victims may seem incongruous. But in the face of an “invasion” of black homeowners, whiteness became a greater unifying factor than nationality.

Chicago’s compressed housing market created a racial atmosphere that was positively venomous. That atmosphere became violent and quite literally explosive. As white residents grew more resentful of the black presence in their neighborhoods, some went beyond lobbying and flyering and turned to violence. Between July 1, 1919 and March 1, 1921, fifty-eight bombs exploded within the homes of black residents. Reflecting the tremendous racial tension of the city, more than a dozen of these bombings took place in July 1919, in the weeks leading up to the riots. As if to leave no doubt as to their message, the bombers also targeted the homes and offices of realtors who sold housing to blacks, such as the banker and entrepreneur Jesse Binga. The bombings killed two people, injured countless others, and damaged an estimated $100,000 worth of property. Despite the wanton brutality of these acts of terror, only two people were arrested in connection with the bombings. Neither was convicted.

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12 CCRR, 589-592.

13 CCRR, 122-129; “Breaking the 'Solid South,” Chicago Daily Tribune (29 May 1921), 5; Cohen, 217-218;
Whites also resented the growing activism of the African American community. As St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton argued in their classic *Black Metropolis*, the migrants possessed a strong desire to advance economically. “Most Negroes,” they claimed, “visualized the [Great Migration] as a step toward…economic emancipation.”\(^{14}\) The experience of World War I—both in the rhetoric of liberty on the homefront and in the pride of black troops who served overseas—also raised new questions about the oppression African Americans faced within their own country. Black leaders and publications exhorted African Americans to express their loyalty through military service, the purchasing of Liberty Bonds, and productivity in the nation’s factories. But they also argued that in return, blacks must be allowed to participate fully in the nation’s social, political, and economic life. Black troops in particular felt the flush of resistance, feeling that they had earned a seat at the table of democracy. As Taft editorialized, “the retired negro soldier, used to arms…resenting the ingratitude he sees…is prompted to ‘direct action’ to remedy his wrongs.”\(^{15}\)

Black Chicagoans also resisted oppression through traditional political means. The city’s African American voters were overwhelmingly loyal to the city’s Republican machine, particularly its head, Mayor William Thompson. Thanks to Thompson, black Chicagoans saw some small measure of patronage from city hall, inducing them to vote for him in a bloc; the African American vote was particularly crucial in securing a hard-fought victory for Thompson.

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\(^{15}\) Grimshaw, 109; Taft, “Causes of Race Riots,” 90; Tuttle, 210-211; see also Schneider; “The ‘Old Eight Regiment,’” *The Broad Ax* (15 February 1919), 1, 4-5; “They Fought for the Flag,” ibid. (9 August 1919), 8; “The People Throughout the French Republic,” ibid. (6 September 1919), 1.
in the 1919 election. In return for significant largesse from the Thompson administration, the black community largely overlooked the Thompson administration’s well-earned reputation for corruption. White voters, however, ferociously resented African Americans’ decision to vote along racial lines. As a Homeowners’ Association pamphlet put it: “their solid vote is the Negroes’ great weapon. They have a total vote in Chicago of about 40,000. This total vote is cast solid for the candidate who makes the best bargain with them.” Through informal protest and political pressure, black Chicagoans pushed back against violent opposition to their very existence in the city.

Unfortunately, such resistance only further enraged white racists. The aspirations of black residents “collided with a general white determination to reaffirm…black people’s prewar status” as a servile race. Blacks’ rising racial pride and their efforts to translate that pride into direct resistance to oppression were particularly galling to white Chicagoans. As Taft opined in his editorial, “the educated extremists among the Negro leaders must certainly see that however great the injustice done to their Race through blind prejudice, 'direct action' is the worst possible remedy,” claiming that “in the end the feeling out of which this evil has come will be increased.” The nation’s unique postwar political culture did nothing to allay white fears. Black agitation for direct action was often linked to hysterical fears of radicalism and foreign influence.

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16 Strickland, 60; CCRR, 591; Merriam, 144-146; Tuttle, 184-207; Gosnell, 39-50.

17 Support for Thompson, and disregard for his administration’s corruption, was not universal among the black community. At least two black newspapers based in the city, the Chicago Whip and the Broad Ax, were strenuous critics of Thompson; Chicago Advocate editor and American Unity Labor Union founder R. E. Parker held regular street-corner meetings on the South Side to publicize the bombing of black homes and decry Thompson’s lack of action in response. See “The Disgrace of Chicago's Leaders,” Chicago Whip (13 March 1920), 8; “Thousands of Colored Men,” The Broad Ax (4 January 1919), 1; “Hon. William Hale Thompson,” ibid. (18 January 1919), 1; “Breaking the 'Solid South,” Chicago Daily Tribune (29 May 1921), 5.

18 CCRR, 591.

19 Tuttle, 221, 262; Taft, “Causes of Race Riots,” 90; see also Drake and Cayton, 60-61.
In some cases, such connections were real—members of the radical Industrial Workers of the World attempted to organize Chicago’s stockyards, and were particularly active in spreading their racially egalitarian message in black neighborhoods. But for the most part, such fears were wildly overstated. Black activists were linked to radicalism simply because they dared to challenge what Tuttle has termed the nation’s “race system of white superordination and black subordination.”

With black and white Chicagoans having staked their positions, tensions increased throughout the summer of 1919. A series of bitter workplace conflicts served as a grim reflection of the ways in which the CFL’s drive for interracial unity was quickly losing ground.

**Antecedents: The Limits of Interracial Unionism**

Awkwardly straddling this racial battlefield was the CFL. Having pledged its dedication to the principle of interracial cooperation, the Federation spent much of the summer furiously attempting to prevent an explosion of violence. The Stockyards Labor Council took great pains to reinforce its message that class solidarity could supercede racial enmity—that black workers could find a safe haven within the CFL, where they would be “just another member.” As violence against black citizens mounted, black and white SLC organizers held street-corner meetings in black neighborhoods, preaching the union’s gospel of equality and solidarity. The Council also consummated its own pledge to remain colorblind, passing resolutions reaffirming

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its commitment to the organization of black and white workers and expelling affiliated local unions that refused to accept African Americans on equal terms.\textsuperscript{21}

However, the machinations of employers combined with workers’ own racial fears and resentments to prevent the CFL from maintaining racial peace. The CFL’s celebrated parade of July 1919 serves as an instructive example. The event was successful in that it attracted a “checkerboard” interracial crowd of some 30,000 workers to hear speakers from the union and the black community laud the union’s efforts at interracial cooperation. At the same time, however, it reveals the limits of the union’s vision of interracial cooperation.\textsuperscript{22} The event was originally planned as a mass interracial march, but meatpacking bosses blocked the interracial alliance by concocting a story that African Americans were arming themselves and planning to use the parade as occasion to massacre whites. The police quickly revoked the union’s parade permit and forced white and black workers to march to the meeting site separately.

The CFL’s furious response reveals deep schisms between the white leaders of the Federation and the middle-class black leadership that they increasingly viewed as an enemy. Though the union’s leadership blamed the packers for stonewalling the union’s progress, they also turned their wrath against the black community. In a withering screed published in its official newspaper, the CFL excoriated the “Negro politicians… and certain preachers” who they claimed were “subsidized” by the packers and complicit in the creation of antiunion sentiment. The union claimed that the packers had paid off two black aldermen and purchased three hundred memberships in the Wabash Avenue Y.M.C.A.—a major black community center—

\textsuperscript{21} CFL Minutes, 5 January 1919, 13-14; Solomon, 44-45.

“and gave them to their [black employees] in order that they might go to the ‘Y’ and absorb the ‘anti’ union propaganda.” The CFL’s message of interracial unity was bested by the counteroffensives of employers and white workers’ own resentment at anti-union elements within the black community. The failure of the parade presaged the disappointment that would meet the 100% unionization campaign, as well as the bitter defeat of the union in the stockyards strike of 1921-1922.23

Such feelings were manifest on the shopfloor as well as in the union hall. As American industry demobilized following the end of World War I, a number of workers found themselves facing lower wages or outright unemployment. Stockyards bosses were particularly merciless in their efforts to slash costs after the war. An estimated 15,000 employees were laid off from the city’s meatpacking industry in spring of 1919. Employers seized the opportunity of the postwar labor surplus to break the power of organized labor. Thus the insult of the mass layoffs was augmented by employers’ decision to retain a high percentage of the nonunion labor, particularly nonunion black labor, hired during the wartime boom. Throughout 1919, the CFL repeatedly rebuked the packers for continuing to “import” black laborers from the South, keeping them “enslaved at low wages,” and using them “to undermine union conditions.”24

The packing bosses constantly reminded white workers of the ease with which they could be replaced. In June of 1919, a group of hair spinners at the Wilson plant—members of a whites-only union—walked off the job and were almost immediately replaced by nonunion African

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23 CFL Minutes, 3 August 1919, 19-20, 22-23; “Proclamation Concerning the Race Riots by the Chicago Federation of Labor,” The New Majority (9 August 1919); John Riley, “Serious Questions,” The New Majority, Vol. 4, No. 1 (3 July 1920); Coit, 99-100; Barrett, William Z. Foster, 98; Grossman, Land of Hope, 208-209. For more on the limits of the campaign, including an account of the 1921-1922 stockyards strike, see Chapter 6.

The relatively small size of the stockyards’ black workforce had mitigated the possibility of racial conflict in the prewar era, with the obvious exception of strikebreaking situations. With massive numbers of workers, both white and black, entering the yards during World War I, many white workers encountered African Americans in large numbers for the first time. As historian Thomas Jablonsky has noted, the two races had previously crossed paths only on streetcars and in other public spaces. Now, forced to work alongside one another on a daily basis, prejudices began to emerge. The hatreds and resentments built in white communities were carried into the workplace.

For many stockyards workers, their resentment at the retention of black labor was translated into rage at black workers themselves, who they saw as unfairly benefiting from the hard work of the SLC. The Alschuler award, for example, applied to all workers in the stockyards; CFL counsel Frank Walsh had spent much of his closing argument making an impassioned case for the importance of interracial unionism. But while an estimated 6,000 African Americans joined the SLC at some point, by summer 1919 the union’s membership roll showed barely two thousand black members in good standing. White unionists resented the fact that nonunion blacks could enjoy the benefits of higher wages and shorter hours without so much as signing a union card. Even those black workers who did join the union were resented for not taking a more active role, or quickly abandoning the union altogether. The CFL’s inability to maintain a sizable, militant black cadre would have significant impact on its ability to withstand the coming firestorm of racial violence.

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25 Grossman, 221; Foner, 144-145.

26 Jablonsky, 96; see also Barrett, 223-224; Drake and Cayton, 64.

27 Grossman, 221; Foner, 144-145; see also CCRR, 413-414.
White workers’ resentment of black reticence fueled a series of conflicts throughout the summer of 1919. Eight days before the riot, 10,000 stockyards workers walked off the job, “the climax of a number of small strikes of the past month,” as the Tribune reported. Among their grievances was the use of “scab” boxes in packing meat, and the abundance of company and city police in the vicinity of the yards, seen as representatives of the company and the guardians of nonunion labor. In advising the men to return to work, SLC secretary J. W. Johnstone attempted to assuage the racial enmity that pervaded the yards and pleaded “for cool headedness and unity among the workers, white and black.” The smaller walkouts that helped precipitate the July strike were nearly always occasioned by anger at black workers. The problem was simple: white workers still perceived their African American coworkers as members of a “scab race.” For their part, as Grossman has noted, “nonunion blacks construed the refusal of union men to work with them as a racial insult.”

The mutual mistrust of white unionists and black nonunion workers quickly descended into violence.

The walkouts were accompanied by vulgar and even violent conflicts on the shopfloor itself. In testimony before the Alschuler committee, both black and white workers offered a glimpse into the racial tensions that dominated the stockyards. White workers decried black anti-union “agitators” who they felt were hired and retained merely to “raise a line of prejudice, and show the white men…[that] the colored man is not with him, and show the colored man…[that] the white man is not with him.” Such workers existed only “to raise dissention [sic] on that footing.” Black workers often responded negatively to union organizing. When white union

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28 “Angry at Guards, 10,000 Workers at Yards Strike,” and “80,000 Packing workers Demand 30 Per Cent Raise,” Chicago Daily Tribune (19 July 1919), 2; “Police Leave Stockyards; Strike Ends,” Chicago Daily Tribune (10 August 1919), 1; Grossman, 221. For more on union resentment against police, see chapter 1.

29 For more on workplace disputes, see Chapter 3.
member Gus Grabe attempted to get a black coworker to sign a union card, the man responded, “you son-of-a-bitch, I will cut your God damn head off, if you say another word to me.” When Grabe attempted to explain the various benefits the union had secured, the nonunion worker derisively dismissed him, claiming such benefits had little to do with the union and more to do with the efforts of Judge Alschuler and the federal government. Grabe lamented that the packers were “pushing these non-union men ahead” and protecting them.30

The legitimacy of Grabe’s suspicions was difficult to deny. Throughout the summer of 1919, white workers resented what they viewed as the special protections granted to black workers, and increasingly protested in organized ways. In one case, a white gang struck and refused to return unless the company fired three black men who had refused to join the union, but still the company refused. As black workers’ opposition to unionism was generalized into rage at white workers, racial violence, or at least the threat of racial violence, became a regular feature of work in the stockyards. One white employee recalled his horror at a group of black men who were discussing arming themselves for protection—“talking about guns and stuff.” White and black employees “were afraid to work when they had their backs toward [each other], for fear of getting a knife jabbed into them.”31

Basic tasks became fraught with peril. One worker claimed that he and fellow union members were afraid of doing their job breaking cattle legs, since “non union men are working when our backs are turned to the gang…and we don’t know when we are going to get it from the


In one particularly gruesome case, a black nonunion man baited an organizer into a fight, then bashed him over the head with an iron pipe, knocking him unconscious. Despite the protestations of the union men in the work gang, the company refused to fire the offender, and he ultimately paid a fine of fifteen dollars. The union gang subsequently walked off the job, deriding “the attitude of the non-union men.”

For white workers, nonunion blacks represented a dire economic, social, and—increasingly—physical threat. For black workers, the union provided few benefits, and its members spent more time intimidating than organizing. As a result, workers spent the weeks leading up to the riot in a state of violent agitation.

The explosion of Chicago’s black population, the spread of African Americans into traditionally white neighborhoods and the resulting contestation over both public and private space, and fear of a rising racial consciousness among African Americans all contributed directly to the rise of racial violence. Chicago’s workers were also implicated in the racial anger that would explode into violence in late July. The efforts of bosses to both reduce and browbeat their workforce, the anger of union leadership at employer obstinacy, and workplace conflicts between rank-and-file whites and blacks all contributed to a toxic workplace atmosphere by July 1919. Despite its claims to peace and interracial cooperation, the CFL would need to muster all of its powers to restrain its members during the orgy of violence to follow.

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33 Testimony of Bedford, ibid., 220-229; Testimony of Dennis Lane, ibid., 69. The man hit by the pipe was Charlie Jamieson; see testimony of Frank Custer, ibid., 280-281 and testimony of Austin Williams, ibid., pp. 449-454.
Antecedents: Racial Murder in the Land of Lincoln

Black and white Chicagoans had been contesting the occupancy of public spaces for months, so it was grimly appropriate that the riot began at a beach on the city’s South Side. Though Chicago’s beaches were strictly segregated, this particular beach—which stretched from 27th to 29th Streets—was not officially maintained by the city. Despite this lack of de jure segregation, and despite the fact that the beach abutted a heavily black neighborhood, a tacit understanding between the beach’s racially diverse regulars held that black bathers were to remain in the area of 27th Street, while whites would occupy its southern end, near 29th Street. As the Chicago Commission on Race Relations noted, each race “kept pretty much to its own part, observing, moreover, an imaginary boundary extending into the water.” Around 4 P.M., a group of black beachgoers walked through the white section of the beach and waded into the water. A confrontation ensued, with white and black bathers throwing rocks at one another. Meanwhile, a seventeen-year-old African American boy named Eugene Williams was swimming in the water and drifted past the “imaginary boundary” into the white section of the water. A group of whites hurled rocks at him. Williams grabbed onto a railroad tie, but was pelted with stones. Blacks on the beach pleaded with the crowd to let them rescue Williams, but any who attempted to enter the water was beaten and stoned. Within minutes, Williams went under and drowned.34

The black beachgoers were infuriated. Several claimed that they could identify the whites who had thrown the rocks and demanded their arrest. Exacerbating the situation, Williams’ body could not initially be found, giving rise to rumors that whites’ stones had killed Williams before he slipped underwater. Whites accused blacks of starting the fracas, claiming it was the result of

34 “Report Two Killed, Fifty Hurt, in Race Riots,” Chicago Daily Tribune (28 July 1919), 1; “300 Armed Negroes Gather; New Rioting Starts; Militia Next,” Chicago Daily News (28 July 1919), 1; “Riot Sweeps Chicago,” Chicago Defender (2 August 1919), 1; CCRR, 4-5; Schneider, 27; Tuttle, 8.
a dispute over a craps game; police vindicated them by refusing to arrest anyone for Williams’
death. African Americans on the beach crowded around the police officers and demanded justice.
The police responded by arresting the leader of the protesters for disturbing the peace.
Reinforcements arrived and dispersed the crowd, but the die was cast. A mere two hours later,
with rumors regarding Williams’ death sweeping the Black Belt, an angry crowd of black
citizens gathered at 29th Street. When police tried to break up the group, an infuriated black
citizen named James Crawford fired a pistol at them. The police returned fire, killing him
instantly. The Chicago race riot had begun.35

The course the riot took, however, was different from that of racial conflicts past. Before the
staggering violence that swept Chicago in 1919, the state had been home to two of the most
infamous race riots in the nation’s history. In August 1908, a mob of whites in the state capital of
Springfield attempted to raid the local jail and lynch a pair of black men accused of rape and
murder. When the sheriff turned them away, the crowd turned its rage against the city’s black
community. In two days of violence, the mob burned most of Springfield’s black neighborhood,
as well as the businesses of whites known to be friendly to African Americans, and lynched two
black citizens. In many ways, the riot was merely a mass expansion of the lynching impulse. As
Roberta Howe Senechal has argued, the overwhelmingly working-class mob was enraged not
only at being thwarted from its purpose at the jailhouse door, but was also resentful of
Springfield’s political and economic elite, who had “allowed blacks a small share of the power
and rewards of local and state government.” As a result, the mob felt its only recourse was “to

35 Ibid; Jablonsky, 96; see also “Bloody Anarchy,” The Broad Ax (2 August 1919), 1-2. The first officer on the scene,
Patrolman Daniel Callahan, was the subject of considerable public outcry from the black community and was
suspended from duty. The man alleged to have thrown the fatal rock, George Stauber, was eventually arrested. See
of Race Riots in Court,” Chicago Daily News (1 August 1919), 1; “The Colored Citizens Committee” and “Calls
Copper Responsible for Rioting,” The Broad Ax (2 August 1919), 4.
drive all blacks from the city.” Though complex and deep-rooted, the anger that gave rise to the Springfield riot was manifested in a drive for racial cleansing: the impulse to “purify” the city of black residents.

The bloody race riot that swept East St. Louis in July 1917 was similarly motivated. Like the Springfield riot, the East St. Louis massacre was occasioned by a slew of conflicts over local politics, morality and vice, and—in particular—wages and employment. Unlike the CFL, East St. Louis’s unions made little effort to organize black workers. In fact, many of the city’s unions openly agitated against the presence of black migrants in the city, whom they felt lowered wages and brought with them a slew of degenerate pathologies and criminal behaviors. The city’s employers eagerly exploited racial divisions within the workforce. In 1916, the Aluminum Ore company broke a strike using black labor; buoyed by its triumph, the company actively recruited blacks from the South, offering high pay and subsidized housing. In the spring of 1917, a proposed strike was crushed due to the mass employment of black workers. This defeat, in the words of historian Malcolm McLaughlin, negated whites’ “privileged position in the workplace” and threatened their “relationship with the state, impugned their citizenship, and marked them as disloyal.” A shootout between a black citizen and a police officer was enough to provoke a full-scale massacre. For two days, white mobs roamed the streets, brutally murdering black men and women with guns, clubs, stones, and knives. The rioters severed fire hoses, then set fire to black homes and shot the inhabitants as they fled. Several African Americans were lynched from telegraph poles and lampposts and their bodies burned. State militiamen, sent to put down the riot, were accused of ignoring white brutality or even actively participating in it. The riot’s

violence was so extreme that W. E. B. Du Bois led 10,000 people in a silent protest march through Manhattan.\(^{37}\)

Much like the Springfield riot, the East St. Louis massacre was in essence a mass lynching—a violent attempt to restore whites to their place at top of the city’s social, political, and economic hierarchy, and to punish blacks for their perceived transgression against the city’s racial order. Historian Charles L. Lumpkins has described the event as an “American pogrom,” a form of ethnic cleansing involving “the organized, physical destruction of a racially defined community” as part of “a violent and protracted struggle…to reconfigure white supremacy into a form appropriate for the urban industrial North.”\(^{38}\) In both cases, the black populace was terrorized by marauding bands of whites who sought either to expel them from the city or kill them outright, and in both cases the black population—despite sporadic attempts at self-defense—was largely powerless against such assaults.

Chicago’s race riot was unique in both its scale and its character. It became clear after the riot’s bloody first days that “the ecology of the Chicago riot was quite unlike that of other race riots,” in the words of William Tuttle. Indeed, the Chicago riot was not a pogrom, a mass lynching, or a massacre, but a race war—a series of pitched battles between whites and blacks for control of their city. This may have been due in part to the events in East St. Louis, which horrified Chicago’s black population and convinced many that the government could no longer be relied upon for protection against racial violence. As coroner’s investigator Roy C. Woods concluded, the victims of the East St. Louis riot were “all defenseless and innocent of any

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\(^{38}\) Lumpkins, 1-10.
wrongdoing, mostly old men, women, and children.” In Chicago, however, “the opposite was true,” as members of both races were “leaders and aggressors…in the rioting.” The evidence for Woods’ theory was manifest: by the time the Illinois militia put down the riot, 38 people (23 black and 15 white) had been killed, 537 injured (342 black and 205 white), and more than one thousand left homeless, making it easily the most severe of the estimated twenty-five racial conflicts of the Red Summer of 1919. Even more revealing, out of the riot’s 38 victims, none were women or girls; of the 537 injured, only 10 were female. Moreover, unlike the gruesome spectacles in Springfield and East St. Louis, the Chicago riot “was marked by no hangings or burnings” of black citizens. The absence of such actions indicated that the Chicago riot was not a massacre, but a battle between black and white citizens. 39 The armed self-defense of black Chicagoans turned the city’s riot into a race war.

The unique character of the riot made it a particular challenge to the city’s labor movement. Though the CFL would succeed in restraining its members from participating in the worst of the violence, the riot’s warlike character cast black and white Chicagoans in a position of mutual distrust. Unlike the riots at Springfield and East St. Louis, which served to reinforce existing structures of racial hegemony, the race war in Chicago opened entirely new gaps between white and black citizens. For those who could not avoid racial contact—workers in the stockyards, for instance—the riot was a period of almost unbearable tension, as members of both races feared for their lives. Its aftermath would leave Chicago’s workers and unions struggling to keep solidarity alive amid an atmosphere of fear, resentment, and lingering violence, and would set the CFL’s organizing drive on a path toward decline.

39 Tuttle, 64-65, 231; Hoffman, 1, 20; Comment of Investigator Roy C. Woods, in ibid., 63; CCRR, 1, 7-9, 17; “Roster of Those Slain, White and Colored, in Race Riots in Chicago,” Chicago Daily News (29 July 1919), 1; Schneider, 27.
The Riot: Urban Warfare in the Windy City

Almost immediately after the death of James Crawford, the city’s Black Belt became the site of furious violence. Throughout the afternoon and evening of the 27th, rumors circulated throughout the African American district: that Williams had been physically held in the water by a white beachgoer, or even shot; that the police had drawn weapons on anyone who tried to rescue him; that his body had been smuggled out of the city to prevent a true accounting of his cause of death. In the wake of James Crawford’s death, these rumors fueled a violent rage. White people who passed through the Black Belt were assaulted—four of them beaten, five stabbed, and one shot. As the night wore on, new mobs sprang up throughout the district and began roving patrols. Infuriated at the attacks, white mobs retaliated. As “news of the afternoon doings…spread through all parts of the south side by nightfall,” the Tribune reported, “whites stood at all prominent corners ready to avenge the beatings their brethren had received.” Whites lined Halsted and State streets, arming themselves with clubs and “pummeling” any blacks who passed by. Throughout the night of the 27th, from nine o’clock P.M. until the early predawn hours, twenty-seven blacks were beaten, seven were stabbed, and four were shot. A series of minor skirmishes continued well into the morning, as blacks who were traveling on streetcars were dragged into the street and beaten.40

The violence escalated on Monday. The early morning hours were relatively peaceful, as South Side residents, alerted to the previous night’s violence, largely barricaded themselves within their homes. As a result, however, those that ventured out tended to be only rioters out for blood. Many of those taking to the streets carried pistols, which they brandished menacingly,

making threats to invade black areas of the city.\textsuperscript{41} A strike of the city’s streetcar operators made travel nearly impossible. White rioters used wagons to block the city’s thoroughfares and then dragged black trolley riders into the streets and beat them. Blacks who dared pass through traditionally white districts did so at their own peril; several African Americans were killed as they walked to work. A group of soldiers and sailors on leave joined in the violence: “augmented by civilians,” they moved through the Loop on Tuesday morning, killing two black citizens and beating and robbing a number of others.\textsuperscript{42}

Crucial to the expansion of the riot’s scope and brutality was the role of rumor. Throughout the first three days of the riot, crowds were possessed by rage, seeking vengeance for non-existent crimes. In his official inquest, Cook County coroner Peter Hoffman expressed his frustration with the “persistent reports…that the total number of deaths far exceeded thirty-eight.” The Chicago Commission on Race Relations criticized the city’s mobs for circulating rumors that strained “all reasonable limits of credibility,” including one report that black Pullman porters were smuggling trainloads of firearms into the Black Belt, and another claiming that more than seventy-five white policemen had been murdered by black gangs. Such rumors, which were nearly impossible to dispel amid the chaos of the riot, proved a volatile fuel for mob rage. In fact, the effect of rumor was so virulent that the militia purchased all copies of the August 1

\textsuperscript{41} “Riot Sweeps Chicago,” \textit{Chicago Defender} (2 August 1919), 1.

issue of the progressive black newspaper the *Chicago Whip*, fearing its contents “might stir the residents to further violence.”\(^{43}\)

By Tuesday, the riot had descended into race warfare, with white and black Chicagoans launching violent offensives against one another. Whites loaded themselves into so-called “death cars” and careened through black neighborhoods, firing indiscriminately into houses and storefronts. Black citizens defended themselves by constructing barricades and sniping back at the cars. But as the Chicago Commission on Race Relations discovered, “so great was the fear of these raiding parties that the Negroes distrusted all motor vehicles and frequently opened fire on them without waiting to learn the intent of the occupants.” Blacks mobs also took the offensive against whites. A pair of whites who worked in the Black Belt were set upon and murdered on their way home from work.\(^{44}\) Whites also struck at African American workplaces. In retaliation for the death of a white rioter, a white mob stormed the Palmer House and the downtown post office, both of which employed a large number of African Americans. Though the police managed to restrain the rioters and evacuate the black employees, the city was rapidly descending into chaos. Hearing of the race war, a group of nearly two hundred black prisoners in Cook County Jail armed themselves with makeshift knives and clubs and menaced white prisoners and guards until a force of city police managed to restore order.\(^{45}\)

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\(^{43}\) CCRR, 21-33, 568; Hoffman, 21; see also “Troops Moving on Chicago as Negroes Shoot into Crowds,” *Chicago Daily News* (29 July 1919), 3; “Ghastly Deeds of Race Rioters Told” and “List of Injured,” *Chicago Defender* (2 August 1919), 1; and “Echoes and Re-Echoes of the Reign of Anarchy,” *The Broad Ax* (9 August 1919), 1-4.

\(^{44}\) CCRR, 6, 16-21; “Negro in Barricade Shoots Two Whites,” *Chicago Daily News* (30 July 1919), 1; Coit, 138-139.

Augmenting the sense that Chicago had become an urban no-man’s-land was the presence of thousands of refugees. Throughout the riot, hundreds of black Chicagoans were forced to sleep in police stations until police could escort them home. The Tribune referred to the city’s central police precinct as “‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ in a modern setting,” a tragic tableau of frightened men and women, resembling nothing more than “fugitive slaves of the ante-bellum south.” Blacks who lived in predominantly white neighborhoods, such as Englewood, were forced to flee their homes for the duration of the riot, during which time their possessions were looted and their houses burned. The highways north of the city became the scene of a mass exodus, as hundreds of black Chicagoans fled to Milwaukee. The riot’s warlike character had become fully realized, as African Americans were forced to choose between leaving their homes and arming themselves for defense.

For the most part, the African Americans who remained in the city did not reciprocate attacks on their neighborhoods by invading white areas. Merely walking to work through a white neighborhood was, in the words of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, “the signal for a carnival of death.” But black self-defense became a defining feature of the Chicago riot. The aspirations of black migrants, black participation in World War I both overseas and on the homefront, and the rise of black racial consciousness as typified by the New Negro compelled blacks to defend themselves from white violence. Befitting a people whose very homes were


48 Tuttle, 210-211.
under attack, black self-defense often took on a community character. In addition to creating barricades and sniping posts, black undertakers refused to accept the bodies of white riot victims. Following a skirmish, a group of blacks followed an ambulance carrying wounded whites to black-owned and operated Provident Hospital and had to be restrained by police lest they break down the doors and kill the whites being treated inside. On Tuesday, the residents of the Black Belt barricaded their streets, stopping all traffic (save trolley cars) south of North Avenue and east of Wentworth Avenue. A group of black World War I veterans sent word to “clean the district of whites,” and led a mob that “set upon [whites] with unmeasurable [sic] fury.”

The riot’s descent into an all-out war pitted black and white Chicagoans against one another, with significant impacts on the city’s labor movement.

**Blood Work: White and Black Workers in the Riot**

From the beginning of the riot, the CFL recognized the dire danger that racial violence represented and restrained its members from participating. The warfare that swept Chicago, conducted primarily between blue-collar workers, threatened to destroy the interracial organization the CFL had spent two years constructing. As a result, Federation leaders raced to restrain their white members from participating in the violence and took great pains to remind black workers of the CFL’s dedication to nonviolence and interracial cooperation. In the middle of the riot, the CFL published a lengthy broadside in its official newspaper, *The New Majority*. Entitled, “For White Union Men to Read,” the article exhorted whites to recall their own terror during strikes “where gunmen or machine guns have been brought in and turned on him.”

49 CCRR, 16-21; “Troops Moving on Chicago as Negroes Shoot into Crowds,” *Chicago Daily News* (29 July 1919), 2; “Ghastly Deeds of Race Rioters Told,” *Chicago Defender* (2 August 1919), 1; Williams and Williams, 81-85; Foner, 146; Coit, 136-137.
declaring “that is how the negroes feel…they are panic-stricken over the prospect of being killed.” White workers had a duty not only to refrain from violence, CFL leaders argued, but to prevent it: “a heavy responsibility rests on the white portion of the community to stop assaults [of] negroes by white men.” That obligation fell most heavily “upon the white men and women of organized labor—not because they had anything to do with starting the present trouble, but because of their advantageous position to help end it.” Guided by the principles of class solidarity and interracial cooperation, the CFL felt confident it could lead the city’s workers back into a position of peace and fellowship.

These efforts were largely successful. As the violence quieted, SLC organizers entered both Packingtown and the Black Belt to restore trust and harmony between white and black workers. Out of these meetings grew a confidence that the union’s message was being received. It was reported that white workers, repulsed by the riot’s violence, “expressed sympathy in many ways with their Negro fellow-workers.” The union also managed to maintain unity through financial aid. Adroitly recognizing that packing bosses might use the riot to divide workers, the CFL offered a safe haven at its headquarters, where workers—white and black—could receive a hot meal. The union’s soup kitchen not only brought in new streams of unorganized workers; it also kept the men “out of the packers’ bread line,” where bosses peddled anti-union propaganda to captive audiences.51

For the most part, the CFL succeeded in its efforts, as its membership largely refrained from the riot’s brutality. As James Barrett has noted, perhaps the most striking feature of the riot was


51 CCRR, 45, 399; “Rush Food to Riot Zone,” Chicago Daily News (1 August 1919); “Keep Up Relief Work in Riot and Fire Area,” Chicago Daily News (5 August 1919), 4; “Industries Gives [sic] Data on Workers,” Chicago Defender (11 November 1922), 14; Spero and Harris, 276-278; Herbst, 49; see also “Food to be Rushed to the Hungry in City's Riot Center,” Chicago Daily News (31 July 1919), 1; “Paying off Colored Stockyards Workers in District Patrolled by Troops,” ibid. (1 August 1919), 3.
“the conspicuous absence of…immigrant stockyards laborers from the crowds that attacked blacks.”

The lack of large-scale participation in the riots by CFL workers may have been due to a genuine feeling of racial harmony and class solidarity; however, it is likely that, due to the location of the violence, many stockyards workers were simply too afraid to leave their homes. In any case, the CFL was largely able to restrain its members from participating in the riot.

Despite the absence of union members in the worst of the violence, the city’s gangs were all too eager to fan the flames of racial outrage. Blue-collar gangs, primarily Irish, initiated or escalated much of the violence. Many of these gangs, such as the infamous Ragen’s Colts, were based in the Irish neighborhoods of Bridgeport and Canaryville that lay east of the yards. To get to work, African Americans were forced to cross these districts, leaving them vulnerable to attack by white mobs exhorted to violence by “vocal bystanders” such as the gang members. Indeed, while roughly one-third of the clashes recorded by the CCRR occurred in the Black Belt itself, a significantly greater number (around 41 percent) took place near the stockyards, primarily along thoroughfares in these Irish neighborhoods, and was “aimed particularly at blacks traveling to and from work.”

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52 Barrett, Work and Community, 222; Barrett and Roediger, 31-32; “Proclamation Concerning the Race Riots by the Chicago Federation of Labor, The New Majority, Vol. 2, No. 6 (9 August 1919); Arnesen, 13-15; Horowitz, 43-44; Brody, Butcher Workmen, 87. This conclusion is disputed in some circles. Historian John Keiser has argued that “many white workers participated in the rioting in spite of the warning by [John] Fitzpatrick that the packers would be the only ones to profit.” It is, of course, nearly impossible to ascertain the union affiliation of the mass of rioters, but the city’s newspapers contain no real mention of any connection between Chicago’s unions and the riot; given the local press’s anti-union bent, they would have gleefully decried the CFL if an opportunity presented itself. The most likely explanation is that some union workers participated in the riot, but not in significant numbers, and certainly not because of any connection with the CFL/SLC. See Keiser, 166-167; Fogel, 34.

53 The physical layout of the South Side provides one possible explanation for SLC members’ lack of participation in the rioting. The SLC had an immense contingent of Polish, Lithuanian, and Slovak workers, all of whom lived south and west of the stockyards in the Back of the Yards neighborhood. The lack of conflict between the Eastern European and black workers may be a result of the fact that contact between the races was rare west of Halsted Street. See Drake and Cayton, 63; Barrett, Work and Community, 221-223.

54 CCRR, 38, 48-49; Cohen, Making a New Deal, 37; “Troops Moving on Chicago as Negroes Shoot into Crowds,”
Figure 1: Detail of Chicago Commission on Race Relations map of sites of violence during the riot. Note the concentration of attacks in the Black Belt (center) and on thoroughfares leading to the stockyards (starred, lower left).

Indeed, the CCRR noted that “the main areas of violence were thoroughfares and natural highways between the job and home”—predictable routes of travel where African Americans would be isolated and vulnerable. The frequent contact between whites and blacks in these areas had caused tension before the riots. Now, such areas became a locus of conflict. Ragen’s Colts were declared responsible for the death of at least one black resident and other gang members were arrested for plotting to burn down much of the Black Belt. As Carl Sandburg memorably declared: “the riots furnished an excuse for every element of Gangland to…test their prowess by the most ancient ordeals of the jungle.”

The riot’s violence quieted during much of Monday, July 28, but resumed with staggering fury that afternoon, as “pistols were flashed and men made threats to invade the stockyards district, where the whites were attacking every black face.” The CCRR reported that the riot reached its height on Monday afternoon, as “white men and boys living between the Stock Yards and the ‘Black Belt’ sought malicious amusement in directing mob violence against Negro workers returning home.” Black workers walking to and from work they risked their very lives.

On Monday, a black stockyards worker named Henry Goodman departed the yards and boarded a streetcar, which was stopped by a white barricade. A mob surrounded the car, ordered its black passengers to disembark, and beat Goodman to death with bricks and stones. On the morning of Thursday, July 31, black butcher William Dozier was walking to work when a white mob began...

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55 Sandburg, 3; “Ragen’s Colts Start Riot,” Chicago Defender (28 June 1919), 1; “Ragen's Colts Deny Riot Responsibility,” Chicago Daily News (2 August 1919), 3; “Clubs Accused in Riot Arson Plots,” ibid. (14 August 1919); Williams and Williams, 75; CCRR, 1, 11-17; Hoffman, 23; Tuttle, 32-33; Barrett, 220-222; Schneider, 27; Coit, 108-110; Philpott, 170-180. George Stauber, he man alleged to have thrown the rock that killed Eugene Williams, was reputed to be a member of Ragen's Colts. See “Alleged Starter of Race Riots in Court,” Chicago Daily News (1 August 1919), 1; Rose Keeffe, Guns and Roses: The Untold Story of Dean O'Banion, Chicago's Big Shot Before Al Capone (Nashville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2003), 118.

56 CCRR, 5-9; Herbst, 46; Philpott, 170-180; “Ghastly Deeds of Race Rioters Told,” Chicago Defender (2 August 1919), 1.
to chase him. Dozier fled into the yards, but the crowd overtook him, pelting him with stones and beating him with sticks and shovels. Bloodied, Dozier lay on the ground as a man named Joseph Carka split open his skull with a hammer. Another mob cornered a group of black stockyards workers as they left work; their lives were saved only when militia beat back the crowd.  

Blacks defended themselves against such violence. In another streetcar attack, a white mob led by Nicholas Kleinmark boarded a trolley car and attacked a trio of black men with clubs, badly beating two of them; one of the men pulled a pocketknife and stabbed Kleinmark to death. A similar situation occurred on the way to the stockyards, as a black man named William Henderson stabbed a white man named Joseph Powers in self-defense. Black workers also organized themselves into groups. One such mob climbed onto a hilltop next to the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad at 51st Street and began firing across the tracks into white neighborhoods. Other groups of blacks sniped at elevated trains as they passed by. The groups managed to wound four whites, who fled into the stockyards hospital to receive treatment. The Tribune also reported that stockyards police engaged in at least two “desperate revolver battles” with black men who were alleged to have killed a pair of white women and a white child. The riot’s expansion into the stockyards area was a harbinger of events to come; with black and white workers fearing for their lives at the workplace as well as at home, the CFL’s mission of creating a racially egalitarian union would be sorely tested.


59 “Strike is On; Cars Stop! 20 Slain in Race Riots,” Chicago Daily Tribune (29 July 1919), 1.
By Wednesday, July 30, the riot had quieted significantly. The Black Belt and stockyards areas remained hazardous, but the most brutal period of the riot had ended. Violence was further minimized by the arrival of state militia on Wednesday evening and a downpour on Thursday, which broke the miserable heat that had characterized much of the week. By Thursday morning, Governor Frank Lowden felt confident in declaring the situation to be “well in hand.” Indeed, the first three days of the riot saw thirty deaths, but on Friday only one injury, and no fatalities, were reported.\(^60\)

There was only one serious incident after the arrival of the militia: on Saturday, August 2, a massive fire swept through a Lithuanian neighborhood west of the stockyards, destroying 49 buildings, causing a quarter-million dollars in damage, and leaving more than nine hundred people—the vast majority of them stockyards workers and their families—homeless. Whites immediately blamed blacks for the fire, although it was speculated that white arsonists wearing blackface were responsible. In any event, the conflagration “enflamed the immigrant community against the Negroes and focused the racial conflict, hitherto generalized, in the stockyards,” according to the CCRR. The violence that overtook the stockyards district had now spread into a white community, augmenting feelings of racial resentment and threatening to explode into violence at the workplace. The CFL, fearful of a resumption of the riot, would have to work even harder to restore a sense of interracial unity to the yards.\(^61\)

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\(^61\) CCRR, 7; “2,000 Homeless in Fire,” *Chicago Daily News* (2 August 1919); “Echoes and Re-Echoes of the Reign of Anarchy,” *The Broad Ax* (9 August 1919), 1-2; Jablonsky, 96-97; Brody, *Butcher Workmen*, 87; Fogel, 34; Horowitz, 43-44.
Though the CFL renounced the brutality of the riot, and its members remained mostly absent from its brutality, the riot deepened divisions between whites and blacks. Distrust between whites and blacks naturally arose in the wake of a full-blown race war, and threatened to shatter the CFL’s interracial alliance. The union moved quickly to frame the riots as the result of employer oppression. A violent strike at the Argo plant in June gave the union an ideal parallel; in that conflict, the company had locked out its striking employees and replaced them with six hundred black strikebreakers, some of whom were armed and tasked with guarding the plant. During a rally at the factory gates, the scab guards shot dead two strikers. The CFL considered the two situations analogous, claiming that the “race trouble gripping Chicago” was merely “the whirlwind…[coming] home to roost.” They blamed the city’s racial animus on “the enthusiastic idiots” who “imported” black labor into the city and “gleefully” murdered peaceful strikers.62

Indeed, the CFL focused much of its rage on the city’s anti-union employers, who, they claimed, “made unprecedented efforts to turn the race riots into a labor war,” a purported conspiracy involving “the cooperation of the Governor of this State; the General of the State Militia; the Mayor of Chicago and his Chief of Police.” The packers ignited the race riots, the CFL argued, because of the success of the union’s organizing campaign: “we had the Negroes ready to join in and it was then that they packers decided to array the races against each other.” The riot was the result of “profitteering meat packers” seeking “to disrupt the union labor

movement in the stockyards.” SLC secretary J. W. Johnstone even called for the prosecution of packing bosses for conspiracy to commit murder.⁶³

But within the union’s criticism of the packers was buried a kernel of resentment at black workers themselves, presaging the bitter conflict that would follow. In a hearing regarding the race riots before federal judge Samuel Alschuler, John Fitzpatrick accused the packers of creating “a situation among the colored people.” But he also upbraided black “preachers and doctors and others” in the black community, claiming they were paid off by the packers to spread anti-union propaganda. Fitzpatrick also criticized black workers themselves, implying that they were clueless dupes, all too easily led astray by their leadership. “There is no friction between white non-union and colored non-union men,” he claimed, with the exception of the fact that “the poor deluded colored non-union man will allow himself to be exploited by the packers to the detriment of his own fellow negroes, and to the great injury of the white worker too.”⁶⁴ Despite the CFL’s claims to an ideology of interracial harmony, the stunning violence of the riots had clearly created an atmosphere of distrust among Chicago’s workers and the leaders who represented them.

The warlike character of the riot, particularly the black community’s large-scale employment of armed self-defense, created significant rifts between the city’s black and white residents. CFL leaders sought to curb the impact of the violence by reiterating their commitment to interracial solidarity, and managed to restrain their membership from participating in the violence. Nevertheless, the brutality of street gangs and the determination of black self-defense had

⁶³ Letter, John Fitzpatrick and Jack Johnstone to William B. Wilson, dated 23 August 1919, FMCS, Box 41; “Labor Blames Packers and Press for Riots,” Chicago Daily Tribune (4 August 1919), 2; “Union Leaders Accuse Packers of Inciting Riot,” August 1919, John Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 8, Folder 61, Chicago History Museum; “Proclamation...” New Majority; see also CFL Minutes, 3 August 1919, 19-20; “Black and White Workers Are Fighting the Same Battle Say Labor Chiefs,” Chicago Whip (15 August 1919), 3; Bart, 11-12.

⁶⁴ Untitled Hearing, August 1919, FMCS, Box 41, 96.
reduced the area around the stockyards to a war zone. As a result, reconstruction of the city’s race relations would necessarily involve a Herculean effort to unite blacks and whites at the workplace. The CFL would assume that responsibility, but their efforts would prove largely futile. The riot, and the union’s actions in its aftermath, would leave Chicago’s black and white workers more divided than ever.

**Aftermath: Salvaging the Stockyards**

In the wake of the riots, Carl Sandburg claimed that “the clashes between white and colored people in the stockyards and adjacent districts are not a race question so much as a labor union question.” Although the riots were primarily a racial conflict, they also took place in the context of unprecedented labor unrest. Some four million workers participated in strikes in 1919. In Chicago, an estimated quarter-million workers were involved in labor disputes during that summer alone. A massive strike of nearly 5,000 city employees kept street sweepers, garbage collectors, bridge laborers, clerks, and firefighters off the job. At the McCormick works of International Harvester, some nearly 8,000 employees walked out in protest of an employee representation plan. A lockout of building trades workers put nearly 100,000 out of work. 65 With the summer of 1919 marked by bitter class conflict and brutal racial conflict, it was clear that the riot would have a significant impact on labor. With racial and class tensions at an all-time high, organized labor would be presented with the opportunity to play a major role, for good or for ill, in the restoration of order after the riot.

Indeed, the crucial role of labor in the city’s post-riot reconstruction was most apparent in the stockyards. Although union workers were conspicuously absent from the riot’s conflicts, the riot

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had raged just outside the stockyards, which were closed for much of the conflict. With the riot ended, the CFL recognized that the reopening of the yards would be a crucial moment for the union. CFL leaders immediately went on the offensive. In the opinion of John Fitzpatrick and J. W. Johnstone, the riots were not evidence of true racial hatred, but were rather the result of employer oppression. The “importation” of black labor, the poisoning of middle-class black leadership against unionism, and black migrants’ inexperience with union organizing all contributed to an atmosphere in which blue-collar whites and blacks murdered one another in the streets. With the riots quelled, the CFL proposed a solution: Chicago’s unions would lead the city forward, creating racially harmonious workplaces in which white and black workers could coexist in class solidarity. As J. W. Johnstone wrote in an editorial following the riots, “it is a safe bet that if all the workers, men and women, in Chicago, belonged to the trade union movement, race riots would be unknown.”66 Naturally, the city’s employers rejected such a plan, and in fact attempted to use the riots to break the power of the CFL.

It is true that the riot’s aftermath became as much a union issue as a racial one. Historians have generally focused on the sources of the riot, but have given comparatively little attention to the crucial impact of the riot’s aftermath on the Chicago labor movement. The reconstruction of the city’s workplaces in the wake of the riots would represent a crucial test both for the CFL’s vision of interracial unionism and for its ability to withstand an assault from the packers—a test it bitterly failed. As the city’s workers emerged from their barricaded homes, the SLC attempted to control their return to the stockyards in the hopes of both avoiding further violence and of strengthening their own campaign for interracial unionism. But the riot had dealt the CFL a major financial and structural blow, damage that was only augmented as employers successfully

turned the riot to their own advantage. The SLC’s efforts to re-organize workers in the stockyards were derailed by a series of strikes that displayed both the weakness of the CFL’s vision and the ability of employers to exploit and prey upon it. Coupled with the riot’s brutality, these strikes, and the violence that accompanied them, helped push African Americans away from unions and toward racially conscious organizing among themselves. The violence that continued to wrack the stockyards throughout the late summer of 1919 dramatized the chasm that had been opened by the riot and its aftermath, as well as the ability of the packers to take advantage of such weaknesses.

The riot weakened the CFL in several crucial ways. As the majority of stockyards workers remained at home for at least one day during the riot, the responsibility fell to the union to support those who needed food or emergency assistance. This support continued after the riot, as the packers in particular saw an opportunity to save money and break the power of the union, and laid off large groups of workers; many others were fired for protesting, either verbally or through wildcat strikes, the additional guards placed within the stockyards. The union, faced with little other choice, raced to provide support. Colored Local Union #651 cashed the paychecks of men who were discharged, claiming they “worked virtually day and night to safeguard the interest of the membership of their local,” and boasting that they would be willing to “co-operate with any agency…willing [to] help make our city a decent place [for] respectable people to live in.” This latter statement was a subtle criticism of the packers, who were widely despised for taking advantage of the riot first by providing a bread line of their own, then by trimming their workforce once the riots were quelled. With numerous men discharged and others requiring

67 Lewis, 31.

68 Chicago Whip (9 August 1919), 7.
emergency assistance, CFL locals found themselves laying out large sums of cash to support their members.

Layoffs were only the beginning. The CFL also experienced several blows to its power as an organizing body. With the violence of the riots fresh in the minds of stockyards-district residents, Chicago police ordered the SLC to hold its meetings elsewhere. Without the advantage of a base of operations near the workplace (and relatively close to the Black Belt), rebuilding the SLC became tremendously difficult. Chaos reigned, as many of the inflammatory rumors circulated during the riot emerged once more. Many of the men were unclear on when it was safe to return to work, and came back late only to find they had been replaced. Without a reliable union presence in the community, communication became nearly impossible. Combined with the fear and mutual distrust of white and black workers, such damage to the union’s very structure proved difficult to overcome.

Perhaps most critically, the riot widened the gap between white and black workers. The sheer terror of the riots themselves created a toxic atmosphere of racial distrust that was carried into the workplace. Employers, seeking to cash in on the chaos of the riot, worked to recruit non-union workers in great numbers, particularly since the South was facing a labor shortage throughout the summer of 1919 and thus provided a level of competition in black labor recruitment. For the large number of white union workers who were laid off, the continued “importation” of black non-union labor was an open insult—particularly since such men enjoyed the protection and benefits of the Alschuler award.  

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69 CFL Minutes, 3 August 1919, 24-25.

70 “Negroes Not Leaving Chicago for South,” Chicago Daily News (7 August 1919), 4; see also “To Colored Labor Seeking Homes,” advertisement, The Broad Ax (16 August 1919), 8; Strickland, 62-63; Lewis, 31.
At the workplace, these actions were translated into festering resentments that exposed the weakness of the CFL’s claims of interracial unity. The union struggled mightily to reassure its members that “the minute the Negro becomes a part of the labor movement he is just as good as any white man or woman in the movement.” Johnstone and other SLC leaders continued to blame the riot on the packers, claiming that the CFL had brought white and black workers “from a point of open antagonism” to a realization that racial differences were merely “used as a pretext by privileged interest[s]” working through “their colored and white stool pigeons [sic] and politicians.”71 But the union’s power was crumbling amid both the atmosphere of distrust created by the riot and the anti-union offensive of the packers. As the stockyards workers returned to their jobs, the union’s attempt to preserve their safety and independence would prove disastrous, as a series of strikes transformed the distrust of white and black workers into a seething racial enmity that would help doom the CFL’s attempt at uniting the races.

The most critical issue facing the union in the wake of the riots was the reopening of the stockyards. It was the CFL’s reaction to this issue that would most deeply damage the union’s efforts to create interracial solidarity and display its impotence in the face of a packer counteroffensive. The CFL bitterly protested the packers’ plan to reopen the yards under the guard of police and militia. Not only did they fail to prevent the presence of militia, their protests widened the gulf between white and black workers. White union workers walked off the job, demanding the expulsion of both the guards and black workers from the stockyards; black workers, fearful of a resumption of the race riot, were grateful for the protection afforded by the militia and resentful of the hate strike. Unable to disavow the strike and accept the militia, but

equally unable to abet the racist motivations of the strikers, CFL leadership unsuccessfully attempted to chart a middle course, ultimately leaving the union divided and weakened.

Union officials and packing bosses alike feared a resumption of violence at the workplace. The CFL in particular was terrified by the prospect of white and black workers attacking one another on the shopfloor. The brutality of the riot had already damaged its claims to interracial unity; if bloody racial strife emerged at the workplace, it would be nearly impossible to build a union of white and black workers. As a result, union leaders advised workers to remain home for much of the week. But with the militia in full control of the stockyards district, it was clear the yards were ready to reopen. By Friday, August 1, the packers had formulated a plan for returning their employees to work: the stockyards would reopen on Monday, August 4, but police and state militiamen would be stationed “at every point where conflict between whites and blacks may develop.” 72 The CFL was infuriated. The use of armed guards within the plants sharpened rage over the deaths at Argo and conjured memories of the bloody Pullman Strike. As James Grossman has argued, white workers viewed the presence of militia as “a provocatio, understood within the context of a half-century of class conflict marked by bitter strikes, injunctions, and armed protection of strikebreakers.” Indeed, union leaders’ greatest fear was that the packers would introduce black nonunion workers and use the militia to intimidate union workers who dared protest. As a New Majority editorial exclaimed, “what fiend could have devised a more diabolical plot?”73

72 “Jobs at Yards Open for Negroes Monday,” Chicago Daily News (1 August 1919), 5; Herbst, 47-48; Horowitz, 45-47.

73 Grossman, 222-223; “Negroes Return to Yards Today Guarded by Host,” Chicago Daily Tribune (7 August 1919), 17; “Proclamation…” New Majority; Tuttle, 57-60.
Union members circulated petitions “demanding that the packers decide once and for all between white or colored employes” and threatened to strike if blacks were not driven from the yards. Workers taunted the militia, wielding their knives and cleavers and reminding the troops that the butchers “[knew] how to use them.” Union leadership raced to find a solution. Though they dreaded the introduction of non-union workers, they were even more fearful of another race war exploding on the shopfloor. The CFL would need to allay the fears of their members without acceding to racial antipathy. J.W. Johnstone and John Kilulski summed up the situation: “five days of race riots have got some of our white workers alarmed and even inflamed [and] we do not know how much longer we can control them.” Black union leader I. H. Bratton concocted a compromise: the SLC, not the militia, would be responsible for the safety of the returning workers, white and black. The union would guarantee harmony and productivity on the shopfloor and be liable for any incidents that occurred. In return, the packers must remove the militia and declare the stockyards a union shop. On its face, it was a brilliant tactical maneuver. Not only did it rid the stockyards of the hated militia, it increased the union’s power and influence within the yards and afforded it the opportunity to organize freely.

Unfortunately, the SLC had badly underestimated both the strength of the packers’ position and the union’s own weaknesses. The fears of the union regarding scab labor were quickly realized. On Thursday, August 7—the date had been pushed back due to the fire in the Lithuanian district—3,000 black workers, many of them non-union, were escorted into the yards by militia and police. As an added precaution, five hundred deputy sheriffs were stationed in the stockyards district as an “emergency constabulary.” A plan to patrol the yards with fifty mounted

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police was ended only after the union lodged a furious protest with Judge Alschuler. White union workers were enraged; John Fitzpatrick bitterly remarked on the packers’ plan to force “the colored laborers…and the white union men together in the stock yards without the knowledge of either side.” With the exception of a brawl in the livestock pens, the presence of the police and militia ensured a relatively quiet day, but tensions simmered beneath the surface. By the end of the day, almost five thousand white unionists had walked off the job in protest. Handbills were circulated in three different languages calling for a mass meeting to discuss a strike against the nonunion black workers.

The union was once again placed in a precarious position. Because they had so vociferously opposed the deployment of militia and police, union leaders could not disavow the strike. At the same time, it was clear that many union workers had trained their hatred not only on the guards, but on the black workers under their protection—undercutting the CFL’s efforts to create a racially harmonious atmosphere in the yards. Union leaders charted a middle course. They supported the strike, but downplayed its racial character, declaring “emphatically” that the walkout was not due to “the racial question” but to the presence of “an armed guard designed to protect non-union labor of whatever color at the expense of union men.” Once more, the CFL sought to transform a racially explosive situation into an opportunity for class unity.


76 Untitled Hearing, August 1919, FMCS, Box 41, 38-39.

77 “5,000 White Men Quit Yards; Negroes Back,” Chicago Daily News (7 August 1919); Pacyga, 217; Tuttle, 63.

78 Testimony of Henry Smith, August 1919, FMCS, Box 41, 10-20; “32,000 Threaten Strike at Yards: Unions Vote to Go Out if Guards Star,” Chicago Daily Tribune (8 August 1919), 1; “Strikes End Gun Stunt of Packers,” The New Majority, Vol. 2, No. 7 (16 August 1919); Pacyga, 240-242; Spero and Harris, 276-278.
But the truth was far more complicated than the union claimed. The walkout of the white union men was not merely a strike for union rights or a protest against armed guards. It was a clear expression of racial anger. Despite its claims of protest against an armed guard intended to protect scabs “of whatever color,” the very same statement took care to delineate the workers’ protest against “the intention of the packers to disrupt the unions by the use of non-unionized *colored* labor.”\(^79\) Despite their claims to the contrary, the white unionists’ anger was not merely against scabs “of whatever color,” but specifically against the use of black nonunion workers, who threatened to destroy the CFL’s fragile interracial alliance.

Even more revealing was the response of black workers to the reopening of the stockyards. African Americans, too, saw the strikes in racial terms. As a result, they chose the path that could best serve their racial interests, even if those decisions were damaging to the CFL. The most significant evidence for these racial divisions was the fact that many of the 3,000 blacks who returned to the yards were members of the union. When the CFL struck to protest the militia, most of the black workers ignored the call and stayed at work. The economic position of black workers, even those in the union, was precarious. Particularly given the riot’s bloodshed and attendant financial hardship, the choice between employment and solidarity was an easy one. Although CFL leaders claimed they had received approval from black unionist leaders for the walkout, black union members remained in the yards in large numbers.\(^80\) White workers were infuriated. SLC organizers and stewards had worked for years to bridge racial gaps. Now, at a

\(^79\) “32,000 Threaten Strike…” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (emphasis mine).

\(^80\) “Union Plea Rejected, Police Stay in Yards,” *Chicago Daily News* (9 August 1919); Andrew Holmes, “Why Colored People Don't Organize,” *Chicago Whip* (21 February 1920), 1, 6; Herbst, 49; see also “The Colored People Throughout the Union,” *The Broad Ax* (16 August 1919), 1.
crucial moment, they were stunned to find that black workers had chosen safety over solidarity. With white workers turning on black, the union was in crisis.

Accentuating the racial nature of the strikes was the fact that black workers did not view the presence of militia and police as threatening. In fact, given the wanton brutality of the riot, many black workers felt grateful for the protection. Whereas white union members responded to the presence of militia and police with resentment and anger, African Americans, lacking the same bitter experience, viewed the troops as “offering protection from whites trying to deny them their right to earn a living.” Indeed, black workers repeatedly expressed their desire for workplace protection in the wake of the riots. A “conference of colored citizens…formed to deal with problems growing out of the race riots” lodged a formal complaint regarding an incident during the riot in which a group of three black men were “beaten senseless in the stockyards…by a mob of Polaks” as police stood by and watched. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the anti-lynching crusader familiar to Chicago’s unions as a champion of black strikebreakers during the 1905 teamsters strike, drafted a resolution that police and sheriff’s deputies protect black laborers as they returned to work.

Most damaging to the CFL was the support for militia among black union members. In light of the SLC’s protests against the police, a resolution addressed to Mayor Thompson by Colored Local Union #651 is revealing. Firing a salvo against white workers, the resolution lamented “the possibility of suffering even more by the attitude of some of the white residents of the stockyards district who are trying to prevent the re-employment of colored men in [the] packing houses.” The black local lodged “our most vigorous protest against this malicious attempt…[by]

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81 Grossman, 222-223.
this unlawful element to prevent members of our race from returning to their places of employment,” and demanded from the mayor “every means of protection that we as law-abiding citizens should receive, to the end that we can reach our places of work and not be menaced or intimidated by any group of people who are seeking to prevent our employment.”

The SLC was adrift in racial turmoil. Despite its efforts to minimize the effects of the white strike, the dissension of Colored Local #651 proved the union could not even summon unanimity from within its own ranks. Its white workers had struck, ostensibly to protest the presence of armed guards but at least in part due to racial antipathy. Meanwhile, black unionists, fearing for the safety of their lives and livelihoods, defied the protests of their comrades and leaders in outright demanding the protection of police.

With these divisions evident, the packers felt confident in dismissing the CFL’s protests and policing the yards with militia. The disheartening presence of federal troops damaged worker morale and reinforced the overwhelming power of the packers. More importantly, it reflected the inability of CFL leadership to unite white and black workers in a progressive, interracial union. At the crucial moment, white workers had chosen to defend their independence at the workplace, while black workers demanded the protection of police. Given the bloody events of the race riot, efforts at class solidarity could not overcome the vagaries of Chicago’s toxic racial atmosphere. As David Brody has noted, “even union membership could not bridge a distance divided by race.”

White and black workers continued to define themselves primarily as white and black, not as workers.

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83 Resolution by Executive Board of Amalgamated Meat Cutters & Butcher Workmen Local Union 651, reprinted in Chicago Whip (9 August 1919), 7-8.

84 Grossman, 223.
The union made one last-ditch effort to reassert its power and regain control of its membership. On Saturday, August 9, SLC officers J. W. Johnstone, John Kikulski, and Martin Murphy traveled to the offices of meatpacking tycoon J. Ogden Armour, who was in the midst of a meeting with the chief of police, the adjutant general of the militia, and other packing bosses. They claimed that since the union had “been on the firing line trying to prevent race rioting,” they deserved a seat at the conference. After a wait of more than two hours, they were permitted to make a brief statement, in which they argued that that “union men will not work with machine guns pointed at them.” Pleading with Armour, Johnstone and Kikulski claimed that all the workers of the stockyards district were underpaid, and that bringing them into a union shop, “as fellow union men and women,” would “hold the situation in hand” without the need for “machine guns or bayonets.” They ended their statement by vowing that if the packers ignored their warnings, “the bloodshed that will follow will be greater than that [which] has occurred and we will be powerless to prevent it.” Armour dismissed the trio—“contemptuously,” in their words—and their proposal was ignored. The union, trying for one last bit of leverage, ordered those on strike to remain out. Most of the men returned to work on Monday, August 11; roughly six hundred who worked for Armour and Morris discovered they had been fired. The union protested to Judge Alschuler, but he had no choice but to vindicate the employers. In walking out, the white unionists had broken the agreement’s no-strike clause, and thus the employers were within their rights to discharge them.85 The union’s attempt to reopen the stockyards as a union shop had failed utterly.

The fault lines created by the race riot clearly damaged the relationship between Chicago’s white and black workers. But the width and depth of the chasm that opened between them was not inevitable. The SLC’s attempts to reopen the stockyards on their own terms, particularly their protests against the use of armed guards, led to a strike that quickly turned racial in character. White workers walked off the job to protect their independence and privilege even as black workers—including union members—were demanding that police and militia remain in and around the yards for their protection.

The union had made two major miscalculations. First, the CFL’s leadership had assumed that their work of creating a racially harmonious union would insulate the workplace from racial violence. As a result, their plan to reopen the stockyards, and the resulting strike, “injected the union issue” into what was fundamentally a racial situation, in the words of David Brody. Second, and more critically, the union’s presumption that black workers would value workplace independence and class solidarity over all else placed African Americans, particularly union members, in the awkward position of choosing between their union and their safety. In the end, they chose the latter, shattering the precarious alliance between white and black workers. By misapprehending the racial reality of the stockyards, the CFL once more left itself vulnerable to the predation of the packers, whose successful deployment of militia served as a major defeat to the union. Though the physical and psychological damage of the Chicago race riot was severe, the CFL’s response to the riot only increased tensions between the races and defeated its own efforts to create racial unity. Resentment against the union would result in renewed racial tensions at the workplace, which would spread into the black community itself.

Same Battle Say Labor Chiefs,” *Chicago Whip* (15 August 1919), 3; Brody, 87-88; Pacyga, 218.

86 Brody, 87-88; Grossman, 223; Arnesen, 13-15; Horowitz, 43-44; Fogel, 41.
Aftermath: Black Consciousness and the Union Appeal

Despite the CFL’s best efforts to restrain workers during the riots, and to unite them afterwards, racial conflicts continued throughout August 1919. White and black workers were divided along clear lines. For the most part, white workers were devoted to the union and its ability to provide class solidarity and shopfloor independence. Black workers, on the other hand, had been violently attacked mere weeks before, and many pledged fealty to their employers in return for guarantees of employment and basic safety—guarantees that the union, whatever its claims, could not reliably provide. As a result, white unionists were more determined than ever to organize their coworkers (and expel those who refused), while black workers proved more resistant than ever to union organizing in the wake of the riot.

One particularly ugly incident is instructive. In a work gang of 180 men, one black laborer, Harry Hawkins, represented the only non-union worker. When his coworkers attempted to organize him, Hawkins responded, “to hell with that. I don’t have to belong to the union, I got the company behind me.” When the union workers pressed him, Hawkins became even blunter: “fuck that button…Fuck the union.”87 This latter comment nearly provoked a fistfight. Black union steward Frank Custer was summoned to try and keep the peace. Hawkins told Custer he had at one point been a member of the SLC, though he only joined “to keep down trouble” with his coworkers. Custer pleaded with Hawkins to return, but Hawkins refused, saying “the union was no good to me.” He claimed that he despised his Polish coworkers, who had intimidated him into joining the SLC and threatened and assaulted him when he left. When Custer laid out the benefits of the Alschuler award and lauded the CFL for securing such gains, Hawkins shrugged

87 Testimony of Stanley Jinnicki, 14 August 1919, “Arbitration Between Libby, McNeil & Libby and their Employes Regarding the Discharge of Certain Employes [sic].” FMCS, Box 41, 11; Testimony of Alex Bernatowicz, ibid., 109. It should be noted that Hawkins denied saying those words, claiming “I don’t use no profane language at all.” See Testimony of Harry Hawkins, ibid., 160.
and credited the federal government, not the union, for the award. Most damningly of all, Hawkins stated his chief desire: “I want to stay in the Stock Yards all my life.” To Custer’s amazement, Hawkins felt the best way to secure that future was to remain non-union: “I have got the company back of me and I don't have to go in. I have got the company [behind] me.” In attempting to make the race riot a class and union issue, the CFL had not only failed to unite black and white workers; it had also failed to convince black workers that the union could protect their lives or livelihoods. As a result, black workers were driven from the CFL into the arms of employers.

White unionists were infuriated by the recalcitrance of black non-union laborers, further widening the breach between the races. In response to Hawkins’ comments, the work gang put down their tools, sent Hawkins to the superintendent’s office, and refused to work until he either joined the union or was fired. In the words of worker Alex Bernatowicz, “if you no take this man out we won’t work.” The superintendent’s first instinct was to send Hawkins back onto the floor and order the men back to work, but he quickly reconsidered when Hawkins claimed the white workers threatened to “pitch me out on my head” if he returned. Such threats were not uncommon. Increasingly, white union workers desired not merely that black non-union workers join the SLC, but that they be expelled from the workplace altogether. When Hawkins attempted to make peace by inquiring about union membership, his coworkers explained he needed to pay a year’s worth of dues up-front. When Hawkins responded he couldn’t do so, they replied, “we don’t want you.” A friend offered to pay the dues for him, but the whites still refused: “they didn’t want me in,” Hawkins recalled, “didn’t want the check, didn’t want me in at all.”

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88 Testimony of Frank Custer, ibid., 129-130, 136-137; Testimony of Harry Hawkins, ibid., 161-166.
white workers, in his words, “wanted me off the place.” Black workers faced an impossible dilemma. On the one hand, the CFL’s ability to represent black interests was dubious at best, as evidenced by the anti-militia strike in the yards. On the other hand, refusal to join the union could carry summon significant reprisals from white workers. Black workers’ resulting ambivalence toward the union, and whites’ angry response to it, created an endless loop of resentments and widened the workplace gap between the two races.

Many whites saw black reluctance to wear a union button as confirmation of their status as a “scab race” in league with employers. It is telling that several union men assumed that Harry Hawkins was a company “plant” employed only to undermine the union. As Frank Custer explained, “it seems to me that [bosses] have picked these men out simply because they are ignorant and low-minded, to start them agitating against the unions…and [making] the men sore.” At a hearing, an arbitrator asked Custer why he didn’t stop the union men from putting down their tools. “I have that…power,” he explained, but chose not to exercise it, because “the company, they plan these little things to come up like that.” Hawkins, he opined, started the trouble under the orders of packing bosses: “they got this man there not to get in the union.” Another black union organizer, Andrew Holmes, was asked for his opinion, and replied, “it is our intention to work harmoniously with other brothers, regardless of race, religion or politics.” However, he went on, some black workers, due to “narrowness or conceit or something,” occasionally caused “an inconvenience to…[a large] number of men,” and should be transferred away from union workers “for the good and harmony of the whole.”

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89 Testimony of Alex Bernatowicz, ibid., 111; Testimony of Harry Hawkins, ibid., 157-161.

90 Ibid., 155.
This feeling was not altogether fair. Though the CFL’s structure and the discrimination of its rank and file rendered blacks reluctant to join the SLC, they were not opposed to unionism per se. Throughout World War I, independent black unions sprang up in several cities, including all-black plumbers’, lathe operators’, and electricians’ organizations in Chicago.91 Black workers desired organizations that could serve their racial interests as well as their class interests. Instead of recognizing this legitimate complaint against the CFL appeal and working to make their actions match their rhetoric, CFL leaders excoriated black workers for their reticence. The combination of black recalcitrance and union resentment and suspicion only deepened divisions between the races. The CFL’s failure to navigate the aftermath of the race riot had pushed black workers even further from the union.

The gulf between Chicago’s black workers and its labor movement was manifested beyond the workplace. The riot had augmented nascent feelings of racial pride and consciousness among black Chicagoans. The CFL’s failed attempts to control the reopening of the stockyards, and the bitter response they provoked, made the African American community even less responsive to the union’s class appeal. Instead, black Chicagoans took strength and pride in their own racial communities. This self-reliance began during the riot itself, during which—despite the efforts of both the packers and the SLC—African Americans relied on their neighbors, not their coworkers, for relief. As Philip Foner has argued, “the militant resistance of the Negroes to the white rioters…[was] an expression of black radicalism that grew out of experience in white America.” Such solidarity was manifested in nonviolent ways as well. A volunteer community in the city’s predominantly black 2nd Ward distributed food baskets, while several black

91 Foner, 147.
institutions, most notably the packer-subsidized Wabash Avenue YMCA and the Chicago Urban League, served thousands of black families.\(^{92}\)

Black community leaders championed such expressions of racial solidarity. In its official report on the riots, the Chicago Commission on Race Relations noted that by the end of the war, “a growing race solidarity” was evinced by the city’s black residents, marked by a “lack of confidence in the white man’s law and machinery of protection” and appeals to citizens to stand up and protest. Indeed, black residents vocally opposed white terror. At a meeting of Congregationalist ministers in September, black politician Oscar DePriest cited the riot as evidence that “patience is no longer a virtue; that [African Americans] are fighting back as any man should to defend his [manhood] and his home.” T. Arnold Hill of the Chicago Urban League claimed the root of the problem was simple: white Chicagoans’ perception that the city’s black population “keeps getting out of line.”\(^{93}\) Another meeting of black community leaders produced a document submitted to Governor Lowden and Mayor Thompson, claiming that Chicago’s whites “do not realize they have in Chicago's colored population a new type to deal with, one that has a distinct race consciousness, that has helped to fight its country's every battle, and that will content itself with nothing less than the full enjoyment of the privileges and rights granted under the law.” An editorial in the *Broad Ax* argued that “the old time darkey is dead” and that “the black citizen...must respect himself, and to do that his house must be protected from the mob and the bomb.” Perhaps most critically, the leaders made clear that African Americans comprised a distinct community “that is not seeking social contact with any race or person that

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\(^{92}\) “A Sickening Sight,” *Chicago Whip* (9 August 1919), 10; “Second Ward Relief Committee Makes Report,” *Chicago Defender* (20 September 1919), 14; Foner, 146.

\(^{93}\) “Oscar De Priest Talks on Riot Before Ministers,” *Chicago Defender* (20 September 1919), 15.
bases such contact upon color and not character.”94 The riot’s sharpening of racial tensions also provided the city’s black community the occasion to join together under the banner of a new, racially independent consciousness.

Particularly given the brutality of the riots, it is not surprising that a central part of that consciousness was resentment of Chicago whites. African Americans recognized that the riot was not a random, deviant event, but rather the apotheosis of years of systematic discrimination and racial violence. The *Chicago Whip*, a longtime supporter of black unionization, began printing more editorials regarding racial violence and equality than class solidarity. In one particularly blistering editorial, the *Whip* railed against house bombings and “open demonstrations…in Jackson and Washington Parks against Colored people,” claiming that such events “had a most important part in creating a culture medium for MOB psychology.” African Americans’ only desire, the *Whip* claimed, was to eradicate “the Hyphen” that separated “African” from “American.” To achieve that goal, blacks were willing to defend themselves, violently if necessary: “white people will soon get used to riots, they ought to know the negro was born and bred in the Brier [sic] Patches of Riots.”95

Race-based organizations took root in the Black Belt. Such direct action took various forms. Seeking to countervail the influence of the Homeowners’ Associations, a group of black citizens formed the Protective Circle of Chicago, seeking “to combat, through legal means, the lawlessness of the Kenwood and Hyde Park Property Owners’ Association” and to “apprehend those persons who have bombed the homes…of Negroes.” The riots certainly rallied African

94 CCRR, 96; “Negroes Call on Mayor, Lowden, to Stop Riots,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (31 July 1919), 3; M.A. Majors, “The Riot Commission,” *The Broad Ax* (30 August 1919), 2; see also “Negro No Shirker in War or Labor, Says Minster,” ibd. (9 August 1919), 5.

Americans to the group’s cause; a meeting of the Circle in February 1920 drew more than 3,000 black citizens. In September 1919, Marcus Garvey visited the area and was greeted by throngs of black Chicagoans who braved a torrential downpour to hear him speak. In 1920, a group known as the “Abyssinians” burned an American flag and shot three whites who attempted to restrain them, claiming that African Americans should no longer pledge allegiance to the United States. Though a fringe group, the Abyssinians reflected a growing strain of thought within the black community: namely, that racial self-reliance was the only path to equality. Such thought often emerged in concert with more traditional ideas governing consumerism and work; by the late 1920s, the Whip was at the forefront of a “Don’t Spent Your Money Where You Can’t Work” campaign.96

Indeed, a central facet of black rhetoric regarding the riots was a strident denial of any desire to mix with whites. Though equality with whites—the ability to live as “pure and simple Americans”—was the goal, fulfilling that goal did not require social integration. Renouncing both the hysterical fears of miscegenation peddled by the Homeowners’ Associations and the simple-minded solutions proposed by integrationists, black leaders took pride in their own communities and vehemently opposed their dilution. At a conference held by “leading members of the race” at Olivet Baptist Church immediately after the riots, pastor J. K. Williams claimed that blacks wanted nothing more than “an equal economic and industrial chance with other races.” But, he went on, “no self-respecting Negro wants what is commonly known as ‘social equality,’” arguing that “sensible Negroes never make an attempt to ‘mix’ socially with white

people, and don’t want white people to ‘mix’ with them.” Black leaders aggressively denied accusations that they were pursuing “social equality” or racial mixing; on the contrary, African Americans were determined to preserve the sanctity and solidarity of their own community.

With a great number of black Chicagoans employed as industrial workers, it was inevitable that such sentiments would affect black perceptions of work and the labor movement. Much of the black community’s resentment was focused on foreigners. European immigrants represented a major source of labor competition for blacks. More importantly, their skin color entitled them to the benefits of white privilege—while blacks, who served the nation both overseas and at home, faced discrimination and violence. The Whip was infuriated by the presence of blacks on bread lines, claiming they had “become thoroughly Americanized” and helped win World War I by “work[ing] at the Union Stockyards during the war, and fed the Allied armies.” More importantly, African Americans were more reliable workers; they had “out-stripped the foreigner in efficiency and endurance” and should be offered more and better economic opportunities than “illiterate and semi-civilized” immigrants, who represented “the Scum of Europe.”

Such resentments were also directed against the CFL and led black workers toward an alliance with employers. Despite the earnest efforts of union leaders, local ministers generally refused to support the union. Some had been paid off by the packers, but most simply felt that black workers could make far greater gains by allying themselves with employers. The ugly history of race relations within American labor, the brutality of the riot, and the CFL’s mishandling of the reopening of the stockyards reinforced racial distrust. Such actions seemed to

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confirm that white unionists resented blacks “as a reactionary field of labor,” which, in turn, vindicated black suspicions that the union’s gestures toward interracial unity were largely spurious. As a result, black workers “learned to regard [whites] as [their] natural enemy and…labor organization as a hideous Bug-bear.”99 Blacks were forced into an awkward role, pulled between white unionists on one side and packing bosses on the other.

With community leaders pushing them away from affiliation with whites, specifically unions, many pledged their allegiance to employers, beginning with their participation in the packers’ bread lines during the riot and continuing with their support for police protection in the stockyards after the riot ended. The packers reinforced black resentment of the union. Stockyards bosses claimed they would reduce the size of their foreign workforce to create more jobs for blacks; they also publicized the fact that the CFL paid fifty dollars to white families whose homes were destroyed in the post-riot fire in the Lithuanian district, but nothing at all to black families who suffered the same fate.100 The city’s political machine catered to blacks as well; Mayor Thompson approved a $25,000 appropriation dedicated to apprehending house bombers, as well as a $10,000 donation to the victims of the Tulsa race riot of 1921 via the Chicago Peace and Protective Association, a black community organization.101 The combined largesse of employers and politicians had rendered unions largely meaningless to the black community.

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100 “Negroes Call on Mayor, Lowden, to Stop Riots,” Chicago Daily Tribune (31 July 1919), 3; Chicago Whip (15 August 1919), 3; Strouthous, 63-64; Grossman, 223.

101 “Mayor Shifts Bomb Cases to Aldermen,” Chicago Defender (14 May 1921), 1; “Start Searching for Bombers,” Chicago Defender (21 May 1921), 1; “Chicagoans Raise Over $1,000 for Riot Victims,” Chicago Defender (11 June 1921), 2.
A growing racial consciousness pushed Chicago’s African Americans toward organizing on the basis of race, not class, and many explicitly rejected alliances with whites. Community leaders and rank-and-file workers both viewed fealty to employers as the best way to advance socially and economically, particularly given the mistakes committed by the CFL. As a result, the workplace conflicts that pushed black and white workers apart spread into the black community as a whole and created a nearly unbridgeable chasm between the races. As historian Catherine Elizabeth Lewis has concluded, “no issue was more irrevocably determined as a result of [the race riot] than the labor policy which was to prevail henceforth in the packinghouse establishments.” With that policy decided largely by racial antagonism, the aftermath of the Chicago race riot bequeathed to the city a profound distrust between white and black workers—a distrust “which brought to an abrupt end the Negroes’ trade-union experience.”

**Conclusion**

The Chicago race riot of 1919 had a tremendous effect on the fortunes of the city’s labor movement. The CFL, whose campaign to organize the stockyards had gathered significant momentum, was suddenly on the defensive, as the riot afforded employers an opportunity to exploit racial schisms for their own gain. Perhaps more significantly, the violence that engulfed Chicago in summer 1919 increased the reluctance of black Chicagoans to ally themselves with organized labor. From the shopfloor to the church sanctuary, African Americans turned away from the CFL’s vision of class solidarity and toward racially conscious organizing amongst themselves.

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102 Lewis, 30.
Chicago was certainly no stranger to racial violence, but the 1919 riot was larger in scope than any previous conflict the city had witnessed. The riot itself was the culmination of years of strife between black and white Chicagoans, resulting from the explosion of the city’s black population and resultant clashes over housing and jobs. Though Chicago’s stockyards and the surrounding area were the site of racial clashes before the riot and racial violence during the riot, the CFL was largely successful in restraining its own members from participating in the worst of the brutality.

But in the wake of the riots, Chicago’s unions and employers wrestled over control of the workplace. The CFL staged a series of strikes protesting the presence of police and militia in the stockyards, believing that black workers would follow them. But black workers, including union members, appreciated police protection in the wake of the violence of the riot. This miscalculation allowed packers to prey on racial divisions within the union, while the bitterness of these strikes helped turn black workers from the CFL. This distance only increased throughout the summer and fall of 1919, as black and white workers clashed on the shopfloor and the black community retreated from alliances with whites—particularly labor unions.

In a way, progressive unionism can be counted among the casualties of the Chicago race riot. Though the CFL continued organizing throughout 1919 and beyond—even taking a leadership role in the great steel strike of that winter—its power had been significantly sapped by the riot. Despite its best efforts, the Federation was unable to convince black workers that their best interests lay with the union. CFL leaders’ overestimation of their ability to marshal support among black workers, union and nonunion alike, led to the disastrous strike at the stockyards, a tragic mistake that both exposed the Federation’s vulnerability to employer assaults and further divided black and white workers. With black workers and community leaders alike abandoning
the union, the CFL and its members grew more vulnerable; non-union black labor represented a ready-made strikebreaking force that could be deployed at the will of employers. As the 1920s dawned, the CFL would become embroiled in a pair of major strikes—the steel strike of 1919 and the stockyards strike of 1921—that would further expose the union’s inability to attract black members and ultimately doom its organizing drive altogether.
Chapter 6: “Boring From Within”: Race and the Decline of the CFL, 1919-1924

In November 1920, the New York American published an article detailing the response of the American Federation of Labor to the failed steel strike of 1919-1920 and its efforts to reconstitute the Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers. “There was a feeling,” the article explained, that the Executive Council “should deal emphatically with the attempts of radicals to bore from within” and shun the “radical doctrines” that might weaken the very foundations of organized labor. Such extremist elements, which helped infuse the strike with “intimated and outspoken radicalism,” must be purged from the movement. The radicals in question were John Fitzpatrick and William Z. Foster. Though Fitzpatrick disputed the article’s contention that the pair were jettisoned from the committee (he claimed he and Foster resigned of their own accord at the AFL’s Montreal convention in June 1920), the article is still telling. Fitzpatrick was head of one of the most diverse and powerful city locals in the nation, and was considered by some to be a successor to Samuel Gompers as president of the AFL. Foster was an organizer of such brilliance that he earned the respect of the bosses he battled. Yet as the 1920s dawned, they had been marginalized within their own federation. The CFL and its leadership were in full retreat.

Though the events that precipitated the decline of the CFL—dissension within the union, the failed strikes in steel in 1919 and meatpacking in 1921, and the demise of the Labor Party—have been the subject of considerably scholarly study, few historians have examined the ways in which they revealed the limits of the CFL’s progressive ideology, particularly in regards to race. Progressive unionism was intended as a response to the bitter defeats of the early twentieth

century—a method for constructing a militant, interracial unionism that could defeat employers with the power of solidarity. The tragic irony of progressive unionism is that it was defeated by the same forces that had crippled labor in 1903, 1904, and 1905: internal dissension regarding black workers and disastrous failed strikes broken with the use of nonunion black labor. Between 1919 and 1922, the Federation suffered a series of blows that doomed the drive altogether. The same combination of structural inertia and rank-and-file animus that stalled the CFL’s previous efforts reached a fever pitch. The defeats suffered by the CFL during this period ultimately forced the Federation into a decade-long period of dormancy. Not until the arrival of industrial organizing under the aegis of the Committee for Industrial Organization in the 1930s would the CFL once again become a major factor in the city’s labor movement. Despite the efforts of Fitzpatrick and Foster to create a new kind of unionism, they failed to adequately engage African Americans, leaving their campaign vulnerable to assaults by employers.

Four major events accelerated the collapse of the CFL and its organizing drive. The first was a bitter internecine war within the Federation itself. In the wake of the race riot, conservative members of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen (AMCBW) sought to wrest control of stockyards organizing from the Stockyards Labor Council (SLC), whose vision of aggressive organizing and interracial unity, they felt, had reached its limits. Lasting nearly ten months, this bitter clash over control of the city’s meatpacking workers pitted unionist against unionist, culminating in the dissolution of the SLC amid accusations of fraud, embezzlement, and murder.

The second blow to the CFL was the Great Steel Strike of 1919. Though most historians associate the strike with the mills of western Pennsylvania, the organizing of the nation’s steelworkers was first proposed by in William Z. Foster at a CFL meeting, and the organization
of workers in the Chicago district was the movement’s first priority. Just as critically, the course of the strike in the Chicago area—specifically the union’s failed attempts to recruit black workers, its response to the use of black strikebreakers, and the repression of the strike by employers—reflected both the ways in which the union was defeated and the ways in which it defeated itself. Combined, those losses bequeathed a bitter legacy to the Chicago labor movement.

The stockyards strike of 1921-1922 was the penultimate defeat for the CFL. As the Alschuler award expired and postwar inflation took its toll on workers, meatpacking barons slashed wages and fomented racial discontent among their workforce in an effort to provoke a work stoppage and destroy the union once and for all. They got their wish: desperate to regain momentum in the wake of the steel strike and preserve some shred of the gains of the Alschuler award, the weakened AMCBW called a nationwide strike in the late 1921. Although the union redoubled its efforts to recruit black workers, the strike followed a familiar script. As in 1904, black strikebreakers kept the yards running, to the fury of whites. As in 1904, white workers engaged in mass actions, including violence, to retake their jobs. And as in 1904, employers proved far too powerful to overcome. The stockyards, like the steel mills, would remain essentially open shops until the 1930s.

Finally, although it did not cause the downfall of the CFL, the collapse of the Labor Party serves as a bellwether of the union’s fortunes in the 1920s. Though the party made a respectable showing in the mayoral election of 1919, it quickly fell into decline. Fearful of a divisive platform, the party failed to engage workers in any sort of class politics. Instead, party leaders failed in their attempts to appeal directly to ethnic and racial minorities, preferring instead to stake the party’s success on esoteric issues such as tax reform, municipal ownership of utilities,
and the rewriting of the state constitution. As a result, the Labor Party became a niche group without a niche and simply could not compete with the well-oiled machines of the two major parties. By 1922, the party was in disarray; by 1924, it had ceased to exist.

In each case, the defeat of the CFL was occasioned to some degree by structural failures of the union. In both the steel and stockyards strikes, these failures were augmented by the union’s inability to attract black workers and the ability of employers to exploit racial divisions. These defeats—the breakup of the SLC, the failure of two strikes in major industries, and the collapse of the Labor Party—reveal the limits of the CFL’s vision of progressive unionism. Despite their idealism and verve, Fitzpatrick and other CFL leaders were simply unable to create a union structure that could appeal to African Americans and withstand employer counteroffensives. As such, the CFL was essentially a militant union that lacked the tools for militancy. Divided in its leadership, limited in its membership, and assailed by employers, the Federation receded into obscurity.

**Civil War in the Stockyards Labor Council**

The Chicago race riot had placed the CFL in the untenable position of choosing between embracing the presence of militia at the stockyards and promoting a bitter hate strike against black workers. The aftermath of this decision was felt long after the militia had departed and the strike had ended. The spectacular brutality of the riot, and the response it had elicited from stockyards workers, disturbed a number of AMCBW leaders. To them, the strike was unacceptable—not because it was racially tinged, but because, as AMCBW local secretary Dennis Lane argued, it was “a strike called without [AMCBW] sanction and in direct violation of the [Alschuler] agreement.” Lane and other AMCBW leaders were skilled workers, inured to the
predictability and conservatism of craft unionism; to them, the SLC’s aggressive militancy was foolhardy and even dangerous.²

The real issue at stake was the structure of stockyards unionism. AMCBW leaders feared that the unskilled workers organized by the SLC were impulsive, volatile, and uncontrollable. Such fears were also tinged with traditional craft-union racial ideology. Many of the unskilled workers were immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, and were seen as dim-witted and quick to anger. Additionally, the SLC had taken great pains to appeal to black workers, whose presence in a union was anathema to craft unionists whose careers had been spent in whitewashed industries. The battle between the SLC and AMCBW would be fought “under the technical guise of constitutional and jurisdictional rights,” as historian Alma Herbst argued, but in reality, “worker was brought in opposition to worker” as a result of the “suspicions and antagonisms…aroused by the display of racial hatred and rioting.”³ The ostensible jurisdictional dispute, in other words, was in reality a battle for the soul of the stockyards.

The AMCBW wasted no time in making its push for reform. In late July 1919, as the race riots began, Dennis Lane created AMCBW District Council No. 9, claimed it was the rightful governing body of the stockyards workers, and demanded that all AMCBW locals resign from the SLC. The SLC leadership was infuriated. Not only had Lane committed the mortal sin of dual unionism, his organization was opposed to many of the guiding principles of the SLC—namely, democracy and diversity. In particular, Lane allied himself with the skilled craft workers, who were overwhelmingly white and native-born, and stipulated that local unions would be limited to five votes within the council, regardless of their size. This latter proviso was

² Herbst, 43; Street, “Working in the Yards,” 275.

³ Ibid.
a clear attempt to limit the power and influence of the unskilled locals, which tended to be large
and ethnically diverse. Eight of the SLC locals, comprising thousands of workers, refused to join
and were suspended from the AMCBW International in September.\(^4\)

Already the severe limits of federated unionism were evident. Despite the SLC’s ability to
unite various locals into a central coordinating committee, actual control of the locals still rested
with the officers of their respective international unions. Lane took full advantage of this power
structure. In September 1919, he appealed directly to Samuel Gompers and the AFL, arguing that
despite the SLC’s success in organizing the yards, its federated structure was incompatible with
the AFL’s long-standing policy of craft autonomy. Specifically, Lane argued that the local
unions’ affiliation with the SLC violated the AMCBW’s rights as the exclusive representative of
the city’s meatpacking workers. Predictably, the AFL agreed. AFL official Frank Morrison sent a
letter to Fitzpatrick ordering him to end all organizing by the SLC in the Chicago stockyards.
The letter reflects the AFL’s fiercely guarded tradition of union autonomy. Although it was SLC
organizers who had organized the yards, Morrison claimed they were no longer needed.
AMCBW members, he argued, “were now in a position financially to handle all the organizing
work needed to take care of their industry.”

The skilled butchers also played on the AFL’s traditional distrust of ethnic and racial
minorities. Morrison relayed to Fitzpatrick that the AMCBW had “called attention to the fact that
some of the organizers…were carrying on an agitation which was not in harmony with the
constitution of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen.” Specifically, the

\(^4\) CFL Minutes: 18 April 1920, 15-17; 5 October 1919, 27; Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, 3; Report of
Executive Board, 19 October 1919, 16-18; 2 November 1919, 7-8; 4 January 1920, 8; Report of Executive Board, 18
January 1920, 11-19; 18 January 1920, 19-25; Reports of Organizations, 15 February 1920, 11-12; Supplementary
Report of Executive Board, 2 May 1920, 15-24. See also “Row Between Labor Here and A. F. of L. Looms,”
*Chicago Daily Tribune* (16 November 1919), 10; Horowitz, 57-61; Clark, 182-186; Street, “Working in the Yards,”
277-278; Brody, *Butcher Workmen*, 88-91; Herbst, 43-45; Barrett, *William Z. Foster*, 98; Pacyga, 243-246 Cohen,
*Making a New Deal*, 46.
AMCBW had named John Kikulski and John Riley. Kikulski was a local Polish-American organizer whose charisma and oration had made him legendary within his community. Riley, a black organizer sent directly from the AFL, had made tireless efforts to recruit African Americans into the SLC. Because of the SLC’s avowed focus on recruiting both ethnic immigrants and African Americans, both men were considered invaluable to the organizing drive. Nonetheless, Kikulski was ordered to Pennsylvania to assist Foster in organizing steelworkers. “In regard to John Riley,” Morrison coldly wrote, “you are requested to see that he ceases any activities among [the] Butcher Workmen.”

Lane’s appeal to the AFL’s suspicion of unskilled workers, particularly ethnic immigrants and African Americans, had worked. Two of the SLC’s most valuable organizers were summarily dismissed. The loss of Riley was a particularly crucial blow, given the SLC’s commitment to organizing black workers. But such organizing was not a priority for the AMCBW, and threatened the exclusionary power of its locals. As a result of the AFL decision, the SLC’s greatest asset—its ability to organize—evaporated.

The SLC quickly withered under such direct assaults. The AFL, seeking to crush any threat to union autonomy, ordered Fitzpatrick to expel the recalcitrant SLC unions from the CFL. Faced with little other choice, the SLC heads resigned in January 1920 and affiliated their locals with District Council No. 9. Under pressure from Fitzpatrick, the Council agreed to eliminate the five-vote rule and hold a conference with the SLC, after which it would issue a new charter that would make District Council No. 9 the citywide representative of all AMCBW locals. In February, the conference elected former SLC officers Martin Murphy and J.W. Johnstone as

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5 Letter, Frank Morrison to John Fitzpatrick, 20 September 1919, John Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 8, Folder 62, Chicago History Museum; see also Report of Stockyards Labor Council, CFL Minutes, 18 November 1917, 4; ibid., 16 December 1917, 45-46.
president and secretary-treasurer. Both sides appeared satisfied with the compromise. But Lane’s zealotry for the Council was dampened by the election of Murphy and Johnstone. He stalled in issuing the charter, delaying the appointment of organizers and the collection of dues.\(^6\)

Finally, the situation exploded. On March 16, Kikulski, in a move that stunned his former SLC comrades, assembled a District Council meeting, held a vote, and was elected president. Murphy and Johnstone howled in protest, but to no avail—thousands of Polish union members had pledged their fealty to Kikulski and recognized him, and only him, as the Council’s rightful leader. Once more, the shortcomings of federated unionism were laid bare. The SLC had no power to compel the locals to recognize Murphy and Johnstone, and was forced to submit to the results of the phony election or risk alienating thousands of Polish workers. In a petty move, the District Council took advantage of a loophole in the SLC’s lease of its headquarters and snatched up the space. Johnstone, finally fed up, dropped a bombshell: he accused Kikulski of embezzling funds from the CFL treasury. In an impassioned oratory before the CFL, Johnstone claimed that “Kikulski had betrayed the confidence placed in him by this Federation’s officers and the Stock Yards workers.” An investigation by the CFL’s Executive Board immediately followed. The Board agreed with Johnstone and concluded that Kikulski had collected per-capita donations from five local unions to assist striking butchers in Detroit, and never delivered the money.\(^7\)

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The rift between the SLC and the District Council widened into a chasm. Though the Executive Board had found Kikulski guilty of fraud and expelled him from the Federation, the CFL, bound by the rules of union autonomy, had no power to enforce its decision. District Council No. 9 vociferously defended Kikulski’s innocence and refused to respect the CFL’s ruling. Federation meetings descended into shouting matches crowded with resolutions and counter-resolutions regarding the guilt or innocence of Kikulski. Delegate Hans Pfeiffer read a unanimous declaration from the District Council condemning the accusations as false and vowing that if the CFL continued “encourag[ing] disruption in the rank and file,” the Council would advise its locals to disaffiliate from the CFL entirely. Kikulski claimed that Johnstone himself had committed fraud, but those chargers were quickly found to be groundless. The situation finally descended into violence. Early on the morning of May 3, Johnstone was entering the SLC offices when several gunshots were fired in his direction. When police arrived, they declined to take Johnstone’s statement and instead ransacked the SLC offices and arrested him on trumped-up charges of assault and carrying a concealed weapon. Johnstone claimed the charges were made by members of the District Council before a friendly judge. In a grimly appropriate finale, the battle ended with blood being spilled. On May 17, Kikulski was shot and died a few days later. The District Council railed against Johnstone, Murphy, and the SLC chiefs, claiming that they had murdered Kikulski to consolidate their power. Though the District Council succeeded in having Johnstone arrested and charged with murder, there was insufficient evidence to secure a conviction and he was acquitted. Kikulski’s killer was never found.8

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Were it not so tragic, the war between the SLC and District Council No. 9 would be almost comical in its absurdity. Petty wrangling over the meeting space and accusations and counter-accusations came to dominate a progressive labor organization. Perhaps no fact better illustrated the irrationality of the conflict than the fact that by the end of the controversy the stockyards were governed by three separate bodies: the Stockyards Labor Council, District Council No. 9, and a Mechanical Trades Council, not to mention independent local unions who refused to affiliate with any of the councils. But although the battle was bizarre, its costs were very real, and they were borne primarily by stockyards workers. Without a centralized system for coordinating and controlling tasks such as organizing, grievances, and dues payments, local unions quickly fell into disrepair. Many workers, disgusted by the fighting of their leaders, abandoned unionism entirely; the morale of those who remained was at an all-time low. By the mid-1920s, the Stockyards Labor Council had disappeared entirely. 9

The internecine war between the SLC and District Council No. 9 reveals the limits of federated unionism. Although the SLC made great strides in organizing the previously impregnable fortress of the stockyards, its ability to direct the organizing campaign was subject to the voluntary participation of local unions. Despite its admirable goals of democratic representation and interracial harmony, the SLC was bound by its obligation to respect union sovereignty. The militancy and diversity that had propelled the rise of the SLC proved its undoing. By engaging in a strike involving a large force of unskilled workers of various ethnicities, the SLC triggered a series of fears and anxieties on the part of old-line craft unionists, who moved to reassert their control over the union and limit the influence of unskilled workers.

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9 Clark, 182-186.
Willing but unable to fully dedicate itself to democracy and diversity, the SLC ultimately failed in its task to permanently remake stockyards unionism.

The Great Steel Strike of 1919

Though it did not involve the same level of infighting as the stockyards controversy, the failed steel strike of 1919-1920 was equally injurious to the CFL. Though most strongly associated with western Pennsylvania, the strike began in the Chicago district—an area that organizers felt was equally vital to the success of the membership drive. More importantly, the CFL was directly implicated in the attempt to build a strong, diverse movement among steel workers, lending the campaign financial and strategic support. Ultimately, however, the strike ended as so many of Chicago’s labor wars had: with a racially divided workforce warring with itself as employers destroyed the strike with scab labor. Though the introduction of federal troops was decisive in breaking the strike, the structure of the campaign both reflected and provoked racial divisions among the workers, which undermined the strikers’ strength and momentum and ultimately left them bitter and defeated.

The organization of the steel industry was a gargantuan undertaking. After crushing the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers nearly out of existence in the 1890s, the steel industry had become a bulwark of the open shop—a fact reflected in the notoriously dreadful conditions faced by steelworkers. In 1919, the average workweek in the mills was 69 hours. Wages were below subsistence levels, a problem exacerbated by wartime inflation that saw the price of foodstuffs alone rise 52% between 1916 and 1918. As late as 1919, two-thirds of the children of black and foreign-born steelworkers in Gary, Indiana had no milk, eggs, or fruit in their diet; a number suffered from malnutrition and even bone defects. The workers
themselves at first appeared immune to organization. Perhaps no other industry better reflected the reconstitution of the American workforce than steelworkers, who were a staggeringly diverse group. Unfortunately, as historian Robert K. Murray has argued, steel bosses easily exploited this diversity for their own benefit. Most of the unskilled workers “were uneducated immigrants of a dozen different nationalities who were completely at the mercy of the steel trust.”

Buried within this polyglot group, however, was the seed of resistance. By 1919, immigrant workers had sufficiently acclimated to American customs that they felt comfortable engaging in informal work protests such as slowdowns. As the Interchurch World Movement found in its investigation of the strike, the immigrant workers had “developed a frame of mind of more or less chronic rebellion.”

With workers increasingly radicalized, the situation was ripe for action.

The first step was taken by William Z. Foster, an itinerant radical who had come to Chicago to assist with the organizing of stockyards workers. A tireless organizer, Foster dreamt of “boring from within” the labor movement to effect the organization of unskilled workers along industrial lines. Foster was not alone, of course; the organization of steelworkers was a part of John Fitzpatrick’s plan of organizing the basic industries of Chicago—namely, meatpacking and steel. The rebellion of rank-and-file steelworkers struck both Foster and Fitzpatrick as an opportunity too rich to ignore. On April 7, 1918, Foster submitted a resolution to the Chicago Federation of Labor claiming that “the organization of the vast armies of wage earners employed in the steel industries is vitally necessary to the further spread of industrial democracy in

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11 Interchurch World Movement, 147, 154-155; Bigham, 58; Dubofsky, Industrialism, 130-131; Brecher, 133-144; Keiser, 56-59.
America.” Foster, the delegate to that summer’s AFL convention, proposed to ask Gompers and AFL leadership to sponsor a mass organizing campaign among the iron and steel industries. The meeting’s minutes recount what must have been a dramatic moment:

[Foster] told how he had constantly heard the cry raised on all sides that 'it can't be done' but that he for one refused to allow himself to be placed in any such state of mind. He told how, from time to time, various trade unions had tried to organize their own particular trade, working in these large industries with no result, and how, one after the other, had failed because each tried to do the job separately, instead of all banding together as a whole, and that there would never again be presented such an opportunity as existed at the present time.12

That summer, Foster traveled to the AFL convention and made his proposal. Befitting the AFL’s traditional adherence to craft unionism, the response was less than enthusiastic. The AFL agreed to form a committee of twenty-two unions to organize the workers, but limited the financial contribution of each local to one hundred dollars, totaling far less than the $250,000 Foster felt was necessary to begin the campaign. Undaunted, Foster pressed on, proudly boasting that the committee itself was his greatest asset, representing as it did workers in “the steel and iron industries from mine to finished product.” Fitzpatrick agreed, noting that the committee could develop and channel “the strength which is within ourselves” and direct it toward a unified campaign in the industry.13

Such enthusiasm appeared warranted. The committee, led by Foster and Fitzpatrick, drafted an extensive list of demands, including the eight-hour day, seniority rights, abolition of company

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12 Resolution No. 2, CFL Minutes, 7 April 1918, 5-7.
unions, and, of course, recognition of the Amalgamated and its subsidiaries as the sole collective bargaining representative of the workers. Organizing began immediately, with a focus on the Chicago district. The early results were nothing short of stunning. In one day, 1,200 workers signed up at Joliet. More than 1,500 signed cards at Gary. At Indiana Harbor, more than 6,000 workers attended a mass rally, with many staying to sign cards. By December, an estimated 25,000 steelworkers were organized nationwide; by June 1919, the number had risen to 100,000. Indeed, the Interchurch World Movement noted that the organizers’ greatest difficulty “was in withstanding the mass-feeling they had fostered.” The furor was undeniable; workers who left the meeting at Indiana Harbor and returned to work without signing union cards were met with “jeers and hoots” from their newly organized colleagues.\(^\text{14}\)

Eastern and southern European “new immigrants” seemed particularly entranced by the union appeal. These immigrants were highly politicized and even radicalized prior to the Committee’s organizing efforts, making them prime targets for Fitzpatrick and Foster’s vision of progressive unionism. As Thomas Mackaman has argued, unskilled immigrant workers were not merely concerned with wages and hours, but with “deeper social grievances.” Wartime propaganda that decried “autocracy” and “Kaiserism” was easily reconciled with the cries of eastern European nationalists. As such, the immigrants regularly agitated for workplace control. Months before the strike began, a group of workers in the Calumet district, dubbed “foreigners”

by plant bosses, engaged in a wildcat strike to protest the dismissal of a coworker. On May 4, a communist rally in Gary garnered an audience of some 10,000 workers. Committee members adroitly tailored the campaign to attract the immigrant workers. Bulletins were printed in nearly a dozen languages, and the Committee hired twenty-five full-time organizers who spoke the languages of the immigrants. As a result, when the organizing call went out, immigrants “flocked into the organization,” in David Brody’s words.15

The moment seemed ripe for a major offensive. The steel companies refused even to meet with the Committee; in response, a strike vote was held on August 20, 1919, with 98% of the steelworkers voting in favor of a strike.16 The ever-cautious Samuel Gompers pleaded with the committee to postpone the strike while he tried to negotiate a parley with President Woodrow Wilson and the steel companies. Though Wilson uttered some banalities about industrial peace, the parley never materialized. Pressure mounted. The committee boasted it had organized 150,000 men—fully 80% of the industry. Rank-and-file workers began agitating on their own, engaging in wildcat strikes in Ohio and Indiana. Finally, the committee could wait no longer. On September 22, 1919, an estimated 275,000 steelworkers walked off the job. Within days, the number would surpass 300,000. The response in the Chicago district was overwhelming. In Waukegan, at American Steel and Wire, nearly 90% struck. Fully 95% of the men at Inland Steel at Indiana Harbor were reported out. In Joliet, the union claimed 98% participation, though the


16 Foster, The Great Steel Strike, 78-80; CFL Minutes, 7 September 1919, 28-30; “Steel Men to Vote,” Chicago Daily Tribune (10 August 1919), 1; Barrett, William Z. Foster, 89-90; Brecher, 137.
company claimed it was closer to 75%. The battle of the steel industry had begun with a major union offensive.

Despite the strike’s strong beginning, issues lurked just beneath the surface. For one thing, the Steel Trust was as much an empire as it was a corporation. Steel magnates controlled not only the plants in which their employees worked, but the cities in which they lived. As David Brody has noted, steel towns “owed their existence to the steel works.” Often, the municipal government was an open puppet of the corporation. A U.S. Steel official presided over the city council in Gary, for example. As a result, unionism was denounced “from pulpits and newspapers.” Store owners refused to extent lines of credit, while landlords evicted “troublemaking” boarders. City officials blatantly flouted the First Amendment, “invoke[ing] ordinances and injunctions to prevent…picketing, parades,” and even large meetings. Union organizers were refused service in hotels, restaurants, and saloons, and ordered away by police. Those who refused to go were jailed or beaten. Any employee who dared sign a union card was discharged and blacklisted from the industry.

Internal issues plagued the union as well. Because Fitzpatrick and Foster had chosen to “bore from within” the AFL, the organizing drive carried the full weight of the AFL’s history of neglect toward unskilled workers, particularly ethnic and racial minorities. The AFL had made


efforts to organize unskilled steelworkers into federal unions in the early twentieth century, but they met with little success; by the time of the strike, most of the unskilled workers were entirely new to unionism. Ethnic and racial conflicts immediately plagued the strike. Employers played on the discrimination of native whites against southern and eastern European workers. Native-born workers, already distrustful of the unskilled immigrants, were assured that the walkout was a “hunkie strike.” Immigrant strikers were told that the skilled native workers would sell them out at the first available opportunity and were reminded that as early as 1902, South Chicago residents had demanded a government investigation as to the presence of Hungarian and Croatian workers. An infamous broadside appeared in the Pittsburgh Chronicle Telegram in early October: Uncle Sam, yelling “The Strike Has Failed, Go Back To Work” in eight different languages.19

The AFL’s insistence on an adherence to union autonomy created still more problems. Because the strike was initiated and led by organizations of skilled, primarily native-born workers, and because the AFL insisted that authority over the drive rest with the union locals, it was difficult to channel the energies of the unskilled men. The supremacy of local autonomy made the coordination of organizing a nightmare. As a result, some districts were unduly aggressive—even engaging in wildcat strikes during the summer—while others were barely organized by the time the strike was called. As one Pittsburgh organizer complained, “the dam broke before this district was more than half worked.” Though the industry was desperate for a new form of militant mass unionism, John Fitzpatrick—no conservative himself—quashed such

19 Interchurch World Movement, 15-16, 135-136; “Foreigners Go Back, Says Strike Picket,” Chicago Daily News (25 September 1919), 3; Brody, Steelworkers, 135-137; ibid., Labor in Crisis, 43; Cohen, Making a New Deal, 39-43; Bate, 129; Brecher, 141-142. For a discussion of race in the AFL, see Chapter 2.
desires, explaining, “this is a fight of trade unions of the country as they exist and as we know them.”

Unfortunately, unions as they existed in the steel industry had a long history of racial exclusion. Divisions between white and black workers would prove decisive in the defeat of the strike. The historical composition of the Amalgamated made it unattractive to African Americans. Because black workers had not entered the industry in large numbers until the wartime era, they lacked even the minor experience of the early-twentieth-century federal union drive. As a result, black workers represented the balance of power in the strike: an unorganized mass of 12% in the Chicago district, and as high as 20% in some areas—a group just large enough to destroy the strike. Many of their interactions with white workers had been negative. In 1909, one white steelworker derided his black coworkers for being “filthy in their personal habits” and “coarse, vulgar and brutal in their acts and conversation.” Working with such men, he claimed, the idea of working with them is repugnant to any man who wants to retain his self respect.” A workplace that employed African Americans was “no place for a man with a white man’s heart to be.”

Once the organizing campaign began, the mutual distrust of white unionists and the black community helped torpedo any possibility of cooperation. If anything, black workers faced discrimination even greater than that of the immigrant workers. Earnest efforts had been made as early as 1909 to rid Gary of African Americans; though the plans failed, blacks were isolated into ghettos, where they paid up to 20% more than whites for equivalent housing. On the job,

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20 CFL Minutes, 5 October 1919, 18-26; Interchurch World Movement, 154-160; Brody, Steelworkers, 217; ibid., Labor in Crisis, 65-66; Bingham, 58; Dubofsky, Industrialism, 130-131; Brecher, 133-144; Keiser, 56-59.

21 Brody, Steelworkers, 121; Spero and Harris, 256-258; see also Edward Greer, “Racism and U.S. Steel, 1906-1974,” Radical America 10 (September-October 1976), 52; Whatley, “African-American Strikebreaking.”
black workers faced constant discrimination. Foremen often favored recent immigrants, augmenting feelings of mutual resentment. The organizing committee, recognizing the danger of such realities, did not entirely neglect black workers. They took great pains to include black speakers during the mass rallies that became a regular feature of the campaign’s early stages. The day after the strike began, the committee held a mass meeting in Gary’s East Side Park and asked black attorney Lewis Caldwell to speak. Claiming the crowd was “a sea of black and white hands and waving hats,” Caldwell admonished the black workers in particular: “There must be no friction between the races. The worst crime of civilization has been…the pitting of the two races against each other in the industrial struggle.”

Despite such efforts, however, black workers did not support the union campaign or the strike. The historical voices of black workers are maddeningly elusive, so it is difficult to speculate on the reasons for black resistance to the union appeal. Pure economics almost certainly played a major role. During World War I, thousands of southern blacks, encouraged by Steel Trust labor agents, hopped aboard the Illinois Central and traveled from Mississippi and Louisiana to Chicago. Even the exhausting, miserable, and relentlessly dangerous life of the unskilled steel worker was preferable to sharecropping. This was particularly true in Chicago, where workers could not only find a good job, but escape southern racial apartheid and make a life in the so-called “Land of Hope.” For many African Americans, unskilled steel work was tremendously attractive. As Bruce Nelson has found, many black workers entered the steel industry before the strike—that is, they applied for work not merely to temporarily fill the spots of striking union men, but to make a lasting career. At Gary Works alone, the number of black

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22 Ibid., “Gary Looks Upon Itself as Heart of Steel Fight,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (22 September 1919), 2; “Steel Strikers Stick in Chicago District,” *The New Majority* (4 October 1919); see also Dorothy Walton, “Scab Life Miserable in Chicago District,” ibid. (11 October 1919).
employees rose from 407 in 1916 to 1,072 in 1917 and 1,295 in 1918. By the end of the war, black workers made up 11.4% of the steel workforce in Illinois and 14.2% in Indiana. The relatively high pay of steel work meant that jobs were jealously guarded. This was particularly true given blacks’ low social and occupational status, which made them vulnerable to mass discharges during the postwar recession of 1919. One Division of Negro Economics report estimated that more than 90% of black World War I veterans had not yet found work by April of that year; another estimate held that as many as 10,000 black Chicagoans were unemployed. For black workers facing such conditions, the prospect of risking one’s job must have seemed ludicrous.  

Because of its own flaws, the Committee was never able to convince black workers that union membership was preferable to scabbing. Black workers were fully cognizant of the fact that many AFL unions continued to bar black members by constitutional fiat. That number included several international unions on the Committee, including a number of mechanical trades. As a result, black workers resented the committee’s efforts as merely pragmatic, even perfunctory. There was little evidence to dispute this notion. The Amalgamated Association had technically authorized the organization of unskilled workers as early as 1889, but few of its lodges were interested in opening their ranks to immigrants and, in particular, blacks. Because organizing power rested with union locals, the rigor with which the committee pursued black workers varied by district. As a result, the relationship between the union and the black community was at times practically dysfunctional. The Pittsburgh Urban League, for example, told the committee they would support the organizing campaign if the committee would employ black organizers and make a concerted effort to organize black workers. Though Foster was

amenable to the idea, the committee refused, and gained itself a powerful enemy. African Americans were also distrustful of white institutions in the wake of the infamous Red Summer of 1919, in which, in historian James Barrett’s words, “black workers were mobbed on their way to work, ‘deadlined’ out of white working-class neighborhoods, and lynched.” This was particularly true in the Chicago district, which was still recovering from the brutality of the previous summer’s race riot. Union attitudes toward black workers, both past and present, combined with the ugly racial realities of 1919 to render African Americans skeptical of the steel organizing campaign.

The black press helped promulgate such distrust. The influential Chicago Defender refused to lend its support. Though the paper vowed that African Americans had no “ambition to antagonize unionism,” it acknowledged that “we stand as the big stick between labor and capital...[and] insist that the federation[s] of labor give us a square deal.” Decrying “‘Jim Crow’ attachments” and “separate organizations,” the Defender argued, “a half a loaf in this particular instance is not better than no loaf at all.” Until all affiliated unions were fully interracial, the Defender would not support the steel strike. Even the nominally progressive Chicago Whip chastised the strikers. Acknowledging that “we assert that it is to the Negro’s decided advantage to join the American Federation of Labor where it will best serve his ends,” the paper railed against the beatings and harassment faced by black workers who refused to join the union. “THE NEGRO CANNOT BE DRIVEN IN,” the editorial concluded, “HE MUST BE MET THRU

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24 Interchurch World Movement, 177-178; Brody, Steelworkers, 125-126, 224-225; Spero and Harris, 256-258; Greer, 52; Norwood, 109-110; Neil Betten and Raymond Mohl, “The Evolution of Racism in an Industrial City, 1906-1940: A Case Study of Gary, Indiana,” Journal of Negro History 59 (1974), 53-54; Dickerson, 51; Barrett, William Z. Foster, 96; Bate, n.186; McCartin, 46.
CONSTRUCTIVE REASONING AND HUMAN TREATMENT.”25 Black workers’ skepticism regarding the campaign constituted a major problem for the committee’s organizers.

That problem only grew as the strike spread. Black workers’ cynicism regarding unions was augmented by the committee’s failure to reach them. Despite Lewis Caldwell’s vision of “a sea of black and white hands and waving hats” and the CFL’s claim that the committee “eradicated the differences of race,” black workers simply did not join the organizing campaign or the strike. Even during the early stages of the strike, black workers were rarely spotted at meetings and rallies. At a mass meeting of 6,000 workers in Gary on the first day of the strike, organizers “were concerned largely with the fact that very few Negroes were present” among the throng—particularly since black union member William Elliston was a featured speaker. The Committee simply never made union membership enticing to black workers. As Mackaman has argued, the Committee was so desperate to avoid any accusations of radicalism that it repeatedly stressed the conservative, “bread-and-butter” nature of the strike. At every available turn, union leaders emphasized that the workers were fighting only for basic rights, such as union recognition, lower hours, and higher wages—not for a revolution. For black workers, “whose economic situation could not be separated from larger question of social equality,” such appeals rang hollow.26

Foster was particularly embittered by the non-participation of black workers. He railed against “the indifference, verging often into open hostility, with which negroes generally regard Organized Labor’s activities” and claimed that African American workers “gave the movement less co-operation than any other element, skilled or unskilled, foreign or native.” It was a


26 “Steel Strikers Stick in Chicago District,” The New Majority (4 October 1919); Dorothy Walton, “Scab Life Miserable in Chicago District,” The New Majority (11 October 1919); “Gary Looks Upon Itself as Heart of Steel Fight,” Chicago Daily Tribune (22 September 1919), 2; Mackaman, 186-189.
difficult argument to refute. Blacks composed roughly 13% of the workforce at the Homestead plant, yet only eight of the mill’s 1,737 black workers signed a union card, and only one of those struck. In Clairton, six of the 300 black workers joined the union and struck, but went back to work after just two weeks. Not a single one of the 344 black workers at Duquesne went on strike.  

Without the cooperation of black steelworkers, the campaign was practically doomed before it began. Black workers represented the balance of power in the strike, but the union’s exclusionary history, coupled with its failure to organize black workers in large numbers and the skepticism of the black community, combined to swing that balance toward the employers.

Perhaps even more decisive than the non-participation of black steelworkers was the introduction of black strikebreakers. The racial attitudes of the strikers would lead them to ferociously resent the presence of these scabs, and ultimately contribute to the occupation of Gary by federal troops and the collapse of the strike. Employers sensed the racial division of the workforce and introduced massive numbers of strikebreakers almost immediately. Most estimates place the total number of strikebreakers used at between 30,000 and 40,000, with perhaps as many as 10,000 used in the Chicago district alone. “The demand for scabs was tremendous,” recalled Foster, opining that “half the strike-breaking agencies in the country were engaged in recruiting them.” The committee took great pains to discredit the presence of the strikebreakers, most commonly by questioning their morals and manhood. Foster, for instance, derided the scabs as “negroes from the South, and...guttersnipe whites from the big northern cities.” But the committee also attempted to present strikebreakers as unwilling dupes suckered in by the mills. In his memoir of the strike, Foster reprinted a letter from a black strikebreaker

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27 “Gary Looks Upon Itself as Heart of Steel Fight,” Chicago Daily Tribune (22 September 1919), 2; “Steel Strikers Stick in Chicago District,” The New Majority (4 October 1919); see also Dorothy Walton, “Scab Life Miserable in Chicago District,” ibid. (11 October 1919); Foster, The Great Steel Strike, 205-207; Dubofsky, Industrialism, 130-131; Dickerson, 85-100; Spero and Harris, 262; Barrett, William Z. Foster, 95-96; Brody, Steelworkers, 224-225.
named Eugene Steward. A native of South Carolina, Steward sought work in Baltimore, where a labor agent recruited him to work in Philadelphia for $4 a day. He and other African Americans were loaded onto a train, which was then locked, and driven to Monessen, Pennsylvania. When Steward realized a strike was on, he attempted to escape the mill, but was captured and told he’d he shot if he attempted to leave again.28

But, as Foster put it, “few…of the imported negro strike-breakers showed the splendid spirit of this unlettered boy,” claiming that the scabs “seemed to take a keen delight in stealing the white men's jobs and crushing their strike.” It can be safely assumed that no one was “delighted” to take on unskilled steel work in 1919, but Foster’s words were perhaps more true than even he realized. Surely African Americans showed no compunction regarding their role as strikebreakers. The Interchurch World Movement reported that far from the naïve victims portrayed by Eugene Steward, “the great numbers of negroes who flowed into the Chicago and Pittsburgh plants were conscious of strike breaking.” Indeed, though some strikebreakers were native southerners, Foster’s belief that the steel companies were “importing” masses of blacks ignorant of the strike was a naïve rationalization of black strikebreaking. Historians Sterling Spero and Abram Harris found that the majority of the strikebreakers were in fact “residents of [Chicago] or persons who had come to the city voluntarily in the hope of finding work in the mills.” In fact, black Chicagoans, fully cognizant of the situation, volunteered for work in significant numbers—to the point that supply exceeded demand, and 500 black workers were sent to steel mills in Cleveland to fill struck jobs there. The “importation” of workers, they

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claimed, was unnecessary when labor agents “were able to recruit all the labor they wanted on State Street.” The ease with which employers were able to recruit black Chicagoans as strikebreakers reveals the extent to which the CFL had failed to recruit African Americans.

Employers eagerly played on that weakness. Due to the steel unions’ long-standing policies of racial exclusion, strikebreaking afforded many blacks a heretofore unavailable opportunity. Black workers were welcomed into the mills by the employers, and offered lodging and meals. In an expose that prompted howls of protest from the union, a Chicago Tribune journalist posed as a strikebreaker to get inside Gary Works. They found a group of black workers carrying cots. When they asked if the men were living in the plant, one of the workers happily replied, “‘Yes, sah…eight of us has cots back of No. 12,’ pointing towards a blast furnace.” Black workers viewed the opening of the mills as a “blessing in disguise.” Indeed, the bitter and violent reaction of white strikers to the strikebreakers transformed the position of the Defender from one of neutrality to one of vocal support for strikebreaking. Referring to Gary as the “New Mecca,” the Defender dubbed the strike a boon “for those of the Race…who have been looking for a place to establish homes where they might find a cordial welcome, plenty of employment, with an opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their labor and the pursuit of happiness in their own way.” The newspaper’s tone reflected the pride and excitement black workers felt about their new opportunity: “our men played quite a part in the steel strike,” the paper boasted. Encouraging the continuation of strikebreaking, the paper concluded that “the strike gave members of the Race an

29 Foster, The Great Steel Strike, 208; Interchurch World Movement, 177-178; Spero and Harris, 262; Norwood, 109.

30 “Tribune Men Find Gary Plant Stricken Giant,” Chicago Daily Tribune (24 September 1919), 3; Brody, Steelworkers, 184-186. Black AFL organizer John Riley responded directly to these strikebreakers in a scathing editorial, claiming they were “a few of the men who have not yet discovered how useful they can be to capital in trying to destroy conditions for people who labor” and reassuring readers that “this type of ‘Tom’ and ‘Sam’ is rapidly disappearing among the colored citizens of the United States.” See Riley, “Reading Between the Lines of the Chicago Tribune and Herald-Examiner on the Steel Strike,” Chicago Whip (4 October 1919), 7.
opportunity to obtain positions which they had never before held,” resulting in “steel officials…look[ing] with particular favor upon Colored employes.” Blacks had never before been welcome in the steel industry or its unions. Without a stake in the organizing drive or the strike, they now viewed strikebreaking as an opportunity for economic advancement.

The steel companies recognized the potential of the strikebreakers to foment discontent—not only by their undermining of the strike, but by the implied racial insult of their very presence. Steel bosses sent spies and agents into the union halls, “instructing them ‘to stir up as much bad feeling as you possibly can.’” The companies also sought to provoke direct confrontations with white strikers, parading black strikebreakers past union pickets whenever possible; the Interchurch World Movement noted that “in Gary the negroes were marched ostentatiously through the streets.” The strikebreakers became a powerful tool both tangibly and symbolically. Thanks to the use of strikebreakers, a number of mills maintained production with only minimal disruption; “on this basis, the companies created a belief that it was being resumed everywhere.” Such rumors eroded the morale of the strikers, but they also fomented hatred and resentment against the strikebreakers, who were increasingly seen as a mass of invaders. Company officials eagerly spread such feelings, responding to any accusations of scabbing, provocation, or violence by saying “niggers did it.”

White strikers grew increasingly agitated about the presence of the strikebreakers, and began to take drastic steps against them. In South Chicago, a group of one thousand union pickets stationed itself at every rail station of the Illinois Central, seeking to chase away a group of thirty

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31 “Gary New Mecca,” *Chicago Defender* (24 January 1920), 13; see also “Says Gary Offers Best Opportunity,” ibid. (7 February 1920), 19.

32 Dorothy Walton, “Scab Life Miserable in Chicago District,” *The New Majority* (11 October 1919); “Steel Trust Spy Chiefs Try to Start Race Riot,” ibid; Interchurch World Movement, 177-178; Murray, 146-148; Bate, 186; Brecher, 14.
black strikebreakers. The strikers, alerted by union railroad workers, even went so far as to grease the tracks, so that the trainload of strikebreakers could not stop at its intended destination. Such resentment and racial animus was not limited to the rank and file. In October, the committee summoned a group of two hundred delegates of various local unions to Chicago for a conference. Among the resolutions passed was “[an] objection to importation of colored laborers,” as committee officials claimed that, “the Negro labor question has become serious.”

Their concerns reflect the tangled web of antipathies the strikers felt for black strikebreakers: the men resented not only that “75 per cent of the labor going on in the mills at present is being done by Negro labor,” but that “95 per cent of the Negroes have never worked in steel mills before.”

The presence of the black strikebreakers was both a racial insult and an insult to the workers’ sense of pride in their work. The solution, “if a great racial feeling is to be averted,” was for the black strikebreakers to be expelled. The feelings of the strikers were so intense that Illinois Governor Frank Lowden intervened, asking that the steel companies stop the importation of black strikebreakers into Joliet. Lowden agreed with union leaders that “if this practice is continued it may lead to serious race trouble.”

Inevitably, “serious race trouble” occurred. On the night of October 4, a black strikebreaker was pulled out of a streetcar in Gary and beaten. The episode remains controversial. According to union representatives, a group of strikers were walking home from an outdoor meeting when, in Foster’s words, they “fell foul of some homeward bound scabs.” A scuffle ensued, described by local unionists as no more serious than what “ordinarily would occur in a saloon when two or three men were fighting.” The fight spread to the streetcar, where a black strikebreaker was

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33 “Defy Strike; Open Mill; Coke Ovens, Slab Plant Start at Gary,” Chicago Daily Tribune (25 September 1919), 1; “Steel Strikers Meet and 'Dig In' for Fight to End,” ibid. (19 October 1919), 7; “Strike Leaders Seek Ban on Use of Negro Labor,” ibid. (17 October 1919), 7.
pulled off and beaten. The strikebreaker drew a knife to defend himself, but that proved unnecessary: a contingent of police, steel mill watchmen, and strikebreakers, armed with heavy clubs, quickly arrived. According to a union striker at the scene, what followed was a minor dust-up: the scabs “struck right and left” to subdue the crowd, and police arrested around thirty people. The only serious injury was to the strikebreaker pulled off the streetcar, about whom the striker said, “I saw him later. He was able to walk around at all times.” Others saw the event differently. A local police officer claimed, “the situation was very tense. You could feel it in the air and see it in the street.” The press took the side of the employers. The virulently antiunion Chicago Tribune described the event as “a pitched battle between 5,000 strikers and several hundred policemen and special deputy sheriffs.” Foster and other unionists practically scoffed at reports of “the hospitals…full of wounded” and “the city…running in blood.” Whatever the case, the incident was sufficient pretext for Indiana Governor James Goodrich to summon federal troops to occupy the city. Army regulars under the command of General Leonard Wood soon arrived and placed the city under martial law, forbidding any public protest or meeting by union members.34

The October 4th incident typified the vulnerabilities of the organizing drive and the strike. The presence and importance of black strikebreakers was a direct result of the union’s longstanding exclusion of black workers and its failure to reform that policy in a meaningful

34 Foster, The Great Steel Strike, 169-170; Interchurch World Movement, 241; Testimony of Donald C. Van Buren, U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor, Investigation of Strike in Steel Industries, Hearings (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919), 909; Testimony of Oscar Anderson, ibid., 977; “Gary Looks Upon Itself as Heart of Steel Fight,” Chicago Daily Tribune (22 September 1919), 2; “Steel Strike Situation,” ibid. (5 October 1919), 1; “Riot Calls Troops; Hospitals and Jail Filled as 5,000 Battle,” ibid. (5 October 1919), 1; “The Steel War,” ibid. (6 October 1919), 2; “Halt New Riots at Gary; Troops Stop Disorder; One Man is Shot,” ibid. (6 October 1919), 1; “Steel Strike Developments,” ibid. (6 October 1919), 1; Murray, 146-148; Brody, Steelworkers, 247, 252-253; ibid., Labor in Crisis, 134-136; see also “Police Prevent Riot as Steel Picket is Shot,” ibid. (4 October 1919), 2; “U.S. Troops Armed With Cannon Stop Disorders in Gary,” Chicago Daily News (7 October 1919), 1; CFL Minutes, 19 October 1919, 18-21; “Two Shot, Many Hurt in Steel Strike Riot,” Chicago Daily News (9 October 1919), 1.
way. As a result, union members fell victim to the steel bosses’ race-baiting and were confronted with federal militia. The resentments and hatreds of the strikers only served to strengthen the significance of the strikebreakers and allowed the steel companies both to resume production and to provoke the hatred of the strikers.

Just as critically, public opinion—which had been generally biased against the strikers—turned positively venomous. The Gary incident allowed the press to heighten hysteria that the strike was a Bolshevik plot. The nationalist propaganda of the war, and the unprecedented wave of militant strikes (including the Seattle general strike and the Boston police strike) that galvanized the nation in 1919 created “numbing fears of subversion.” The presence of large numbers of immigrants in the strike only served to corroborate this assumption. Union leaders weakly replied that steel bosses had hired the immigrants in the first place, but to no avail. The charges of radicalism became more vociferous when reporters discovered Foster’s syndicalist past and publicized quotes from his youth regarding plans to foment revolution by “boring from within the labor movement.” With public opinion turned against the strike, it had little chance.35

With Gary under martial law, the strike quickly collapsed in the Chicago district. As Foster lamented, “the employers scored a break-through at…Gary…which shattered the whole line.” Without control of Gary, “the great western stronghold of the United States Steel Corporation,” the strike was effectively over in the Chicago area. Small groups of strikers began to trickle back into work, a number that swelled as the committee’s meager strike fund was exhausted and a brutally cold winter set in. By November, all of the mills in the district save Waukegan and Joliet were running at 50% of capacity or greater, with some as high as 85%. Although the committee estimated more than 100,000 men were still out in mid-December, committee leadership could

35 Brody, Steelworkers, 246-253; ibid., Labor in Crisis, 129-139.
no longer continue, and the strike officially ended January 7, 1920. Though some small groups of men remained on strike, they were striking in name only; in reality, they had been blacklisted and would not be welcomed back to their old jobs.36

The defeat of the steel strikers was a grave blow to the CFL. Fitzpatrick and Foster had attempted to bring to the industry the same democratic spirit that briefly made the SLC a major power in the city’s labor movement. But the steel union’s history of discrimination, the AFL’s insistence on local control, the cynicism of black workers, and the determined counteroffensive of the steel companies combined to crush the committee. Foster resigned from the committee in January 1920, and Fitzpatrick followed in June, when the committee was dissolved. Though a new committee was formed, it was purely perfunctory. The union had been utterly defeated. The steelworkers suffered most. Though twenty strikers had been killed in conflicts with police and mill guards (most of them in the Pittsburgh district), they won not a single concession. A study by the Department of Labor found that the twelve-hour day was just as prevalent in 1920 as it had been in 1910. Steel companies quickly moved to consolidate their power; as David Brody has put it, “if antiunionism had hardened earlier, in the twenties it became implacable and merciless.”37 The defeat chased unionism from the industry entirely. Unions would make no headway in steel until 1935.


37 Press release from John Fitzpatrick, 22 November 1920, John Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 9, Folder 67, Chicago History Museum; Murray, 152; Brody, Steelworkers, 263-278; Barrett, “Revolution and Personal Crisis.”
The racial legacy of the strike was equally bitter. Much of the blame fell on the strikebreakers and leaders in the black community. Foster joined in the chorus of voices that denounced African American strikebreakers for “breaking down the White working man” and their leaders for being “violently opposed to…trade unions” and “look[ing] upon strike-breaking as a legitimate and effective means of negro advancement.” An editorial in the CFL’s newspaper wondered “what Lincoln would think could he see to what use the freedom he died for was being put today” and opined that the Great Emancipator would be sickened at the sight of “Negroes…being used not only to forge chains of economic slavery…for themselves but for white workers as well.” The truth, of course, was not nearly so simple. As Foster acknowledged, “the unions are themselves in no small part to blame” for “fanning the flames of race hatred.” Racial exclusion, he argued, was “in direct conflict with the fundamental which demands that all the workers be organized, without regard to sex, race, creed, politics or nationality.” Black leaders, as Foster astutely recognized, “are in a race war,” and “inasmuch as the steel strike resulted in more negroes being in the industry than was the case before, they look upon the outcome as a victory.” The tragic irony of that so-called “victory” was that black workers received little reprieve from white hatred and derived little tangible economic benefit from competition with whites. According to Bruce Nelson, 73.6% of black steelworkers were employed in unskilled positions in 1910. Despite the central importance of African Americans in breaking the 1919 strike, their position barely changed. Two decades later, in 1930, the percentage of unskilled black workers stood at 73.5%—an improvement of just one-tenth of one percent.38

38 Foster, The Great Steel Strike, 209-211; Interchurch World Movement, 177-178; “How Steel Gang Jobbed Negroes,” The New Majority (3 July 1920); Nelson, 167; Dickerson, 92; Barrett, William Z. Foster, 96; Bate, n.186.
Foster’s problem was one of necessary and sufficient causes. Though the strike was lost due to black strikebreakers, their presence and importance was in turn due to the longstanding policies of the AFL, the contemporary failures of the committee, and the racial attitudes of rank-and-file workers. The solution to the AFL’s problems lay not in excoriating black workers, but in correcting its own myopia. For evidence, one need look no further than the story of a black machinist in the Youngstown district who walked off the job with his white comrades, stayed out to the bitter end, and still was not admitted to the machinists’ union.  

The Stockyards Strike of 1921-1922

It seems appropriate, in a way, that the first industry to be tackled by the CFL—meatpacking—was also the site of its final major defeat. In 1921, Chicago packers slashed wages, built a strike reserve force, and openly provoked the weakened AMCBW into calling a nationwide strike. The strike would follow a familiar and tragic pattern. The union, unable to recruit black workers in significant numbers, was left vulnerable to the race-baiting counteroffensive of employers. The introduction of black strikebreakers added a volatile element to the strike, and despite the unified (and violent) response of white ethnic communities, the strike was soon defeated, leaving the already weakened stockyards organizations shattered.

The major difference between the strike of 1904 and the strike of 1921-1922 was the conflict’s origin. In 1904, the union had sought to negotiate a higher wage scale for the unskilled workers, while the 1921 strike was called from a position of weakness. By the early 1920s, the SLC was ill-prepared to defend itself against an employer onslaught. The postwar depression and resultant labor surplus created a crisis of employment for stockyards workers. Though the union

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had used the looming expiration of the Alschuler award in summer 1919 to initiate a new campaign to secure 100% unionization of the yards, it had failed. The explosion of racial violence during the summer of 1919 derailed the campaign and added a volatile racial element to the union’s activities; the war between the SLC and AMCBW diverted the time, energy, and resources of the leaders of both unions away from the campaign.\textsuperscript{40} By the time of the strike, the SLC had reached its lowest ebb.

The packers sensed an opportunity to roll back the gains made by the union during the prosperous, government-mediated war years. Eagerly attempting to exploit the union’s weakness, they instituted the American Plan, a sweeping ideology of reform that reached a number of major industries after the war. Though its specifics differed by industry and even company, the general idea was quite simple: it combined, in James Barrett’s words, “sophisticated welfare policies with a firm decision to destroy trade union organization.” For the packers, such plans took many forms. Chief among them was the employee representation plan, known to workers as the company union. Ostensibly a tool for shared democratic governance, company unions were in reality nothing more than a perfunctory nod toward union values. Employers packed company unions with preferred workers, making it a “carrot” for management. Bosses often targeted specific employees to receive the benefits of the company’s largesse. Among the skilled workers, such benefits were generally doled out to the so-called “butcher aristocracy,” whose unique skills could not be replaced. The unskilled workers most frequently targeted were African Americans. With many black workers serving as a “strike

\textsuperscript{40} CFL Minutes, 3 August 1919, 22-23; ibid., 18 January 1920, 19-25; Reports of Organizations, ibid., 15 February 1920, 11-12; ibid., 21 November 1920, 14; Street, “Working in the Yards,” 273-279.
insurance” force, their continued fealty to the company over the union was of utmost importance.\textsuperscript{41}

A number of packers went beyond company unions. By the early 1920s, both Armour and Swift would add company recreation outings, plant beautification programs, company publications, Americanization programs for immigrants, and stock purchases. Taken together, these programs served to normalize the relations of production while maintaining a divided workforce through preferential distribution of benefits. Above all the American Plan sought to “increase efficiency and productivity as well as inculcate a sense of allegiance to the employer,” as Rick Halpern has argued.\textsuperscript{42} By enacting the American Plan within the stockyards, employers put meatpacking workers on the defensive and helped force a confrontation with the weakened AMCBW locals.

Perhaps more crucial to the looming conflict than union weakness or employer paternalism was the role of race. Employers had used racial tensions to break strikes in the past, but in the World War I period, the CFL’s efforts to organize black workers, flawed as they may have been, served as a bulwark against open race-baiting by employers. With the horrors of the race riot, the defeat of the steel strike amid racial enmity, and the collapse of the SLC into civil war, the packers confidently used race to help provoke a strike. The packers had chosen their battlefield well. By 1921, membership in Colored Local 651 was down to 112, with only 49 members in good standing. Agents of the company began openly hiring black workers as a strike reserve


\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
force. Not only did the packers choose not to conceal this information; they directed their spies on the killing floors to spread the word.43

The packers also used their contacts with the black community to foment discord. The mysterious R. E. Parker—editor of the Chicago Advocate, founder and head of the American Unity Labor Union and Colored Welfare Club (AULU), and rabblerouser extraordinaire—reappeared on the scene. White workers claimed that Parker was recruiting southern blacks to work in the stockyards in case of a strike. Others speculated that the packers had paid Parker to incite a race war and thus justify the intervention of federal troops, who could be used to destroy the union once and for all. Most galling to the SLC was an open letter from Parker to the city’s packers. The letter claimed that “six thousands of colored laborers” belonged to the AULU, and claimed that every one of them would “accept 20 per cent reduction of wages on skilled labor and 10 per cent reduction on unskilled labor as you have agreed to give.” Parker was careful to note that he had “no affiliation with the American Federation or the Amalgamated Meat Cutters’ Union,” and that his men refused to strike with the AMCBW. Parker ended his letter with a stinging critique of the CFL: “we believe we are better off by not being in the white union as they have always been unfair to colored laborers.” In an article in his newspaper, the Chicago Advocate, Parker claimed that any strike undertaken by the AMCBW would be a bluff, since “the jobs at the stockyards belong to the negroes, not the foreigners.”44

It is impossible to assess the veracity of Parker’s claim to 6,000 members. Dennis Lane cast doubt on Parker’s claim, arguing that the total number of black workers in the yards did not


44 CFL Minutes, 20 March 1921, 28-29; Open letter, R.E. Parker to packing companies, 9 March 1921, reprinted in The New Majority (19 March 1921); “Stock Yards Workers Vote to Uphold Rights,” ibid. (26 March 1921).
number 6,000 and that “most of them are members of the [AMCBW].” Lane also mocked Parker’s intention to “offset” a mass stockyards rally with a meeting of his own, noting that an interracial crowd of thousands attended the stockyards march, while Parker’s counterprotest garnered a mere one hundred. Nevertheless, if the reaction of other unionists is any indication, the threat Parker posed was very real indeed. One labor leader referred to the publication of Parker’s open letter in several city dailies as an act “either…[of] idiotic ignorance or…criminal intent to help stir up a new race warfare.” Another unionist, mindful of the lessons of Gary, called it a “deliberate attempt to incite riot so that soldiers, machine guns, mounted police and all the other instruments of terror may be turned loose in the streets.” The CFL also expressed fear that “copies of the ‘Chicago Advocate’ a newspaper containing stories which might incite race hatred were circulated in the colored districts of Chicago.”

The CFL was not blind to the potential of racial conflict. The blows the Federation had suffered in the race riot and the steel strike had taught its leaders a harsh lesson. As the packers attempted to appeal to black workers in anticipation of a strike, so too did the CFL. The union’s primary tool in defending itself against possible race-baiting was the mass meeting. The feeling predominated among CFL leaders that if the benefits of unionism were simply and directly explained to black workers, they would flock to the union in droves. During the summer of 1921, a series of nightly meetings consisting of “a continuous program of music and short, snappy speeches” was held at the Pekin Theater on the South Side. Led by A. K. Foote, secretary of Colored Local 651, and black AFL organizer John Riley, the meetings sought to counteract the efforts of bosses, preachers, politicians, and antiunion newspapers to paint unions as “disorderly outlaw bodies that are prejudiced against [black workers].” But the program was postponed by

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order of the chief of police after an undisclosed incident “involving a small group of negroes.” Other meetings followed. In September, on the first day of the strike, an estimated 25,000 union members attended a mass rally; union leaders noted that “I. H. Bratton, colored, president of Local 651 of the Butcher Workmen—the Negro local—was enthusiastically received as a speaker by the 2,000 or more members of his race who were in the throng,” though the numbers were likely exaggerated.\(^\text{46}\)

Unfortunately for the CFL, the meetings had diminishing returns. A week after the mass meeting, an assembly intended to rally the black stockyards workers drew a mixed-race crowd of less than one thousand. In October, the union boasted of an “overflow meeting” of black stockyards workers held at Forresters’ Hall, but the meeting was held in conjunction with the Pullman porters and it is impossible to know how many workers attended solely in support of the AMCBW. The most productive of the meetings, held at Unity Hall in December, was attended by a mere six hundred workers, though once more the numbers were inflated by the presence of members of the Pullman porters, waiters, and musicians unions. The CFL appealed to the stockyards workers with a prestigious set of speakers—John Fitzpatrick; black former alderman Oscar DePriest; and Irene Goins, president of the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs and a member of Woman's Trade Union League—who stumped for the union and its potential to uplift the black community. Fitzpatrick even attempted to heal the rift caused by the waiters strike of 1903, explaining that the so-called “betrayal” of black waiters was the doing of bosses, not the union. More importantly, the union made concrete promises to solicit the advice and approval of

black community leaders, to strengthen Colored Local 651, and to create a “central council of Negro unions” to better organize and coordinate black members.\textsuperscript{47}

But even this meeting was largely ineffectual. Though the idea of the council seemed progressive on its face, it revealed the impotence of the CFL’s federated structure in the face of racial tension. In reality, the council served merely as another form of “Jim Crow unionism.” The CFL chartered the black labor council and secured a meeting space for it, but black interest in joining segregated federal unions remained so low that the council had little to do. The organizers the CFL hired to support the council were not worth the salary they were paid. Though they managed to convince perhaps a hundred black workers to sign union cards, they spent much of their time attempting to convince potential scabs to reconsider. The organizers soon moved to the more fruitful organizing ground of the hotel and restaurant industry. With a racially explosive strike in the offing, Colored Local 651, as Alma Herbst has noted, had “entered a state of quiescence from which it was never aroused.”\textsuperscript{48}

Despite the union’s best efforts at awakening black support, the unfortunate racial history of unionism in Chicago, coupled with the lingering distrust engendered by the race riot, caused most black workers to keep the CFL at arm’s length. As historian Paul Street has argued, the CFL’s efforts to create a split between black workers and the overwhelmingly antiunion black middle class fell short because “the black laborer and the black professional shared a common subordinate status based on the color of their skin.” The CFL’s appeals to African Americans’ class identity were therefore of limited efficacy, as the black worker “could not simply divorce

\textsuperscript{47} “Union Leaders See Further Pay Cut by Packers,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} (28 September 1921), 5; “Need of Colored Unity Appeals to Colored Workers,” \textit{The Butcher Workman} (December 1921); “Negro Union Workers Federated in Chicago,” \textit{The New Majority} (3 December 1921); Lewis, 35; Herbst, 54-57.

\textsuperscript{48} “Negro Unions Progress,” \textit{The New Majority} (17 December 1921); Herbst, 54-57.
his consciousness of race from his consciousness of class.” Catherine Elizabeth Lewis has noted that on the eve of the strike, the CFL’s policy toward African American workers was essentially identical to its iteration during the World War I-era organizing drive: first, the employment of “a few Negro organizers to tell Negroes the advantages of trade unionism,” and second, the practice “of proclaiming ‘brotherhood’” while organizing African Americans into all-black federal unions.49 If race was to be a deciding factor in the strike, the CFL was already at a disadvantage.

Whatever the strength of Parker’s organization or the effect of the CFL’s efforts to organize black workers, pure arithmetic held that the packers had chosen the right time and place to battle the union. Wartime inflation had caused cost of living “Back of the Yards” to skyrocket, with one estimate claiming it was as high as $1,850 per year; an unskilled stockyards worker making the average salary of $22 per week would fall short of that amount by more than seven hundred dollars. If the packers hoped to racialize the conflict, they had once more chosen well: unemployment among African Americans was even higher than that of whites. During 1920 alone, more than 5,000 African Americans applied for employment through the Urban League; only 608 found jobs.50

Perhaps most critically, with the war over, the federal government was no longer in the labor mediation business. The Alschuler award—savior of the stockyards workers—was set to expire on September 15, 1921. Sensing an opportunity, the packers announced plans for drastic wage cuts in February. Though weakened and divided, especially in Chicago, the AMCBW had no choice but to fight back. On March 10, a strike vote was held at a mass conference in Omaha,

49 Lewis, 35.

and passed with overwhelming support, 21,842-207. With its passage, the battle truly began. Anticipating the immensity of the fight to come, smaller packing companies began laying off employees immediately. After a protest from the union, President Warren G. Harding intervened, upholding the sanctity of the eight-hour day but also determining that wage cuts were inevitable. By the expiration date of the Alschuler award, both sides were in a state of high agitation. When the packers increased their proposed wage cut from 12.5% to 15%, the union formulated a list of demands and pleaded with the packers for negotiation. They refused. The die was cast: on December 5, 1921, the stockyards strike officially began.51

The response, as in other strikes, was immediate: 45,000 men walked out nationwide, an estimated 25,000 in Chicago alone. Almost immediately, however, it became clear that the packers were fighting from a position of strength. The first day of the strike, a group of 200 police was deployed in the yards as a “mobile force.” Estimates of the number of strikers were met with calm rebuttals that the strike was having no effect on production. The packers announced that advertisements requesting strikebreakers had already run in newspapers in both Chicago and Kansas City, and coldly stated that none of the strikers would be permitted to return to their jobs. If the packers seemed unruffled by the prospect of a lengthy siege, the union appeared disorganized and ill-prepared. Crucial segments of the workforce—namely, the firemen and engineers who ensured smooth transit of goods into and out of the yards—did not walk out.

More damningly, the same problem had plagued the union during the 1904 strike, and CFL leadership had done nothing to correct it during the intervening years. Fearful of backing a losing cause, even the teamsters refused to walk out in support of the embattled AMCBW.52

In spite of the workers’ isolation, or quite possibly because of it, the strike became a community affair. Historian Thomas Jablonsky has argued that “never before had residents representing so many nationalities united in such a public display of labor solidarity.” Crowds constantly filled the streets in an endless, raucous protest. A judge issued an injunction prohibiting picketing in the stockyards district, an order the strikers completely ignored. When mounted police arrived to clear the strikers out of Davis Square Park, they felt the rage of Packingtown. For days, the strikers engaged in riots against an army of more than one thousand police. Men hurled bricks and stones, while women flung red pepper into the eyes of police and their horses. Motorcycle-mounted police were knocked from their vehicles “and strikers tore pickets from fences with which to club them.” Several reports even claimed that snipers stationed in upper-story windows were firing down at the police.53

But the community solidarity of the union workers went largely for naught, as the packers moved quickly to replace the striking workers. As before, the packers made use of black strikebreakers, augmenting the volatile racial atmosphere of the strike. Unlike before, however, the packers’ strength allowed their recruitment of strikebreakers to be outright brazen. Morris and Company reportedly opened an employment office in the heart of the Black Belt, infuriating

52 “Nationwide Strike Effective in All Packing Centers,” The Butcher Workman (December 1921); “Police Prepare for Walkout of Packing Unions,” Chicago Daily Tribune (4 December 1921), 10; “Big Stockyard Walkout is On,” The New Majority (10 December 1921); “Yards Crippled by Huge Strike,” ibid. (17 December 1921); Clark, 200; Barrett, Work and Community, 260-262.

strikers and widening the gap between white and black workers. Their rage only increased when it was revealed that the packers were again lodging black strikebreakers in the yards, leading to another outbreak of smallpox among the scabs and familiar recriminations of the scabs’ immoral and degenerate behavior. Moreover, unlike previous conflicts, the strikebreakers were almost exclusively black. In one major plant, the proportion of black employees rose from 25% to 33% in the span of a few weeks; another firm saw its black employment double, from one-sixth to one-third. Many plants ran at only 25% capacity, but the sight of black strikebreakers marching into the yards to do “white” jobs substantially weakened the resolve of the strikers. Though the violence of the strike never reached the brutal fever pitch of the 1904 strike, the mob soon turned its fury on the strikebreakers, pulling African Americans off of streetcars and beating them; at least one black strikebreaker was stoned to death during a riot.54

White fury did little to sway the packers or the strikebreakers. In addition to the strikebreakers brought into the yards, many black stockyards employees, not swayed by the union’s recruiting drive, refused to strike. The union’s appeal to black workers’ sense of class had failed, partly because African Americans identified more closely with one another as a race than with white workers as a class, but partly because the union could provide no tangible economic benefit to black workers as a class. The packers’ appeal, on the other hand, was filtered through middle-class leaders of the race, and involved an immediate and tangible benefit: the promise of employment during a depression.

54 “Union Asks Yards Parley,” Chicago Daily Tribune (8 December 1921), 1; “Rioting Breaks Out in Yards; 9 Reported Hurt,” ibid. (16 December 1921), 1; “Yards Strike is Still Going Big,” The New Majority (24 December 1921); “Packers Create Small Pox Panic,” ibid. (21 January 1922); CFL Minutes, 15 January 1922, 15-16; Spero and Harris, 279-281; Hutton, 9; Grossman, Land of Hope, 224-225; Pacyga, 252; Clark, 202-204; Herbst, 65-66; Street, “Working in the Yards,” 296.
Indeed, the packers’ efforts to win the fealty of black workers were richly rewarded, as black community leaders openly urged workers to remain on the job. The Sunday before the beginning of the strike, black ministers throughout the city included antiunion messages from the packers in their sermons and urged their parishioners to ignore the strike call. In October, the Wabash Avenue YMCA—a major black community center—opened its membership drive with a dinner funded by the packers. Speakers included Harvey Ellerd of Armour, who spoke on “The Y. M. C. A. as an Expression of Good Will Between Employer and Employe,” and George Merritt, president of the Armour Efficiency Club, whose speech was entitled “Why the Industrial Workers Support the Y. M. C. A.” Such methods, as Alma Herbst has argued, “were merely a repetition and an intensification of” those used in previous strikes. But the dire economic conditions of 1921 meant that for African Americans, a choice between scabbing and striking was essentially a choice between employment and unemployment. As a result, the black workers “sought favor and protection where they were to be found; lip service to the union was abandoned.”

The strategic paternalism of the packers made the decision simple. There was perhaps no better evidence of the effect of such largesse than the actions of the Chicago Urban League. Though nominally neutral in industrial disputes, and sometimes even pro-union, the League—facing the prospect of 20,000 unemployed black Chicagoans—had little choice but to support employers during the strike. Just as critically, the League was dependent on contributions from local black elites, nearly all of whom opposed the strike, and from the stockyards firms themselves. Ultimately, the League supplied nearly five hundred strikebreakers to the packers during the strike. After the strike was over, the League’s industrial secretary openly boasted of

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55 “‘Y’ Campaign On With Much Enthusiasm,” Chicago Whip (29 October 1921), 4; Herbst, 59-60; Fogel, 34-35; Lewis, 37-39; Herbst, 64-65; Zieger, 84-85; Smith, 102-103.
replacing the striking workers, claiming that black employees had managed to regain skilled jobs previously lost to white workers.56

The black press also overwhelmingly supported the strikebreakers. The Defender so vociferously supported scabbing that it refused to use the term “strikebreaker,” claiming that black unionists “obeyed the dictum of their superior union officials and did exactly what their white brothers did—struck.” Non-union blacks who remained at work in the yards were thus not strikebreakers, but simply desperate men in need of an opportunity: “the prospect of a job in these times of near-starvation looks good to [any] idle worker, black or white,” the paper argued, lamenting that “such opportunities only come to the black worker on occasions like this.” More importantly, the Defender took aim directly at the CFL. The editorial railed against Jim Crow unionism, arguing that “the doors have not been sufficiently opened to bring about complete racial unification” and demanding that blacks be accepted “unreservedly into every trades union.” The very presence of black strikebreakers, of course, made the prospect of a successful interracial union bleaker than ever. Nonetheless, the Defender scoffed at the CFL’s mass-meeting strategy, citing its neglect of black workers during the wartime period: “unions cannot

56 Fogel, 34-35; Lewis, 37-39; Herbst, 64-65; Zieger, 84-85; Smith, 102-103; Strickland, 72-73. Oddly, the boldest symbol of packer paternalism, R.E. Parker, abruptly changed course once the strike began. He publicly refused to supply the packers with scabs, urged black workers to walk off the job, and offered a personal pledge to John Fitzpatrick that AULU workers would not return to the yards until all AMCBW workers were reinstated. It is unclear what caused this abrupt about-face (or if it was legitimate), but as the strike was quickly crushed without his aid, it certainly appears he overestimated his centrality to the conflict. See “Yards Workers Talk Strike If Pay is Slashed,” Chicago Daily Tribune (8 March 1921), 6; “Packing Unions' Chiefs Gather to Fight Wage Cut,” ibid. (9 March 1921), 5; “Yards Strike Put to Vote of 100,000 Men,” ibid. (11 March 1921), 1; “Stock Yards Unions Start Strike Vote Today,” ibid. (13 March 1921), 1; “Halt Pay Cut, 25,000 Yards Workers Cry,” ibid. (14 March 1921), 1; “Packing Strike on Today; Both Sides Sanguine,” ibid. (5 December 1921), 3; “Both Sides Gird for Finish Fight in Yards Strike,” ibid. (11 December 1921), 5; Letter, R.E. Parker to John Fitzpatrick, 19 December 1921, John Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 11, Folder 77, Chicago History Museum.
expect to close the working door in his face in peaceful times and expect his co-operation in troublesome times.”

Even the progressive Chicago Whip found it impossible to support the CFL. “The majority of our workers are outside the pale of unionism,” an editorial claimed, “not because they want to be but because…they have been barred from linking their fortunes with them.” With no stake in the success of unionism, the paper argued, black workers turned to self-preservation: “WE MUST LIVE, AND IF WE CANNOT GET A WHOLE LOAF WE WILL TAKE THE PART OF THE LOAF WE CAN GET.” Though the editor lamented the low wages that resulted from black strikebreaking, he claimed, “this is a situation for which the unions are entirely responsible.” If the white unionist “wants…full power in the economic world,” he concluded, “he must take his black fellow workman as a partner.”

Between the packers’ promise of employment and the union’s inability to appeal to black workers, the choice was simple: strikebreaking was a prime opportunity for black workers.

With the participation of black strikebreakers, the strike soon became a desperate proposition. The strikers, their strike fund quickly exhausted, struggled to provide food and coal for their families during the brutal Chicago winter. Within a matter of mere weeks, the strike appeared hopeless. As Thomas Jablonsky sardonically noted, “the unions could not feed all those who insisted on eating.” By January, the CFL was openly soliciting donations of coats and other winter clothes at its meetings. The strike was officially called off on January 31, although by that time only a small number of the workers were still on strike. With their victory secured, the


packers moved to consolidate their power and crush the union. Dozens of union activists were summarily fired and blacklisted. The eight-hour day, enjoyed by stockyards workers as a result of the Alschuler award, was abandoned in favor of the ten-hour day. The packers were given free rein to institute the American Plan and all its trappings. As in steel, the meat industry would not enjoy a union presence of any significance until the mid-1930s.\(^{59}\)

Much as the steel strike had done, the stockyards strike of 1921-22 left a bitter racial legacy in its wake. The defeat of the union not only weakened the CFL, it helped drive black and white workers even further apart. More than ever, white workers resented blacks as a “scab race.” The SLC had been completely shattered, while District Council No. 9 was severely weakened by the defeat. With these organizations lacking the influence to “counsel them in the virtues of interracial solidarity,” as Street put it, white workers became more isolated and xenophobic. The great mass of Chicago’s stockyard workers, in the words of Lizabeth Cohen, “would enter the decade of the twenties disappointed in their effort to build a permanent industrial union and distrustful of the…black workers whom they felt had betrayed them.”\(^{60}\)

Though black workers had made tremendous inroads into the meatpacking industry—after the strike, they constituted fully 30% of the stockyards labor force—they fared little better. The packers’ victory had taught them the value of a permanent “strike insurance” force of black labor. While African Americans retained stockyards jobs in larger numbers, their continued loyalty to packing bosses was, in the words of historian Lizabeth Cohen, nothing more than “a sad commentary on the racial realities of the 1920s,” since “evidence abounds that employers

\(^{59}\) Jablonsky, 49-50; Clark, 204; Halpern, “The Iron Fist,” 164; Barrett, Work and Community, 263; Keiser, 50; Grossman, Land of Hope, 209; Slayton, 94-95; “Stockyards Strike Off,” The New Majority (11 February 1922); “Packers Give 8-Hours Day the Gate,” The New Majority (3 June 1922); CFL Minutes, 15 January 1922, 3-4; see also Report of President John Walker, Proceedings of the 40th Annual Convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, 1922, 51.

\(^{60}\) Street, “Working in the Yards,” 325; Cohen, Making a New Deal, 43; Barrett, William Z. Foster, 98-99; Hutton, 9.
frequently mistreated their black employees.” The packers promoted some black workers to formerly “white” positions, but only as often as was necessary to foment racial discord and ensure that the workforce remained divided. Despite finally cracking the so-called “knife aristocracy” of skilled butcher jobs, the vast majority of black workers remained consigned to the lowest-paying and most dangerous jobs. A 1926 survey of one large plant reported that less than 40% of the white employees but nearly 70% of black employees were paid the unskilled “common labor rate” of 45 cents. These unskilled workers labored under truly offensive conditions. At both Swift and Armour, management forbade black workers from handling any finished products, claiming that white customers would be repulsed by African Americans handling their food.61

The defeat in the stockyards was a crippling blow to the CFL. Not only did it constitute the union’s second resounding loss in a major industry in the span of two years, but the packers had deliberately provoked racial conflict in the hopes of dividing and defeating the union. The fact that this plan was an unqualified success is a sad testament to the degree to which the CFL failed in its stated mission to attract black workers. Despite the union’s efforts to win the loyalty of African Americans, their class appeal failed in part because black workers were more responsive to the needs of their race, and because the class appeal of the packers—the guarantee of employment—was far more persuasive. Without the support of black workers, the CFL added another defeat to its ledger.

The Fall of the Labor Party

By 1920, the Labor Party was in full crisis; in 1923, John Fitzpatrick, disgusted with the party’s disintegration, would storm out of the its convention; by 1924 the party was, for all intents and purposes, defunct. The disintegration of the Labor Party represented the final defeat for Fitzpatrick’s vision of progressive unionism. Despite the party’s respectable showing during the mayoral election of 1919, it quickly collapsed and finally was abandoned by its architect.

Though not nearly as dramatic as the civil war of the SLC or the strikes in steel and meatpacking, the death of the Labor Party is similarly instructive. Fitzpatrick had envisioned a true people’s party beholden not to monied interests but to workers. But as with his failed attempts to organize the meat and steel industries, the structure of the organization proved an obstacle. By organizing the party along local union lines, the CFL tied the party to a diverse and often competing set of ethnic political interests inflamed by the nationalism of the World War I era. Polish workers, for example largely abandoned the party after the murder of John Kikulski in 1920. Despite its democratic structure, the party was unable to formulate a broad class-based ideology and took almost no part in the CFL’s crisis points—the race riot, the steel strike, and the meatpacking strike—each of which represented an opportunity to transform working-class militancy into electoral power. As Elizabeth McKillen has observed, the party’s platform—public ownership of utilities, recognition of the rights to organize and bargain collectively, democratic governance of imagery—were “so in line with longstanding AFL policies…that Gompers included them in his own [postwar] reconstruction program.” Fitzpatrick and other party heads hoped to attract both “mainstream unionists [and] disillusioned progressives” while
avoiding accusations of radicalism amidst the hysteria of the Red Scare. Party officials seemed determined to steer a tortuous middle course.\textsuperscript{62}

Such a philosophy resulted in disaster for the party. Instead of forming a militant political coalition, the party’s insistence on local trade union control alienated moderates, while its relatively conservative program failed to attract mainstream unionists. The latter problem was exacerbated by the AFL’s Non-Partisan Political Campaign, which was launched just as the party was gaining momentum. The Non-Partisan campaign adopted several of its planks while deriding the efficacy of a third party, simultaneously co-opting the party’s influence and undermining its authority. Moreover, the Non-Partisan campaign was legitimated by the imprimatur of the AFL, making it far more attractive to unionists who doubted of the strength of the Labor Party. The party’s activities consisted primarily of electing delegates to the state’s woefully unpopular constitutional convention. In other words, the Labor Party was founded in the hopes of effecting massive change in the American political system, but its leaders chose to effect that change through plodding, staid means. As Roger Horowitz observed, “the central problem of the Labor Party was that its objectives were not realizable through the strategy of electing labor representatives to office.” As a result, the party’s 1920 convention was sparsely attended and its coffers nearly empty. The party’s official newspaper, \textit{The New Majority}, was running a deficit of nearly $2,000 every month. The party’s 1920 campaign was a disaster: the total number of votes cast for hundreds of Labor Party candidates nationwide was less than 12,000. Fitzpatrick, making a run for the U.S. Senate, gained only 0.5\% of the vote.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{62} McKillen, 128-129, 190-191.

The specter of racial division also reared its ugly head once more. Despite its efforts, the Labor Party was unable to connect with the city’s vital ethnic communities, in part because the militant cadre of the union consisted largely of recent immigrants who were not registered to vote and thus took little interest in the party’s activities. But even those eligible to vote had already been bought off by the major political parties. Lacking contacts with ward captains, the union could not attract a large number of ethnic voters. African Americans in particular were wedded to the city’s Republican machine. Just as black workers would not pass up the packers’ promise of employment for the union’s appeal to class solidarity, neither would they abandon the patronage of Bill Thompson in favor of the Labor Party’s pledges to amend the state’s constitution. Despite the avowed anti-racism of the Labor Party platform and its promises to recruit African American voters, the party largely failed in these attempts. In 1920, for example, the Defender reported that black editor Hugh Nanton would be traveling to the party’s convention in Schenectady, and could not resist pointing out that “Nanton…has the distinction of being the only one of our people represented.”

Despite these setbacks, Fitzpatrick insisted on moving forward with the founding of a national labor party in 1920. The result was the Farmer-Labor Party, a tenuous alliance of workers, farmers, and intellectuals. The new party nominated a number of U.S. Senatorial candidates for the 1920 election and selected a little-known Utah attorney named Parley

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Christensen as a presidential candidate. Their aims were modest—it was expected that Christensen could carry a half-dozen states, and three of the senatorial candidates had a strong chance of election. Instead, the campaign was an abject disaster. Christensen gained only one percent of the popular vote (compared to the 3.5% earned by Socialist Eugene V. Debs, who conducted his campaign from federal prison) and did not carry a single state. None of the senatorial candidates were elected. The Illinois results were particularly discouraging: Christensen’s presidential campaign received fewer votes statewide than John Fitzpatrick’s mayoral campaign had earned in Chicago alone in 1919.65

Beset by structural flaws, preyed upon by the AFL, ignored by African Americans, and rapidly losing strength, the Farmer-Labor Party was in disarray. Desperate to salvage the party, Fitzpatrick called for a convention in 1923, at which he planned to reorganize the party along the British Labour Party model. But the party’s structure proved problematic once more. The party’s power rested with its member unions, and many of those unions had abandoned the party due to pressure from the AFL and the party’s lack of electoral success. As a result, the party was forced to forge alliances with non-labor groups, many of whom had different priorities than Fitzpatrick’s narrow trade-union political agenda. A large contingent of communists attended the 1923 convention, for example, and attempted to wrest control of the party from Fitzpatrick. When Fitzpatrick attempted to limit their power, he was voted down, and the communists formed the short-lived Federated Farmer-Labor Party. Fitzpatrick marched his delegation out of the conference in disgust. In Chicago, the party was losing strength as well. The embarrassment of

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65 McKillen, 156.
the Christensen in Illinois signaled the party’s irrelevance. In May 1924, Fitzpatrick officially counseled the CFL to embrace the AFL’s non-partisan position. The Labor Party was dead.

The Labor Party suffered the same fate as the CFL drives in meatpacking and steel. Weakened by a flawed structure, the party made few inroads among ethnic and racial minorities and lacked the funds and organizational energy to seriously threaten the status quo. The predation of the AFL and the internal flaws of the party only served to accelerate its demise. The quiet death of the Labor Party signaled the full defeat of John Fitzpatrick’s vision of progressive unionism. Despite his best efforts, the CFL entered the 1920s much as it had entered the 1910s: divided, weakened, and lacking direction.

Conclusion

Fitzpatrick’s noble vision died with the Labor Party. The CFL had made a valiant effort to “bore from within”—to reform existing union structures and create a dynamic, democratic unionism based on a militant, diverse membership, a sense of interracial solidarity, and an independent labor politics. But the CFL was defeated at every stage. Old-line trade unionists resented Fitzpatrick’s efforts to recruit African Americans and recent immigrants, as well as his militant posture in regards to employers. The union’s inability to effectively appeal to black workers led directly to its defeat in major strikes in steel and meatpacking. Finally, the Labor Party’s schizophrenic nature—functioning both as a political party and a representative of union locals—rendered it ineffective and futile.

James Barrett has noted that “Chicago’s militant labor movement…did not simply fall apart; it was attacked and destroyed.” Certainly one cannot underestimate the active role employers

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played in the destruction of progressive unionism. Their alliances with black community leaders, their paternalistic attitude toward black workers, and their successful use of race-baiting tactics to defeat strikes in steel and meatpacking dealt severe blows to the CFL’s ability to build a truly interracial organization. With that said, the true legacy of progressive unionism is its inability to recognize the degree to which African Americans’ identity was tied to their race and not their class. Confident that the union appeal would succeed within the black community if only it were properly delivered, Fitzpatrick and the CFL, as historian James Grossman has argued, deeply “underestimated the ability of both the migrants and the black bourgeoisie to evaluate unionism rationally, according to standards different from those familiar to white union leaders—standards shaped by the overwhelming reality of racial discrimination as part of a historical experience.”

Without such an understanding, the CFL’s efforts to organize an interracial union would remain merely a dream.

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Conclusion: The Past, Present, and Future of Interracial Unionism

Chicago’s slaughterhouses and steel mills remained a site of contestation throughout the 1920s, even as management encroachment took on new forms. So-called “welfare capitalism” grew into its fullest bloom, as executives foresaw a future in which “the enlightened corporation, not the labor union or the state, would spearhead the creation of a more benign industrial society,” in the words of Lizabeth Cohen. Courses in English and civics headlined “Americanization” programs that sought to break down ethnic barriers and unite workers in the common goal of loyalty to both boss and country. To counteract the burgeoning unity of white ethnic workers, bosses no longer viewed blacks as a “strike reserve” force, but rather as an integral part of workplace governance. Many of Chicago’s industrial plants hired increased numbers of African American and Mexican American laborers during the 1920s, with their numbers surpassing 30 percent in some places. On the shopfloor, capricious foremen—whose brute control had only united workers in enmity—were replaced by scientifically trained efficiency experts, and standardized wages were dumped in favor of incentives that individualized earnings and further suppressed solidarity. The final indignity was the widespread use of employee representation plans—company unions promoted by bosses as an opportunity for shared governance and industrial democracy—that were often staffed by black workers who were suspicious of their white coworkers and loyal to their employers.¹

By no means did workers capitulate to such conditions. Though formalized union structures had largely been driven out of steel and meatpacking, workers continued to resist the control of management. Many workers took advantage of fluctuating labor markets by quitting their jobs and seeking better ones. While on the job, many workers, particularly young laborers, engaged in informal protests such as tardiness, slow-downs, and unannounced absences. Further, the low wages and unstable employment that dominated industrial labor throughout the 1920s forced many members of working-class households—wives, daughters, and sisters—into employment, which helped insulate steel and meatpacking workers from outright destitution during slack periods.² Such methods of protest revealed workers’ ongoing struggle for control and dignity, but also reflected continuing racial divisions and an inability to mount organized challenges to capital.

If the 1920s were a time of trial and tribulation, the 1930s were an era of triumph. Salvation came through the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), later the Congress of Industrial Organizations, which fulfilled the promise of Fitzpatrick and Foster’s campaign for progressive unionism. In meatpacking and steel, respectively, the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC) and Steelworkers Organizing Committee (SWOC) used Communist organizers to build an industrial labor movement that was by no means perfect, but was nonetheless democratic, inclusive, and centered on interracial unity.³ Despite the failures of the


World War I era, both unions were able to successfully organize their industries and negotiate contracts that protected their members.

One must avoid the temptation to view the success of the CIO solely as a condemnation of the CFL. Organizers and leaders of the CIO were the beneficiaries of any number of external factors—the largesse of a generally pro-labor New Deal government, a massive national upsurge in labor activity that crossed lines of industry and geography, and a widespread embrace of Communist organizers that would have been unthinkable in the era of the Red Scare—that helped carry them to victory. Nonetheless, the rousing success of the CIO suggests that the failure of interracial unionism during the CFL’s campaign of 1917-1922 was by no means inevitable. Whereas the CFL attempted to compromise with its progressive leanings and its craft-union past by organizing neighborhood locals, the CIO made no such allowances for decrepit AFL tradition and organized all workers into industrial unions. With no racial or craft barriers blocking their path, African Americans enthusiastically embraced the CIO and became instrumental to its success. Though historical conditions were certainly different during World War I, it is difficult not to wonder what might have been.

Despite the earnest efforts of the CFL to create an inclusive, progressive union, its leaders accommodated existing union structures and inadvertently reinforced existing patterns of segregation. White workers, operating under discursive assumptions regarding the “fitness” of black workers for union membership, distrusted African Americans and viewed them as a “scab race.” Black workers, similarly distrustful of discriminatory white unions, viewed their white

coworkers with a jaundiced eye. As a result, racial conflicts erupted on the shopfloor, augmented by the efforts of employers. With little effort, employers were easily able to divide and defeat the CFL’s campaign at every turn through the use of spies and agitators, the repression of union activism, and, most importantly, the cultivation of African American loyalty through community funding and workplace promotion. Though the power of employers was the greatest factor in the union’s defeat, CFL leaders augmented that power through the reinforcement of racial divisions. Without a united front, workers were left vulnerable to the predation of employers.

The drama and turbulence of the 1930s represent a constant source of interest to historians, but in many ways the CFL’s failed campaign has far more to teach us. Then as now, American workers exist in a nation dominated by business interests free to buy and sell politicians at will. During the Red Scare, activists were regularly harassed, beaten, jailed, and even killed for speaking out against war and oppression. Today, the executive branch has been granted sweeping powers of surveillance and enforcement over free speech. Just as the term “radical” was used to slander anyone with even the slightest inclination toward social justice, today people seeking even the mildest reforms to our health-care system are branded “socialists.” Perhaps most importantly, in both eras, race represents an explosive central element of political discourse. Like workers who feared the specter of the black strikebreaker, today’s fear-mongers paint the nation’s first black president as a foreign interloper whose every word and deed is inimical to some fictive system of “American values.”

Such divisions have largely come to define organized labor for many Americans. Right-wing radicals have succeeded in associating unionism with socialism, sloth, and avarice. More disturbingly, particularly given the rise of public-sector and service-industry unions, are the attempts to associate such values with people of color. In this formulation, unions represent a
foreign (literally and figuratively) element imbued with all the negative stereotypes race-baiters have long assigned to African Americans and Latino/a Americans. Then as now, big business and their captive politicians seek to dupe the working class into thinking they are part of “us” (unorganized, conservative, cowed, and white) and not part of “them” (unionized, radical, black/brown). The antidote for such oppression lies, as it always has and will, with the people. If unions are to endure this trying period, let alone to flourish as they once did, it is incumbent upon them to learn the lessons of the past. A resurgent labor movement cannot make compromises with the mistakes of past, but must create a new unionism that truly embraces people of all walks of life—a unionism that is not merely “progressive,” but radicalism, a unionism that seeks not only social justice but social transformation.
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