



No Tea for the Fever: The Richmond Tobacco Strikes 1937-1941

Parker E. Watts

Barnard College, Columbia University

Department of History

Faculty Advisor, Thai Jones

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## Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	2
INTRODUCTION .....	4
CHAPTER ONE: “Hood Ragged Generals” .....	12
CHAPTER TWO: “The Union(s) Make us Strong” .....	26
CHAPTER THREE: “Trust God...But Keep Your Powder Dry” .....	46
CONCLUSION: .....	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	63

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*Women*

They were women then  
My mama's generation  
Husky of voice—Stout of  
Step  
With fists as well as  
Hands  
How they battered down  
Doors  
And ironed  
Starched white  
Shirts  
How they led  
Armies  
Headragged Generals  
Across mined  
Fields  
Booby-trapped  
Kitchens  
To discover books  
Desks  
A place for us  
How they knew what we  
*Must* know  
Without knowing a page  
Of it  
Themselves.

Alice Walker

## Introduction

. . . there is nothing like tobacco. It's the passion of the virtuous man and whoever lives without tobacco isn't worthy of living. Not only does it purge the human brain, but it also instructs the soul in virtue and one learns from it how to be a virtuous man. Haven't you noticed how well one treats another after taking it. . . tobacco inspires feelings, honor and virtue in all those who take it.<sup>1</sup>

Before cotton was king and ruled the economies of the American South, another plant, the so-called golden leaf of Virginia, would set the foundation for colonial commerce, planting, and more generally Southern society. When John Rolfe, an early English settler of the United States, imported tobacco seeds to Virginia he changed the course of American history.<sup>2</sup> Tobacco would soon become the most important cash crop of the English colonies. While tobacco built the Virginian economy, it destroyed Virginian soil— a paradox that would spur the expansion of the colony and many conflicts between Native American tribes. Constant planting without proper soil care strips the soil of the nutrients essential to growing any crop, let alone a crop as temperamental as tobacco. Virginian forests were regularly cleared so that tobacco could be planted in fresh soil, while “old fields” would remain unplanted for up to twenty years before the soil was naturally restored. When land in the territory was left all but barren, Virginia colonists looked west for new soil to cultivate. The need for new land would be the basis of claims to the Ohio River Valley and Kentucky.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Molier's Don Juan, quoted in Cotton, Lee Pelham. “Tobacco: Colonial Cultivation Methods.” National Parks Service. U.S. Department of the Interior, February 1998.

<https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/tobacco-colonial-cultivation-methods.htm>.

<sup>2</sup>“John Rolfe,” National Parks Service (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2015), <https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/john-rolfe.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Lois Green Carr and Russell R. Menard, “Land, Labor, and Economies of Scale in Early Maryland: Some Limits to Growth in the Chesapeake System of Husbandry,” *The Journal of Economic History* 49, no. 2 (June 1989): pp. 407-418, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022050700008020>, 413.

The tobacco growing process is extremely labor-intensive— before mechanization or industrialization each flower of the plant had to be hand-picked off the plant to increase the number of nutrients sent to the plant and to encourage the growth of larger leaves.<sup>4</sup> While settlers first turned to European servants, refugees, and paupers to do the work of cultivating what was quickly becoming a cash crop, they soon realized that they were going to have to export their labor needs to another group of people.<sup>5</sup> By 1700, Virginia leaders committed to sourcing their labor from Africa. From the mid-to-late 1600s, the Virginia gentry worked to institutionalize and expand slavery to secure the workforce needed to farm tobacco.<sup>6</sup>

Tobacco seeds are extremely small, only 0.75 millimeters long, 0.53 millimeters broad, 0.47 millimeters broad, and weighing 0.08 grams— a fraction of the size of mustard seeds.<sup>7</sup> Tobacco plants are grown as seedlings in seedbeds, and later transplanted to farm fields after the last frost in spring.<sup>8</sup> Slaves on tobacco plantations are estimated to have planted and weeded an average of two acres and cleared land with 9-10,00 plants a year per slave.<sup>9</sup> From the process of sewing the seeds, transferring them into fields, weeding multiple times, and deflowering, one slave is estimated to have bent over nearly 50,000 times during the tobacco planting season.<sup>10</sup>

Tobacco production in Virginia has always been a political topic. From colonization and slavery, to wage theft and corporate exploitation the plant's history is heavy. Of course, the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> George S. Avery, "Structure and Germination of Tobacco Seed and the Developmental Anatomy of the Seedling Plant," *American Journal of Botany* 20, no. 5 (1933): pp. 309-327, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1537-2197.1933.tb08894.x>, 311.

<sup>8</sup> Lee Pelham Cotton, "Tobacco: Colonial Cultivation Methods," National Parks Service (U.S. Department of the Interior, February 1998), <https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/tobacco-colonial-cultivation-methods.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Carr., 412

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 414

history of tobacco is important in order to understand the dynamics of the Richmond Tobacco Strikes, but it is also important in order to understand the city as a whole. The Altria plant in Richmond now produces half of the cigarettes sold in the United States, making the Richmond facility one of, if not the largest cigarette production plants in the world, competing only with the Hongta Cigarette production in Yuxi, China.<sup>11</sup> Even plants and facilities that are no longer used for tobacco production are held in Richmond's memories. The Liggett and Myers cigarette plant is now an office building, tobacco storage warehouses in Church Hill and Manchester are being converted into housing for "young, upwardly-mobile professionals" — further gentrifying what used to be Black neighborhoods.

For nearly 400 years, the tobacco industry in the American South has been a significant source of economic and social capital linked to a history of Black exploitation as a means to extract wealth. Tobacco has been a crucial cash crop in Virginia since the colonial era, and it was slaves who were forced to harvest and prepare the product for market for the majority of that time. Tobacco production is an intensely physical process that wears the body down. Handling tobacco exposes workers to large amounts of pesticides, nicotine, and fertilizers that are damaging to the skin and respiratory system when touched directly, and the plant is tough to manage physically.

On April 16th, 1937 employees at the Carrington and Michaux (C & M) tobacco plant walked off of the line in protest of untenable working conditions. Stemmers on the line typically logged 80 hour work weeks, with little to no ventilation and pay that was far lower than any other factory tobacco worker. That day, a group of mostly Black women would start what is

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<sup>11</sup> Louisa Lim, "China Dependent on Tobacco in More Ways Than One," NPR (NPR, February 18, 2011), <https://www.npr.org/2011/02/18/133838124/china-dependent-on-tobacco-in-more-ways-than-one>.

known as the Richmond Tobacco Strikes. By the next month, nearly 400 Black women would be striking across multiple companies, fighting for better wages and working conditions in the plants. The strikes would last for nearly four years, and change the landscape of tobacco stemming, and organizing, in the South.

Today, the Richmond Tobacco Strikes struggle to qualify as a footnote in history, but at the time these women were fighting against one of the most powerful industries in the South with no help. The Tobacco Workers International Union (TWIU) was doing little to nothing to help improve working conditions and remained segregated up until 1939. Together, the women of the tobacco plants would organize to create a new union, desegregate the TWIU, and push tobacco bosses to grant them better working conditions and higher wages.

This thesis investigates how race, gender, competing unions, radicalism, and Southern politics converged during the Richmond Tobacco Strikes to create an environment in which Black women were able to take power from tobacco industrialists in Virginia. On a broader scale, this thesis aims to reveal why the story of these women is not told today. Why is the story of these poor, Black women— influenced by radical politics and the communist party, and winning against one of the most powerful industries of the time— hidden from history? What do those in power gain by erasing this story and how does this fit into a larger narrative about power and exploitation in the South?

When the women of the tobacco strikes decided to start their movement, they made themselves visible in a centuries-long history of exploitation and struggle surrounding the crop, the land, and the people. In many ways, the story of these women is the same as those of slaves one hundred years prior. It is one of abysmal working conditions, sexual exploitation, and a disregard for class solidarity in favor of racial superiority. In others, it's different. It's one of

victory against the ruling class—a rare feat across history. In either case, the stories are inextricably connected to the plant, to the land, and to the people.

### Literature Review

The Black Southern Labor movement remains relatively under-studied in the broader scope of American Labor History. Most historians focus on Northern labor movements and workers of urban hubs as a means to tell about labor in the United States.

Robin D.G. Kelly's *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* is a seminal work in regards to Black Communism and organizing in the South. Kelly tells the story of Alabama Communists during the 1930s and 40s who challenged the Deep South's traditions of Jim Crow, racial repression, and economic injustice in favor of Communist organizing and racial equality. *Hammer and Hoe* examines how Alabama's sharecroppers, housewives, illiterate laborers, and unemployed industrial workers built coalitions and changed their communities. Kelly's work illustrates the important differences between Southern laborers and their counterparts in other parts of the country, and thus the importance of using different strategies to organize Southern labor.

Literature directly concerning the strikes is sparse. Herbert Northup's *The Tobacco Workers International Union* provides helpful background about the TWIU and why it was hesitant to participate in the strikes. Northup explores the racial and cultural norms that allowed for Black tobacco workers to be mistreated and briefly details the Strikes and its motives. There seems to be a sole article dedicated to the movement, Richard Love's "In Defiance of Custom and Tradition: Black Tobacco Workers and Labor Unions in Richmond, Virginia 1937-194".

Love provides the most extensive history of the movement, detailing the intricacies of internal and external union politics of both the TSLU and TWIU .

Most writing about the TSLU and the women of the strikes has taken shape in Labor Day blog posts and small pieces about the lessons to be learned from the inspiring women of the movement. In the popular version of the story, the women of the movement are merely sources of inspiration meant to line puff pieces with lessons about how perseverance and fortitude can lead all, even the most marginalized, to the American Dream. I take issue with this. It falls into a greater pattern of mystifying and mythologizing the struggles and hardship of Black women in the name of a greater good. The tobacco strikes are an inspiration. They serve as a reminder of what radical politics, grassroots organizing, and community building can do in the face of adversity. But they are also a tragedy—the story of a sector, a city, and a union that failed to serve the Black women who made their systems function in the first place. And they are a warning; the failures of the strikes seem to repeat themselves throughout history.

My work highlights specific conditions that shaped the struggle in Richmond. This story, like most, is nuanced. On a broader scale, the characteristics of the labor movement in the South are complicated. Not only are the same anti-union and anti-communist sentiments present, but so too is the shadow of Jim Crow. And laborers of the South had the added stress of knowing that their actions might not just lead to legal ramifications—they could lead to violence or even death. The threat of the Klu Klux Klan in the early 1900s was very present for organizers across the South. In Richmond specifically, tobacco workers faced the delicate dynamics of gender, the city's racial and economic history, the politics of an old union, and the creation of a new one, as well as religion and Communism.

Chapter One examines how gender influenced the organizing, striking, and bargaining process. The women of the strikes were not only facing racism from unions, bosses, and media, but they were also constrained by gendered expectations of how they should operate. Chapter One analyzes the conditions that women in the tobacco industry were subjected to, the ways that gender was leveraged by workers and abused by their opposition during the strikes, and examines media portrayals of union leadership through the lens of gender. In order to analyze these events, this chapter uses accounts from newspapers and magazine articles both as a means of understanding the experiences of women in the factories and a means to examine the ways that gender influenced how the media reported about the strikes.

Chapter Two investigates the histories and politics of the two tobacco unions that were involved in the strikes, the Tobacco Workers International Union (TWIU) and the Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Union (TSLU). The chapter examines the conditions that allowed for a Black union to be created, the competition that was spurred by having two competing unions in one town, and events that allowed the TWIU to emerge as the prominent union in the City. This chapter utilizes primary sources such as union memos, as well as secondary source materials such as newspaper articles while also building upon the scholarship of Herbert Northup and Richard Love in order to fully explain union activity between 1937 and 1941.

Lastly, Chapter Three investigates the role of two communities in the movement: the Communist Party and the Black Church. The chapter investigates how the Communist Party became popular in the South, how the Party became tolerant toward the church, and how the Church influenced the movement. First, this chapter builds upon the scholarship of Ben Rose and J. A. Zumoff as a means to investigate the ways that the Communist Party became favorable in the eyes of Black Southerners. This chapter also uses Communist magazines as a means to

demonstrate the Communist progression from an organization that held deep disdain for the Church to one that came to trust and embrace the church over the course of five years. It also examines the ways that Richmond strikers demonstrated their faith while fighting for progressive and radical change.

## Chapter One: Hood Ragged Generals

### Gender and the Movement

“You can out talk the men. But us women don’t take no tea for the fever”

— “Mama” Louise Harris (New Republic, 4 Nov. 1940).

Born in 1891 in Richmond, Louise Harris left school at eight years old to work as a nanny and a cook for white families in the city.<sup>12</sup> By the time she entered her first tobacco plant, Louise was in her forties and had experienced all of the hardship that accompanied being a poor Black woman during the Jim Crow Era.<sup>13</sup> As the child of slaves and someone who had been working for nearly 30 years, Harris knew what it meant to be worked to the bone. Louise wasn’t one to shy away from a hard day’s work. But when she arrived at Export Tobacco Company, Harris bore witness to treachery she’d never known before. According to Harris, it took her only one day to find out that “preachers [didn’t] know nothing about hell. They ain’t worked in no tobacco factory.”<sup>14</sup>

Harris did not sit idly by and let herself perish in her newfound hell. When word of a Black tobacco union spread through the plant, Louise dedicated herself to organizing her co-workers, becoming the “Missus CIO” of Richmond.<sup>15</sup> And yet, although “Mama Harris” had such a strong influence on the movement, very little is known about her as a person. There are no photographs, no letters or journals, not even a tombstone to note her death. Indeed, for a movement characterized by the fact that it was led by women, the names, faces, and voices of

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<sup>12</sup>Alice Knox Eaton, “Harris, Louise ‘Mamma,’” *African American Studies Center*, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.36468>.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ted Poston, “The Making of Mama Harris,” *New Republic*, November 4, 1940, pp. 624-626, 624.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

those women are conspicuously missing. Like many Black women in history, the women of the strikes have been obscured from their own stories. Their identities are a key facet of the history, but they also made them less noteworthy compared to their male counterparts.

This chapter analyzes the strikes through the lens of gender, investigating the ways that gender identity made women in the factories both targets and assets to the movement. First, the chapter examines the working conditions of Black women in the Tobacco Industry before the strikes. Next, it analyzes the discrepancies in media profiles with regards to men and women who took on leadership roles in the movement, and the ways that gender was utilized as an asset to the movement. To examine gender's impact on the strikes, this chapter uses first-hand accounts and interviews with tobacco workers in addition to profiles and articles published in magazines about the movement. Additionally, this chapter builds on the scholarly work of Herbert Northrup and Richard Love.



To fully understand Richmond's tobacco plants, it's important to know how the industry operated before the strikes—to know who the workers were and what they did, and to know their bosses and how they abused their power. Gender dynamics would be a key factor in the strikes mainly because they had been one of the dominant forces that allowed the tobacco industry in America to be so successful and so rife with workplace injustice. In unionizing, the women of the strike created strength from what made them targets.

Across the South, the tobacco industry was primed for unjust labor conditions and hostile towards organized labor, regardless of gender and, in some regards, race. The industry mechanized early, meaning that skilled laborers were replaced with machine operators soon after tobacco products became mass-produced. When cigarettes were first introduced to Americans in

1867, the average skilled hand roller could produce 2,500 cigarettes per day. Twenty years later, machines would be producing 120,000 cigarettes in the same period, a 4,800% increase in productivity over only two decades.<sup>16</sup> Even further, a majority of the tobacco industry was located in the anti-union and pro-segregation South. While jobs between Black and white staff were evenly split, the type of work that they were given varied greatly. Black employees did the processing work—stemming, blending, and shredding—menial and difficult work. On the other hand, white employees took on the skilled maintenance and supervisory work.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of race, more than half of workers in tobacco plants were women.<sup>18</sup> This hierarchy left most Black women in the tobacco industry at the very bottom of the rank and file; subject to the worst working conditions, last to receive any benefits, and exposed to the most abuse at the hands of their employers. Black women dominated some sectors of the tobacco factories, particularly those that processed the leaf for manufacture.<sup>19</sup> For over one hundred years, Black women served as the primary processors of the plant—creating a rich culture of mutuality and opposition.<sup>20</sup>

This social composition of the labor force had important implications for dynamics in the factories. Not only did the tobacco industry heavily rely on the creation of hierarchy, but they also relied on their workers' understanding of said hierarchy. It was not enough to simply give white people the best jobs at the expense of Black women. The industry needed to go further, making white employees understand that their position within the companies was completely contingent on the subjugation of their Black "co-workers." Constantly reinforcing hierarchy in

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<sup>16</sup>Herbert R. Northrup, "The Tobacco Workers International Union," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 56, no. 4 (1942): 606-626, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1883412>, 606.

<sup>17</sup>Northrup, 607.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>"Mamma Louise Harris," in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Carlson, 1993).

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

the industry meant that Black employees could never be seen as comrades by their white counterparts, they would always be seen as competition. The hierarchy was only further cemented by the Jim Crow society that defined Richmond's views towards its Black citizens. White factory workers were raised in a society that socialized them to believe that Black people were inferior and therefore deserved less than them. The tobacco industry only incentivized those sentiments further. The dynamics of the industry, the union, and the city essentially destroyed any chance of solidarity between races and genders, as white workers adopted a "for each his own" mentality, leaving Black women to survive what they could.

Gender may not seem to be an obvious factor in tobacco production at first glance, but the fact of the matter is that tobacco production is grueling work—hazardous for one's health and demanding on one's body. As such, the manufacturing process historically supported a hierarchy within the industry—those with social capital were granted the jobs that required higher skill sets and afforded better wages and working conditions. Those with less social capital were relegated to the most arduous and least rewarding positions. In the South in the mid-twentieth century, as with today, Black women were assigned to the bottom of the pecking order. It is imperative to understand that these injustices did not simply happen *to* Black women, but in some aspects, they could only happen *because* they were Black women. This intersection of gender and race for Black women in Richmond created an environment that made them particularly vulnerable to the misdeeds of those in power. Black women in the factories were disposable, and so they were destructible, at least in the minds of the Richmond elite who employed them. With no one else to turn to, the women of the movement were forced to rely on themselves and create the workplaces that they deserved. In a sense, this intersection granted them the strength to fight back against the system at the center of their mistreatment.

On their own, Black women were subject to the worst working conditions of all the laborers. Compensation, though poor regardless of the company, varied depending on the factory. In some plants, machinists were reported to earn \$1.20 per day for stemming 65,000 leaves, while hand stemmers earned five cents per pound of stems produced.<sup>21</sup> Some employees reported working more than 80 hours a week, and being paid \$18.25.<sup>22</sup> Several stemmeries paid piece-work wages, paying between five and six cents per pound of stems pulled. Most piece-work factories did not count the weight of the entire leaf, only the stem, meaning that on a good day, an *experienced* stemmer might pull fourteen pounds of stems in an eight-hour workday, making twelve and a half cents an hour, generously.<sup>23</sup>

Even further, because tobacco rehandling was a seasonal industry, the working year for rehandlers was only about 168 days.<sup>24</sup> Due to the short season, many in the labor force were compelled to work fourteen to sixteen-hour shifts, six and a half days a week to earn enough to get through the entire year.<sup>25</sup> And while mechanization had begun to spread across some stemmeries, it was low labor costs that made expensive machines unprofitable. Tobacco industry employees were forced to reckon with the fact that increased labor costs could make their jobs obsolete almost overnight. The threat of industrialization continued to loom large for tobacco processors and the only way to stave it off and protect their jobs was to accept the terribly low wages, or at least that is how Tobacco Bosses reasoned with their Black staff. By the early 1930s,

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Love, "In Defiance of Custom and Tradition: Black Tobacco Workers and Labor Unions in Richmond, Virginia 1937-1941," *Labor History* 35, no. 1 (1994): pp. 25-47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00236569400890021>, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Poston, 624

<sup>23</sup> Women's Bureau. United States Department of Labor, Hours and Earnings in Tobacco Stemmeries, Bulletin No. 127, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1934), 4-5; Kaufman, Challenge and Change, 68-69. As Quoted in Richard Love, "The Cigarette Capital of the World: Labor, Race, and Tobacco in Richmond, Virginia, 1880-1980" (dissertation, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Love, "The Cigarette Capital of the World: Labor, Race, and Tobacco in Richmond, Virginia, 1880-1980" (dissertation, 1998), 183.

the average salary for a Black woman was \$5.95 per week— significantly lower than the average of \$9.00 for white women, \$9.65 for black men, and \$ 15.70 for white men.<sup>26</sup>

Aside from the economic disparities between Black women and the rest of the workforce, there were also the abhorrent working conditions and constant sexual harassment that Black women endured. The parts of the factories where Black employees worked were known to have leaky roofs, damp and moldy environments, low ventilation, and dim lighting.<sup>27</sup> Workers drank from the water boilers and ate lunch in the restrooms as they had no access to clean water from fountains or dedicated space to eat and take their breaks.<sup>28</sup>

Black women in the factories were routinely subjected to sexual harassment from their foremen and supervisors. Without access to dressing rooms, Black women often found themselves changing their clothes behind kegs and barrels in the factory for anyone, including their male bosses, to see.<sup>29</sup> Some women even shared stories of how the foremen of the factories would watch them undress, only to insult their looks when they did not like what they saw.<sup>30</sup> Tragically, this was only the beginning of the abuses that occurred in the factories. Florence Walker, a stemmer from Richmond spoke about the sexual violence that ran rampant in the factories with historians Gregg Kimball and Richard Love in 1992. “We had a ‘straw boss’,” Walker explained, “and as many women as he could get to go back in the ‘hole’ with him during the daytime, he got ‘em. Just having sex is what it was, and some girls would go.” Walker continued, “I told him I wouldn’t and one day he handed me a slip and told me ‘You don’t have any more job.’ We had absolutely no protection... they fired you when they got ready... and

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<sup>26</sup> “Tobacco Wage Gains 39%,” *Richmond New Leader*, June 29, 1936, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Augusta V. Jackson, “A New Deal for Tobacco Workers,” *The Crisis*, October 1938, pp. 322-330, 322.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

treated you any kind of way, and there wasn't anything you could do about it.”<sup>31</sup> Walker was not alone in her experience. It was quite common for Black women in the stemmeries or processing plants to be sexually exploited at the hands of their bosses, and if they refused they'd be fired and replaced as though nothing had happened at all.<sup>32</sup> The workplace protections of the New Deal were not to be found in Dixieland, and there was no hope anywhere on the horizon that change would come from the outside. The women of Richmond's tobacco industry were going to have to stand up for themselves if they wanted any hope of change.



Louise “Mamma” Harris, James E. Jackson, Francis Grandison, and C. Columbus Alston shaped how the strikes played out—organizing the workers, creating a union, and forcing the tobacco bosses to bargain with their employees for fairer contracts. Each faced a tremendous feat when they chose to fight against one of the most powerful industries in the South. Their victories required incredible strength, tactical knowledge, and organizing skill and their successes changed the lives of thousands for the better. And yet, the ways that they are remembered vary greatly. The men of the movement have been preserved in articles and archives, and their contributions to the world have been well documented and preserved. On the other hand, Louise Harris has been all but lost to history, almost impossible to find in the archives and with relatively few contemporary articles that discuss her impact in organizing Richmond's Tobacco Strikes. After the strikes, Harris returned to anonymity, how long she worked in the factories or what she did after is still a mystery. What was the end of Mamma Harris' career as an activist was only the beginning for Alston, Grandison, and Jackson. The tobacco strikes operated as a springboard for

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<sup>31</sup> Love, *Cigarette Capital*, 1

<sup>32</sup> Love, *Cigarette Capital*, 1.

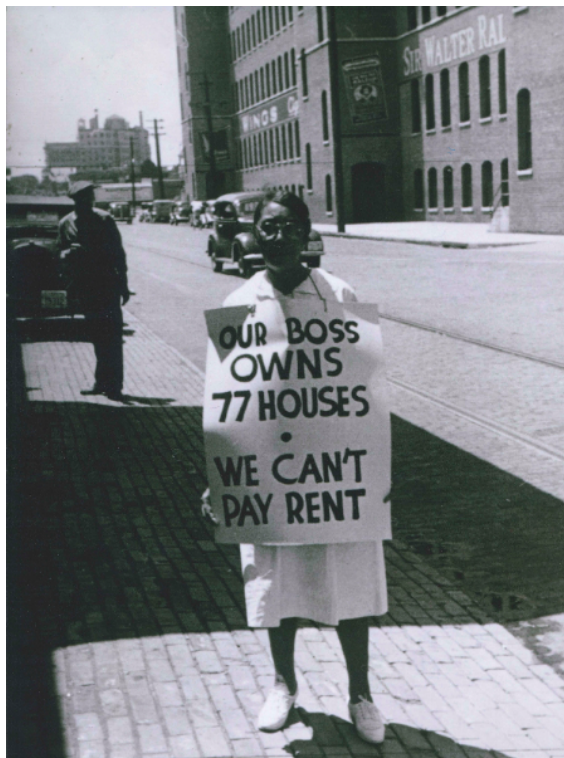
their lives in Black leftist organizing. Their stories from the strikes and the lives that they would go on to lead in the aftermath were well documented in collections across the country.

To attribute this discrepancy to gender alone would be a mischaracterization of history. A number of factors brought Mamma Harris back to her post as a factory worker, while her counterparts ascended to leadership in Black labor organizing. Harris was older, poorer, and less educated than the others. The male leaders were closely affiliated with nationwide organizations, namely the Communist Party, CIO, and SNYC, while Harris was only a member of her local union. Harris was married, with a home and responsibilities that may have been more pressing than a life of organizing. Frankly, Harris may not have been interested in leaving her community and hometown in pursuit of activist stardom. Still, when examining the archives and how the four are remembered, it is striking that the only person who actually worked in a tobacco plant is nearly untraceable in the records of the movement.



In 1938, Augusta V. Jackson traveled to Richmond to write about the strikes for *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) founded by W.E.B. Du Bois. The piece was sympathetic to the strikers, Ms. Jackson found the cause honorable and the working conditions deplorable, there's no question that she was on the side of the TSLU's movement. But interestingly, those on strike were not cast in the best light either. Jackson does not portray the women of the strike as pioneers in the labor movement, who stood up against their bosses and risked their livelihoods and homes to speak truth to power. Instead, in Ms. Jackson's story, the strikers are merely pitiful, in need of guidance from a more learned set of leaders. In Jackson's worldview, the strikers were "toiling, illiterate,

leaderless Negroes' ' with “no conception of struggle.... tired and worn looking, dressed in the pathetic and incongruous Sunday best of underpaid workers”.<sup>33</sup>



At least from Augusta Jackson’s perspective, it was clear that the leaders of the movement were the men— Francis Grandison, C. Columbus Alston, and James E. Jackson, whom she described as “known to thousands of the working population of Richmond” and “personally loved by three thousand members of the Tobacco Unions, and respected by the general citizenry”.<sup>34</sup> In Augusta Jackson’s version of events, the men of the movement were not co-agitators in the struggle, they were the originators, organizers, and overseers, to whom the movement owed its success. The piece bears no mention of Mamma Harris or any of the other women who actually worked in the factories. In fact, no woman appears by name in the piece.

<sup>33</sup> Augusta V. Jackson, “A New Deal for Tobacco Workers,” *The Crisis*, October 1938, pp. 322-330, 322.

<sup>34</sup> Jackson, 324

Any quote or idea attributed to a nameless woman in the piece is in direct relation to one of the key men of the movement. The men were directly compared to Moses and Joseph, while the women were relegated to the margins of the story.<sup>35</sup>

Two years later, towards the end of the strikes in November of 1940, Ted Poston of The New Republic wrote a profile of Mamma Harris. This piece, which seems to be the only piece about the strikes solely dedicated to Harris, would not speak to her brilliance, organizing abilities, or curiosity—those adjectives were reserved for the men. Mamma Harris was described as a “scrawny hardbitten woman” living in a “tenement in Richmond’s ramshackle negro section.”<sup>36</sup> Her husband, Bennie, joined her for the interview, contributing as much, if not more, information for the article.

Unlike Jackson, Poston’s article relies far less on his own opinions of the strike and essentially re-tells the experience he had in visiting Mamma Harris in her home. While Poston’s profile of Harris lacks outright praise and admiration, it is clear that strikers at the time were keenly aware of how gender influenced the strikes, seeing as gender was a key theme present throughout the interview.

According to Poston, before he could even find Mamma Harris, another community member employed by the tobacco industry helped him find the right people to speak to. She made it clear that while the white union officials were kind, they would be of little help if he wanted to know the true happenings of the strikes. A woman Poston identified as Sister Jones let him know that, “The white folks down at the union headquarters is alright and we love ‘em—especially Mr. Marks,” said Sister Jones, “But if you want to know about us stemmers and

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Poston, 624.

the rumpus we raised, you better go see Mamma Harris. She's Missus CIO in Richmond."<sup>37</sup>

Sister Jones provided an insight that is important in multiple regards. The white men of the CIO, just like the Black men of SNYC, were the people who were credited to the outside world. But for native Richmonders, specifically the women who worked in Tobacco factories, perceptions of who ran the show were a completely different story. For the true accounts of the strikes, interested parties needed to find Mamma Harris.

When Poston got to The Harris's home, similar sentiments were shared. As much as popular reporting made the movement out to be one led and supported by well-educated young men, the picture that the Harrises painted was quite different. Certainly, some men were influential in the movement and their contributions were invaluable. But the reality was that it was women who were making the day-to-day operations of the strikes successful. Mamma Harris shared, "They [Police] 'fraid of the women. You can outtalk the men. But us women don't take no tea for the fever."<sup>38</sup> Bennie went on to share, "There was five hundred of the women on the picket line and only twenty of us men"<sup>39</sup> The strikes, at least according to the Harrises, were an affair led by women. Even further, any protection that womanhood might have guaranteed a white woman striker from the police was not extended to Black women on the line. At the Vaughn Strike, when police officers began assaulting strikers, they included the women in their targeted violence.<sup>40</sup> The strikers weren't just using organizing because they were women who were being targeted, their identities as Black women would also shape how the strikes operated. As Black women, the ladies of the strike had to understand that they would be afforded no mercy

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

or special treatment because of their gender. In fact, in many ways, it was because they sat at the intersection between womanhood and Blackness that they were able to be treated so horribly.

Louise and Bennie were also keen to point out what seems to be under-explored in other sources: the role of white women in the struggle. At the Export factory, a reported five hundred Garment Workers Union (GWU) members joined the picket line, with others donating money to the cause.<sup>41</sup> “It was them white garment ladies what sent the cops. Them cops jump salty as hell ‘*white* women’ they say, ‘white women out here parading for niggers.’ But they don’t do nothing. Because we ain’t taking no stuff from nobody.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, white women putting themselves on the line complicated the strikes in the best way possible for the strikers. As much as Bennie wanted to attribute the lack of police violence at the picket to Black strikers “taking no stuff” there was almost certainly a new layer of protection granted when a group of Southern white women joined their ranks. The police didn’t have to acknowledge Mamma Harris and her coworkers as women, but the GWU would demand the police’s Southern sensibilities, which placed protecting the delicacy of white women above almost all other things.

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<sup>41</sup> Poston, 625

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.



The image that accompanies the piece, whether advertently or not, also speaks to the issue of gender and the erasure of Black women from the narrative. The article, which is titled “The Making of Mama Harris” and details the many ways that women made the strikes possible, is accompanied by a small drawing of what appears to be four Black men arguing with a white “boss”. The men in the picture do not seem to be factory workers in the city, rather they are agrarians in the countryside.<sup>43</sup> Overall, the image speaks to a general misunderstanding of what the grievances were. Poston’s writing tells the story of women abused by the system, joining together in solidarity for better wages and a way to hold their bosses accountable. The image tells the story of men in the countryside arguing for an abstract version of what the strikes were in reality.

In his later years, James Jackson would go on to reflect on the Harrises and the lessons they taught them in regards to labor, organizing, and gender. In the New Deal Era, ideas of

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

hypermasculine workers became popular in American propaganda, creating an idealized image in both physical and gendered terms.<sup>44</sup> In Jackson's view, even though Bennie was a powerful, muscular man—the quintessential manly laborer, he would often sit quietly as his wife took charge of the crowd. From what Jackson saw, he noted that Mamma Harris debunked the popular conception of what a manly employee was, and forced him to question the gendered dynamics that were so prevalent in the labor movement at the time. Mama Harris was, to Jackson, “an articulate ‘spokesman of the rank and file... in a class by herself’ who in conjunction with her husband provided Jackson with “an example of the power of muscle and mind in defeating exploitation and reversed popular representations of gender and power.”<sup>45</sup> While reporting from the period failed to adequately address the role that gender played in the movement, those involved—men and women, high ranking officials and everyday factory workers—were aware of the ways that gender norms were being subverted as Mamma Harris and the women of the movement led the Union.

It was a special intersection between gender and race that created the conditions for the tobacco strikes, and so it makes sense that gender would be one of the key axes that the strikes were organized around. Reporting of the era's failure to adequately address women as the main supporters of the movement speaks to a broader history of relegating Black women to the margins in favor of Black men. And yet, even though they were being erased, the women of the movement's resilience and courage shone so bright that they could not be ignored.

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<sup>44</sup> Sara Rzeszutek Haviland, “Jack and Esther's Paths to Activism and Each Other,” *James and Esther Cooper Jackson*, 2015, pp. 15-56, <https://doi.org/10.5810/kentucky/9780813166254.003.0002>, 20.

<sup>45</sup>Rzeszutek, 20

## Chapter 2: The Union(s) Makes Us Strong?

Of all the major cities in America, Richmond was probably one of the least prepared for a strike of any kind, let alone a wave of strikes that would last five years. The city owed much of its commerce to Big Tobacco and was not eager to disappoint tobacco bosses who could pack up their plants and move to another city with less trouble. The city was not amenable to union action and certainly would not have approved of *Black* workers being the ones to cause such a stir. And yet, the women of Carrington and Michaux were perfectly positioned to launch a strike by the spring of 1937. Their colleagues were deeply unsatisfied with their working conditions, the Great Depression made economic hardship widespread among Black Richmonders, and employees could be almost certain that their voices would not be heard if they did not cause a scene. Striking presented itself as the perfect way to bring attention to their cause and make the changes they wanted. But there was one problem: the Women of Carrington and Michaux did not have a Union to represent them. The women of Carrington and Michaux's strike was a complete leap of faith. There was almost no hope that the white union would support them and there was no guarantee that their community would catch them. And yet, their fall would lead to a ripple effect that would be felt for years to come.

This chapter analyzes the political, economic, and social conditions that created and destroyed the Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Union almost simultaneously. It begins with a history of the white Tobacco Workers International Union, followed by a history of how the Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Union was created. Next, the chapter details the period between 1937 and 1941 and the labor action that occurred in the tobacco industry. Lastly, the chapter explores the reasons that the strikes came to an end. This chapter uses internal union documents, newspaper articles, and the work of Richard Love to examine the political and economic changes that the two unions underwent from 1937 to 1941.



Prior to the strikes, the Tobacco Workers International Union (TWIU) was the only tobacco union in Richmond. Established in 1895, the Union was founded when ten local tobacco unions, directly affiliated with the AFL, met in St. Louis to form a national organization.<sup>46</sup> While the union was the first of its kind, it would remain relatively weak for the next twenty years. For a brief moment during World War I, the TWIU became a relatively aggressive union. A number of non-union strikes and walkouts took place in tobacco factories across the country, spurring the need for union representation and creating pathways for chapters across the country to grow and gain large memberships.<sup>47</sup> Even with this newfound infrastructure and membership base, the zeal did not last, and in the post-war era, the TWIU soon returned to the inoffensive union that it had been in years before.<sup>48</sup>

Even when membership was at its highest, the TWIU was not known for aggressive policy or lobbying on the behalf of workers. This stance was due, in large part, to the leadership

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<sup>46</sup> Northrup, 607.

<sup>47</sup> Northrup, 609.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

of the union. Secretary-Treasurer, E. Lewis Evans, stepped into his role when the union was created in 1895 and remained hesitant to encourage or even approve of strikes for the entirety of his forty-five-year tenure as Secretary-Treasurer of the union.<sup>49</sup> Many of his publications noted his opposition to “strikes and hasty actions” and upheld union negotiating as “the answer to all of labor’s ills”.<sup>50</sup> Evans’ dedication to pacifism was due to the fact that he came to power at a time when aggressive union action could be harmful to smaller companies on the fringes of the industry.<sup>51</sup> In an attempt to keep the peace, the TWIU constitution was designed to prevent walkouts, requiring two votes— first the approval of the general executive board and second an affirmative vote from the majority of locals throughout the country. Each local, no matter their size, had one vote in any matter. As a result, only one strike was ever officially authorized in the 45 years that Evans held office.<sup>52</sup> Ironically, Evans’ commitment to preserving the jobs of the most marginalized white tobacco workers prevented a strong union from advocating for the working conditions that those very people deserved.

When the women of the strikes asked for support from the TWIU, they essentially asked the union to abandon their entire organizing philosophy. Of course, the TWIU's failure to support Black strikers was characterized in part by racism and a desire to uphold the Jim Crow society that defined Richmond at the time. The TWIU’s leadership opposition to the trouble that often accompanied strikes in the tobacco industry was equally important. The response to the strikers would have only been nominally better if they were white. Perhaps they wouldn’t have turned them away completely, but the reality was that until 1937 striking was off the table for all members of the TWIU, regardless of race.

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<sup>49</sup> Northrup, 610.

<sup>50</sup> Northrup, 612.

<sup>51</sup> Northrup, 613

<sup>52</sup> Northrup, 612

On a national level, the TWIU was never segregated. At least on paper, the union constitution forbade discrimination on the basis of race, creed, or color.<sup>53</sup> Across the country, Black workers served on the International Executive Board, worked as union organizers, and played a crucial role in organizing in other tobacco cities like Winston-Salem.<sup>54</sup> In practice, TWIU's treatment of Black employees varied greatly depending on the city they were in and the culture of the local union. While Black people were essential to the union in Winston-Salem, for example, the movement in Durham had trouble reaching Black laborers who were interested in joining. In Richmond, organizing Black workers was seen as a lost cause, and the TWIU made few efforts to do so. Richmond had a reputation as a parochial town, where union action was rare. Not even white tobacco workers were especially zealous in their union activities. The tobacco industry's last strike in Richmond was in 1905 and the last strike in Richmond across all industries was in 1922.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, the former capital of the Confederacy would not have taken kindly to any organization trying to empower the Black labor force that provided cheap labor to its most important industry. Including Black men would not only challenge the labor practices of the city—it would challenge the Jim Crow society that ruled the Old South. Local organizers felt that they faced enough of a challenge organizing white employees and that including Black staff would cause too many problems.<sup>56</sup>

On an internal level, the TWIU was concerned that desegregation might lead to tensions between Black and white members. Historically, whenever strikes occurred in other industries, it was Black people who stepped in as scabs.<sup>57</sup> Beyond their racial resentments against Black

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<sup>53</sup> Northrup, 612

<sup>54</sup> Northrup, 614

<sup>55</sup> Northrup, 617

<sup>56</sup> Northrup, 614

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

Richmonders, white workers also harbored quasi-legitimate grievances against the blacklegs who historically stood between them and fair contracts. The TWIU feared forcing Black and white people to unite under the same union, even if separated into segregated groups, would stymie what little progress they achieved.

Regardless of the theoretical problems that the union had concerning segregation, Black tobacco workers in Richmond were feeling the effects of the everyday mistreatments that accompanied having no union representation. The low pay, horrible facilities, and pervasive workplace abuses made for an untenable working environment. If one thing was clear, it was that Richmond's local TWIU was interested in preserving the status quo. If a second thing was clear, it was that by 1937, Black workers in Richmond were not.



James Jackson began his career in leftist politics by joining the National Negro Congress (NNC) in 1936.<sup>58</sup> While working with the NNC, Jackson came to believe that young Black Southerners would benefit from an organization that centered Southern concerns in its mission.<sup>59</sup> At the time, most progressive Southern organizations were syndicates of larger Northern operations, which were not suited to cater to the distinct nature of Southern social and political norms.<sup>60</sup> Southerners did not just have to deal with complicated labor politics, they also had to deal with Jim Crow legislation, a widely illiterate population, the Ku Klux Klan and sympathetic municipal governments, the church and a number of other institutions that characterized the

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<sup>58</sup> Sara Rzeszutek, *James and Esther Cooper Jackson: Love and Courage in the Black Freedom Movement* (Kentucky, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 34.

<sup>59</sup> Rzeszutek, 34

<sup>60</sup> Rzeszutek, 35

South.<sup>61</sup> If organizers wanted to adequately address the South, they were going to need to develop strategies and tactics with Southern society, and all of its nuances, in mind.

Inspired by friends Edward Strong and James Ashford, Jackson created the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) in Richmond, as an attempt to provide an organization that specifically addressed Southern issues.<sup>62</sup> After hosting a successful convention for Southern youth in February of 1937, the conference attendees chose to elect a leadership board and established SNYC as a permanent institution dedicated to advocating for Black Southern issues.<sup>63</sup> SNYC had its mission, its leadership, and it had organizing capabilities. All they needed was a movement to organize around.

On April 16, 1937, nearly 400 tobacco workers walked out of the Carrington and Michaux (C&M) Tobacco Company in a spontaneous strike against the low wages and poor working conditions that were pervasive in the industry.<sup>64</sup> The employees of Carrington and Michaux were dedicated to improving their place of employment but they didn't have the tactical knowledge needed to bargain with their bosses. When the leaders of the strike contacted Richmond's TWIU representative, their case was rejected as hopeless. This group of strikers was predominantly comprised of Black women, making very little money, with no political sway in the city. The TWIU was a timid union that would not endorse a white-led strike, let alone a strike organized by a group of Black women who could shake the foundations of Jim Crow society. After 24 hours, the women of the movement had received no support for their cause and were

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<sup>61</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> Rzeszutek, 36

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> "300 Stage 'Sit-In' at Leaf Plant," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, April 17, 1937, 1.

quickly running out of time to make a move. The workers of the Carrington and Michaux plant were going to need to create a union specially prepared for their cause.

Knowing that the white union would not be coming to their aid, the strikers turned to their own community. Just barely two months old, SNYC found the issue that they so desperately needed to become a proper organizing channel. Jackson and the rest of SNYC offered to help C&M's workers organize an independent union, formulate their demands, and negotiate with the executives at C&M.<sup>65</sup> And so, the Tobacco Laborers and Stemmers Union (TSLU) was born.<sup>66</sup> Jackson, Alston, and Grandison worked with the strikers to create a citizen's committee, negotiate with the C&M bosses, and draft a new contract for the stemmers of Carrington and Michaux.<sup>67</sup> Within the next 72 hours, the strike was over and the employees of C&M were guaranteed wage increases, a 40-hour workweek, and union recognition.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps the bosses at Carrington and Michaux knew that their employees were well deserving of better working conditions and higher wages. Or perhaps the new union was exceptionally good at its job. Regardless, the TSLU made more changes in a week than the TWIU made in nearly half a century. The women of Carrington were lighting a fire in Richmond that wouldn't soon be put out.

Word of the strikes quickly spread through the homes and factories of Black women in Richmond. The TSLU's eyes were set on the I.N. Vaughn factory, working to organize their laborers and represent them in negotiations with the company's management. For a week, negotiations remained at a stand-still, as Vaughn's company president refused to eat into the

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<sup>65</sup> Rzeszutek, 42

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Love, Defiance, 21

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

company's profits to increase wages.<sup>69</sup> With little hope for a breakthrough in sight, the workers of the factory announced their plans to strike on May 7th.<sup>70</sup> Three days later, Vaughn and his company conceded to the strikers' demands, granting wage increases, shorter hours, and improvements to the factory's facilities.<sup>71</sup> Steam was picking up as the TSLU concluded Richmond's second strike of 1937 and secured another victory.

Next, in mid-June, employees at the Tobacco By-Products and Chemicals Corporation went on strike. This would be the longest strike of the three, lasting almost an entire month. It would also be the most complex, as the strike hinged on how workers of the plant were classified. The Tobacco By-Products and Chemical Corporation primarily extracted nicotine and other chemicals from tobacco byproducts for use in non-tobacco-based products, such as insecticides.<sup>72</sup> Because Black laborers in the company fed machines, swept, and worked the company trucks, the By-Products Corporation classified them as unskilled or semi-skilled workers. The Union's primary demand became reclassifying job categories, which would not just result in wage increases—it would desegregate the previously all-white “skilled worker” job classification and serve as a threat to the racial hierarchy that the industry relied on.<sup>73</sup> The staff of the By-Products Corporation negotiated with their employers for six weeks before resorting to striking.<sup>74</sup>

In the midst of their strike, the TSLU recognized that it was time to strengthen its connections in the organized labor network. When the TSLU first appealed to the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) for support, the CIO refused to work with the strikers, citing the

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<sup>69</sup> “2nd Tobacco Group Win Substantial Increases,” *Richmond Planet*, May 15, 1937, 1.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Love, “In Defiance”, 33

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> “By-Products Force Strikes; Plant Closed,” *Richmond News Leader*, June 16, 1937, 1.

fact that it did not have a tobacco workers union.<sup>75</sup> After nearly three months of successful strikes across the city, 12 members of the TSLU traveled to Washington DC in late June of 1937 to represent nearly 2,500 employees in 9 separate locals and meet with the director of the CIO, John Brophy.<sup>76</sup> The TSLU's meeting was successful, Brophy agreed to have the CIO support the TSLU, appointing Alston as CIO field representative.

When Alston and the rest of the TSLU returned to Richmond, strengthened with CIO backing, a new zeal helped to resolve the lingering strike at Tobacco By-Products. On July 7, the strike ended, and several employees who were previously classified as “helpers” or “laborers” were reclassified as skilled workers. Company concessions included the typical wage increases, vacation time, and better hours, but most importantly, the changes in classification compelled the company to change its policy of only using Black people in non-skilled positions.<sup>77</sup> The walls that surrounded the tobacco industry for decades before were starting to crumble under the pressure of the TSLU and the Black women who served as the backbone of the work stoppages.



With the newfound power granted by a CIO affiliation, the TSLU began plans to organize the stemmers in the Larus Brothers Tobacco plant. Because Larus produced finished tobacco products, this was a tactical step above organizing stemming plants. If the TSLU was able to organize Larus, the next step would be to organize “the Big Four” of the tobacco hierarchy—R.J. Reynolds (Camel), Liggett and Myers (Chesterfield), American Tobacco (Lucky Strike) and P Lorillard (Old Gold).<sup>78</sup> Challenging the Big Four would put the TSLU into direct competition with the AFL and white union workers. Simply put, results of action at Larus would determine

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<sup>75</sup> Love, “In Defiance”, 33

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> “Tobacco By-Products Strike Settled,” Richmond News Leader, July 7, 1937, 1.

<sup>78</sup> Northrup, 609

the trajectory of the TSLU and the Black tobacco movement in Richmond—it was crucial that the TSLU was successful.

The dispute between the union and Larus Brothers would be more complicated than the others. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) mandated that Larus hold an election, giving employees the opportunity to vote for either the AFL and TWIU, CIO and TSLU, or a third “company union” named the Independent Association of Larus Brothers Employees (IALBE).<sup>79</sup> The IALBE presented a major problem for both the TSLU and the TWIU. The company union fought hard to make sure that both Black and white workers at Larus chose to vote against the CIO and AFL in favor of keeping the company union, promising higher wages and other benefits.<sup>80</sup> Keeping the company union in charge would mean that Larus would be able to keep their problems in-house, without dealing with the bureaucracy and oversight that accompanied a national union. The election meant that the TSLU would be facing the force of both the TWIU and the company union—two parties with vested interests in keeping Black workers marginalized. When the votes were counted, the TSLU won amongst black employees by a vote of 114 to 65. This meant that employees would win hourly wage increases, 8 hour days and 5 day weeks, paid vacation and overtime, and access to a grievance committee.<sup>81</sup>

The TWIU, on the other hand, lost its election in a vote of 109 to 105.<sup>82</sup> The results of the election at Larus meant two things. First, the TSLU was ready to move on to Richmond’s larger factories. The members of the TSLU had a serious chance at changing the landscape of the tobacco industry in Richmond permanently. Almost more importantly, the election at Larus was a signal to the TWIU—this white union could not continue conducting business as it had in the

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<sup>79</sup> Love, “In Defiance”, 33

<sup>80</sup> Love, “In Defiance”, 35

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

past. Fighting for labor victories would no longer be successful until the TWIU created a plan to adequately address “the negro problem” that they had ignored for decades. The TSLU and CIO were suddenly legitimate threats to the TWIU, and the sleepy union needed to make a move.



In July of 1938, the CIO chartered a new union— the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) under whom the tobacco workers fell. Because the union included the agricultural sector, it attracted many Black, Mexican, Filipino, and Japanese Americans and quickly became one of the most diverse unions in the country.<sup>83</sup> The TSLU would no longer be known as such, instead, it was absorbed into the national UCAPAWA. Practically, this would have little impact on the day-to-day activities of the Union for the time being, as the original union leadership remained dedicated to the Richmond project.

The UCAPAWA’s first action would be challenging a subsidiary of the largest tobacco manufacturers in the world, the British-American Tobacco Company. Many large tobacco companies were able to maintain segregation within the industry by signing contracts with union locals via subsidiary companies. The British-American Tobacco Company trickled down through the Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company to the local Richmond stemmery and preparation plant, Export Leaf Tobacco Company.<sup>84</sup> The TSLU already organized Export in 1937, thanks to Mamma Harris who collected 60 women from the plant almost immediately after the first strike at Carrington and Michaux in order to begin the process of setting up a shop at Export. Mamma Harris organized nearly 700 of the 1,000 workers at Export and the TSLU negotiated for shorter hours and higher wages in 1937. A year later, the TSLU returned to the bargaining table, hoping

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<sup>83</sup> Love, “In Defiance”, 36

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

to persuade management to negotiate a new contract for higher wages in preparation for new minimum wage mandates that were set to take effect in the fall due to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA).<sup>85</sup>

Throughout July of 1938, negotiations continued between the union and Export. While headway was made with regards to increased wages and paid vacation time, the parties were deadlocked when the issue of setting up a union shop came to the table. By the end of July, negotiations came to a complete halt, and on August 1st of 1938, the workers of Export Leaf Company declared their strike, the TSLU's fourth strike in just under a year and a half.<sup>86</sup> Nearly 250 members of Local 332, 165 of whom were Black women, walked out of the plant in protest of working conditions.<sup>87</sup> For three days, more than 200 people marched, sang, and picketed the plant twenty-four hours a day, keeping the plant from operating at all.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> "Stemming Plant Is Closed When 200 Workers Strike," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, August 2, 1938, 11.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Poston, 624



After three days of protests, something that had never happened in Richmond's labor history took place. On August 4th nearly 200 members of Richmond's local Garment Workers Union (GWU) reported to the picket line to support the strike. Most astonishingly, these 200 members were white women. The color barrier that stood between workers was slowly beginning to dissolve. Alongside CWA, many other CIO affiliated unions would donate to the strike fund including the Newspaper Guild, the AFT, and the Clothing Workers of America (CWA).<sup>89</sup>

In response to the picket line, Export threatened to shut the factory down and move out of the city altogether. With no signs of progress and the fear of losing one of the biggest companies

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<sup>89</sup> Poston, 624

in the city, Richmond's progressive mayor, John Fulmer Bright, suggested that the TSLU's actions might leave thousands of Richmonders out of work.<sup>90</sup> The odds of Bright believing this are slim, he was a staunch supporter of FDR and a four-term incumbent. What is more likely is that Bright was keenly aware of the fact that tobacco leaf season was just around the corner. The workers of Export were coming between the city and its most profitable industry, politics or morals could be damned in the mind of Mayor Bright, the city needed its cigarettes.<sup>91</sup>

The staff of Export maintained their strike for nearly three weeks, picketing for the entire time. Eventually, the TSLU won and the stemmers were granted raises, a seniority system, and paid vacations. In exchange, the stemmers dropped their demand for a union shop and settled for a modified check-off system that authorized the company to deduct union dues from workers' paychecks and paying them directly to the financial secretary of the union local.<sup>92</sup>

After a victory at Export, the union returned to I.N. Vaughn, fighting for increased wages, better sanitary conditions, and a check-off system.<sup>93</sup> Fresh off of a string of victories, the union was in for its biggest move up to that point. The strike at I.N. Vaughn was the first non-spontaneous and non-local strike to happen in Richmond. The backing of the CIO and mounting union victories made it clear to tobacco bosses that they were no longer dealing with who they previously perceived as shiftless local Black workers— they were dealing with an organized group of Black activists who presented a threat to their very way of life. A return to I.N. Vaughn, a company that had just capitulated and signed a new contract signaled that the CIO wouldn't stop at just small wage increases. They would be challenging the structures of big

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<sup>90</sup> Love, "In Defiance", 38

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> "300 In Leaf Plant Strike," Richmond News Leader, September 27, 1938, 1.

tobacco and Jim Crow as they spread their communist values throughout the Black community of Richmond.

This strike would see the first arrests made, as police charged James Jackson with disorderly conduct and assault and battery and organizers Leslie Dixon and Bessie Armstrong for disorderly conduct.<sup>94</sup> In addition to the arrests, this would be the first picket a large number of employees chose to cross. The country was in the thick of the Great Depression, and Black people in Richmond could only go so long without collecting any pay.<sup>95</sup> Nearly 100 workers crossed the picket line on the second day of the strike, and while Dixon and Armstrong were released on their own recognizance, the CIO was only able to bail Jackson out on the condition that he stayed away from the picket line.<sup>96</sup> The strike droned on for two weeks, and in the end, the TSLU failed for the first time. While management at the plant did grant hourly and piece work raises and recognized the TSLU as the sole bargaining agent for Black workers, they refused to sign a contract.<sup>97</sup> These victories would seem even smaller when days later several stemmeries including Laurus and Vaughn fired hundreds of piece work employees just days before they were guaranteed to receive higher wages due to the FLSA.<sup>98</sup> While the Union would take action and file complaints, it was slowly beginning to see its demise.



During the CIO strike at Vaughn, the AFL began seriously addressing how to treat Black tobacco workers. After nearly two years of quasi-competition with the TSLU, the TWIU came to

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<sup>94</sup> “300 Negro Tobacco Workers Strike Here at Vaughn Plant Under CIO Auspices,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, September 28, 1938, 12.

<sup>95</sup> Love, “In Defiance”, 40

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 41

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 42

fully realize that in order for their union to remain competitive it was going to need to start admitting Black members.

In May of 1938, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) called a meeting to discuss the union at American Tobacco.<sup>99</sup> There, the NLRB suggested holding an official hearing on the case and asked if the CIO would be the best representative for Black workers. This proposal put TWIU's Richmond Representative, L.C. Crump into a tough position, facing two equally embarrassing choices. First, he could choose to object to CIO representation and look like a fool, since the AFL did not make an attempt to organize black employees in over 40 years. On the other hand, if he chose not to object, he would be blamed by the AFL for allowing the CIO to get an edge over the union. With this in mind, Crump proposed that the AFL "save our face" and move to organize Black Tobacco Workers at American.<sup>100</sup>

The latter quarter of 1938 and early part of 1939 were relatively quiet for both the AFL and CIO. From 1939 to 1940, two things happened at the same time. First, Crump and the AFL continued to organize the labor force at cigarette companies with the hopes of creating closed shops across the city, which would solidify the TWIU as the only union in Richmond. This time, the TWIU's renewed efforts were accompanied by an understanding that in order to make any headway in monopolizing tobacco unions, they would need to appeal to Black tobacco workers. Secondly, the TWIU decided to go on the offensive. On April 17th, 1939, the TWIU organized a strike for the first time in 39 years, closing down plants in Richmond, San Francisco, and Durham, North Carolina in an attempt to consolidate its position as the representative of Liggett and Myers' six plants across the country.<sup>101</sup> At the same time that the TSLU was emerging as a

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<sup>99</sup> Love, "In Defiance", 36

<sup>100</sup> Crump to Evans, May 5, 1938, TWIU Papers, Series III, Box 31.

<sup>101</sup> " Richmond News Leader, April 17, 1939, 1

union that was causing too many waves by asking for too much too soon, the TWIU began presenting itself as a palatable alternative for both employees and city officials. More than 100 members walked out in Richmond, white men from Local 196 and Black women from Local 202 joined together, creating the first non-segregated picket of Richmond's tobacco workers.<sup>102</sup> And while Black people did not challenge the union's segregationist policies, this would be a step forward for the TWIU and black workers alike.

By the end of a week, the TWIU achieved significant gains in their new contract with Liggett and Myers. The union worked with L&M to create a de-facto union shop at the factory, suggesting that when layoffs happened at the company, they would first affect those with the least seniority. Since L&M would be using the TWIU's seniority system, non-union members would be the first to go.<sup>103</sup> This presented problems for Black union members, because the TWIU kept separate seniority lists for their segregated locals, meaning that any white union member would have seniority over a Black union member, regardless of how long they had actually been on the job. Although the deal was less fair for the Black workers, the economic benefits of wage increases in the short term were enough to make the long-term consequences of the TWIU's bargaining worthwhile.

The TWIU's victory at Liggett would be the TSLU's second strike in the eyes of Richmond's elite. Not only had the TSLU disrupted the harmony of the city with their strike at Laurus, but now the TWIU was showing the city that the disruption might have been for not. For better or for worse, the TWIU was showing Richmond that Black labor organizers could negotiate higher wages without challenging the foundations of segregation. The CIO's most

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<sup>102</sup> Love, "In Defiance", 42

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

recent strikes ended with arrests and violent threats, and most importantly it questioned the Jim Crow system that ruled the South for the past 75 years. The TWIU's victory at L&M showed Richmonders that labor struggles in the tobacco industry could still uphold the segregation that defined the city in many ways. Black tobacco workers quickly came to understand that siding with the AFL's union would protect their relatively stable and well-paying jobs in big factories without shaking the racist foundations of the city and would likely lead to better protection than the CIO could provide.

Aside from the challenges presented by the TWIU, the TSLU was beginning to face the consequences of the original dilemma that characterized stemming labor supply for the entire century: As wages and working conditions improved in stemmeries, tobacco bosses had less and less of a reason not to mechanize the work previously done by cheap laborers.<sup>104</sup> As 1940 approached, companies that could not afford to mechanize almost certainly could not afford to keep their employees — they were going to have to shut down. On October 27th, 1939 I.N. Vaughn closed its doors and left the tobacco industry. Vaughn could neither afford to raise his wages to the new minimum wage, nor could he find stemmers who could work at piece work rates quickly enough to remain profitable while being paid minimum wage, and nor could he afford to purchase machines to automate the work. And so, Vaughn's 263 employees were fired and the doors of I.N. Vaughn closed for good.<sup>105</sup>

In factories across the country, mechanization and national minimum wage legislation were slowly making stemming an obsolete occupation. Between 1930 and 1940, the number of Black workers in the tobacco industry had declined by nearly 15%, with stemmery employment

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<sup>104</sup> Love, "In Defiance", 44

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 45

dropping by over 20%.<sup>106</sup> Between the initial strike at Carrington and Michaux and 1938, nearly 1700 Black women lost their jobs in factories.<sup>107</sup> Even though the number of black staff remained stable over time, it was only because the total number of employees increased, making Black workers a smaller percentage of the total employees in the tobacco industry.<sup>108</sup> Not only was the TSLU becoming less favorable, but they were also becoming less relevant. Their market of Black laborers in stemming jobs was slowly moving into other occupations as their jobs became unavailable.

In 1940, after their successes at Liggett and Meyers, the TWIU held a vote that would force E. Lewis Evans out of the TWIU. Evans, who had presided over the union with somewhat of an iron fist, was abruptly replaced with W. Warren Smith, who diverged from Evans' nearly forty-year strategy of tempered and inoffensive union activities.<sup>109</sup> Under the leadership of Smith, the TWIU began actively recruiting Black people to join their union. This decision would solidify the TWIU as the right union to back, at least in the minds of the pro-segregationist white Richmonders. While the TWIU would allow Black workers to join the union, they wouldn't integrate their locals. It was a genius political move, securing the loyalties of both the Black tobacco workers who did not want to risk what little job security they had left and white Richmonders who did not want to see their beloved segregation compromised by an outsider labor union.

On October 8, 1941, the TWIU called a second strike at Larus Brothers Tobacco in an attempt to challenge the union shop. The TWIU wanted full control of the plant. While 100 strikers belonged to the TWIU Local 219, an all-white union, 166 Black employees belonged to

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Love, "In Defiance", 45

the former TSLU, then known as UCAPAWA Local 577.<sup>110</sup> On the first day of the strike, Black staff did not participate in the initial walkout, but on the second day, they decided not to cross the line, in an effort to not agitate racial animus that white strikers might have harbored. “The risk of crossing a picket line,” one Black worker wrote, “would be too great therefore for our safety and security we implore both yourself and the union involved that you come to some kind of agreement so our people may go back to work”<sup>111</sup>.

While they faced pressure from Larus Vice President, Charles Reed, to return to work, Black employees continued to refuse to cross the picket lines for the first two weeks of the strikes. Black people believed that crossing the picket lines would open old wounds, as Black workers were historically sent in as scabs when white workers went on strike in other industries in Richmond.<sup>112</sup> Black staff tried to commit to solidarity for as long as they could, but when the strike entered its third week, they were finally forced to return to work.<sup>113</sup> While the TWIU created a hardship fund for white people on the picket line, Black employees, who were not officially on strike, did not have access to the fund.<sup>114</sup> With mouths to feed and bills to pay, Black people who were supporting the work stoppage could no longer grandstand for a union that did not have their best interests at heart. After another two weeks, the TWIU came to an agreement with Larus, in a settlement that resembled that of the L&M strike— including increased wages, seniority provisions, and paid vacation. The deal did not, however, allow for a closed shop. Larus instead offered to encourage TWIU membership.

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<sup>110</sup>“Strike Voted: Larus Plant Is Picketed,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, October 8, 1941, 1.

<sup>111</sup> Love, “In Defiance”, 45

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

In the aftermath of the strikes, tensions between Black and white workers were on the rise. First of all, the strike at Larus was the final strike for the former TSLU. Jackson, Alston, and most of the TSLU's original organizers left Richmond and did not take part in the negotiations between what was then known as the UCAPAWA, the TWIU, and Larus. The independent stemmeries were quickly closing shop or downsizing. Frankly, the original fire that drove the sleepy town's local union found itself dying down as grassroots organizing in church basements was replaced with representation from officers affiliated with the national CIO. Local membership was shrinking, and so too was the "power and pride that the black tobacco union had once generated in Richmond."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Love, "In Defiance", 46

### Chapter 3: Put Your Trust In God but Keep Your Powder Dry

#### Communism and the Church

“[I] asked God for the righteous victory of his servants; thanked Him for Mr. Alston, the Moses sent to guide them through the wilderness, and for Mr. Grandison, the Joshua who would lead them into battle”

From its inception, SNYC was an organization heavily influenced by the Communist Party. Jackson and Alston were inspired by the work of Ed Strong and James Ashford, two Communists who led the National Negro Congress in the 1930s. The son of a Baptist minister, Strong intended on following in his father’s footsteps, and worked as a youth leader at Mount Olivet Baptist Church for a short period after attending the YMCA college in Chicago.<sup>116</sup> Strong drifted from the church, and became active in the First International Youth Congress and the Communist Party in the early 1930s while pursuing a graduate degree in political science from Howard University.<sup>117</sup> In 1936, Strong planned a conference for Southern Black youth, though it was postponed, as Strong was asked to attend the World Youth Congress in Geneva at the same time as the convention was planned.<sup>118</sup> While Strong was away, planning the first conference was assigned to James Jackson, who had been involved in Southern politics since the age of sixteen when he fought segregation in the Boy Scouts and joined the Communist Party.<sup>119</sup> Jackson was joined by fellow Communist organizer, Christopher Alston, who moved to Richmond after organizing autoworkers in Detroit.<sup>120</sup> While Alston and Jackson worked together to organize the

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<sup>116</sup> Kelly, 200

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

conference, Henry Winston, a Black communist from Mississippi went on a Southern speaking tour to publicize the conference.<sup>121</sup>

The two-day conference was held on February 13th and 14th of 1937, to commemorate Frederick Douglass' birthday. At the conference, 534 delegates from 13 states, many of whom were Communists, came together to witness a variety of speeches and forums on issues such as voting rights, recreation, education, health, and fascism.<sup>122</sup> By the end of the convention, the Congress elected to become a permanent organization and chose Richmond as its headquarters.<sup>123</sup> Just a few months later, SNYC would begin its work organizing the women of Carrington and Michaux.

This chapter analyzes the roles that Communism and the Church played in the movement, and how the two ideologies interacted with one another. While the Communist Party was remarkably progressive with regard to issues of race during the 1930s, it struggled to understand the cultural significance the Church had in Black Southerners' lives and attempted to dismiss it as a result. After continued organizing across the South, the Party came to understand that they would not be successful in asking Black Southerners to give up their religion in favor of politics. The latter part of the chapter focuses on the role that the Church played in Richmond specifically, both on an organizational level and a personal level. This chapter uses articles from *Southern Worker*, a Communist magazine, to survey the ways that attitudes towards the Church changed between 1930 and 1937. It also uses reporting from the tobacco strikes to speak to workers' religiosity and the use of the Church as an organizing space.

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<sup>121</sup> Kelly, 200

<sup>122</sup> Kelly, 200

<sup>123</sup> Tim Wheeler, "James Jackson: Communist Leader and Pioneer Fighter for Civil Rights," *People's World*, July 11, 2019, <https://medium.com/peoples-world/james-jackson-communist-leader-and-pioneer-fighter-for-civil-rights-425960946a82>.



The communist principles that led SNYC and the TSLU were concerning to all who were interested in maintaining the status quo— the government, the tobacco bosses, and the TWIU alike. Many were concerned that adopting Communism would excite Richmond’s Black community, and lead them to work harder towards changing their stature as second-class citizens within the city of Richmond. Amid the Great Depression, the Communist Party was infamous for its work fighting anti-blackness in America and its radical solutions to the so-called “Negro Question”. In the early 1930s, the Party went through several changes that made them more amenable to adopting racial justice as a core tenant of the movement. First and foremost, the Party became infinitely more popular as the glory of the Roaring Twenties faded into the Great Depression. While the party was dismissed as unnecessary by many as the country enjoyed economic prosperity in the post-war haze, the Depression revealed a need for a stronger voice for the proletariat.<sup>124</sup> Second, several Black Communists emigrated from the Caribbean to Harlem in the previous decade, and while the number of Black people in the Communist Party was low, the Caribbean influence in Harlem allowed for a small number of Black communists to hold the Party’s feet to the fire when it came to the issue of American racism.<sup>125</sup> Lastly, and relatedly, the Communist Party began to seriously consider possible answers to the “Negro Question”. As such, the Party began investing in Black politics across the country not only as a means to address racism but as a means to stratify the proletariat. In the South, specifically, the Party focused on organizing sharecroppers and “exposing and fighting Jim Crow lynch law justice.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> J. A. Zumoff, “The American Communist Party and the ‘Negro Question’ from the Founding of the Party to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 6, no. 2 (2012): pp. 53-89, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsr.2012.0012>. p 80

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 67

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 53

At almost the exact time that the Communist Party was beginning to address American racism, a larger movement on the American left was beginning to emerge. From roughly 1933 to 1936, a new center-left coalition was formed to organize against racism, class exploitation, and war.<sup>127</sup> During that period, workers across the country were striking, organizing, and unionizing. The Jacksons and many other Communists were part of this coalition and advocated for what some call the “second” New Deal of 1935-1936, including legislation such as Social Security, work regulations and protections, and the Wagner Act, which was a major win for unions across the country.<sup>128</sup> In the wake of this activism, the Communist Party was encouraged to create a broader concept of what a change network might look like, including Socialists and militant members of both the AFL and CIO.<sup>129</sup>

In a memo to another union official, the TWIU’s Secretary-Treasurer, E. Lewis Evans, wrote, “I have an idea that the firms will object to the nigs getting into the CIO or into that communist bunch they have been training with.”<sup>130</sup> Of course, Evans was correct. Not only was the TWIU terrified of what might happen if Black workers got their way, but so too was Richmond’s bourgeoisie. Both city officials and tobacco industrialists could not afford for their Black employees to gain class consciousness. By 1937, when the TSLU aligned itself with the CIO both the CIO, SNYC, and the Communist Party had established themselves as organizations that were committed to radically changing the economic and social structures that had defined America, specifically the American South, as soon as possible.

<sup>127</sup> Ben Rose, “The Communist Party and the CIO,” *Theoretical Review*, no. 22 (1981).

<sup>128</sup> Tim Wheeler, “James Jackson: Communist Leader and Pioneer Fighter for Civil Rights,” *People's World*, July 11, 2019, <https://medium.com/peoples-world/james-jackson-communist-leader-and-pioneer-fighter-for-civil-rights-425960946a82>.

<sup>129</sup> J. A. Zumoff, “The American Communist Party and the ‘Negro Question’ from the Founding of the Party to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 6, no. 2 (2012): pp. 53-89, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsr.2012.0012>, 55.

<sup>130</sup> Evans to Crump, July 3, 1937, Evans to J. E. Lentie, July 9, 1937, TWIU Papers, Series III, Box 31.



While the Communist Party was dedicated to the social and economic liberation of Black Southerners, it took years for Party leaders and higher-ups to understand the complex cultural and religious practices of African-Americans in the South. The principles of most Black Southern movements were just as much the product of Communist politics as they were the product of a Black Southern Christian philosophy. The struggles faced by Black Americans across the South was a holy war, of sorts, at least for those who chose to dedicate their time to the movement. Few ordinary Southerners involved in radical Black politics would be known to quote or praise Lenin and Marx. They would, however, make reference to Christ and Moses as a way to galvanize and organize others in their communities. The Southern rank-and-file's dedication to a higher power proved to be a major source of conflict for Communist organizers across the South. In the Urban North, Communists frequently challenged rank-and-file's religious beliefs, following the typical Communist pattern of favoring secularism over religion and dogma that they believed clouded the minds of the proletariat.

Most Communist movements of the South aimed to mimic those of the North, specifically with regard to their anti-religious sentiments. Many Communists, some Southern and others not, saw the Church as an institution that was preventing the Southern proletariat from what was rightfully theirs in the name of temperance and a promise of heaven. As such, many early Southern Communists aimed to “disillusion” Black workers of their beliefs in Christ. It would take Communists in the South a bit of time to understand that the same approach could not be taken amongst Southern Blacks. The vast majority of African Americans in the South were devout Protestants, regularly attending church services and centering their lives around the

church. If the Communist Party were to ask Black Southerners to choose between them and Christ, the choice would be a simple one for most, and it would not favor the Party.

*Southern Worker*, a regional newspaper created by the Communist Party in 1930, was an attempt to document the Communist Party's attempts to unify Black and white workers and farmers against capitalism, corporations, and inequality. A paper "of and for both white and black workers and farmers" *Southern Worker* aimed to specifically speak to the issues and concerns of Black laborers, and the Jim Crow laws that kept Black workers from accessing jobs.<sup>131</sup> In its early years, *Southern Worker* took on a notably anti-Church sentiment. From September 1930 to March 1932, *Southern Worker* published nearly sixty negative articles about the Church. With salacious titles like "Thieving Preacher-Landlord Robs Whole Cropper Family", "'Fly In Pie' Of Well Paid Church Heads", and "Communist Sets Preachers Right In Red Debate", *Southern Worker* established itself as a publication that was thoroughly anti-religion, specifically taking issue with the Black church and clergymen.<sup>132</sup> And while the titles were extreme, their grievances were legitimate. In the eyes of the editors and many Communists, the Church was an institution that failed to adequately serve its parishioners by calling for temperance and faith rather than recognizing inequity in the world and working to change it.

*Southern Worker* wrote of the church as a space that failed to provide hope for this world by providing promises for the next. In December of 1930, *Southern Worker* published a short article titled "World Is Coming To End— Don't Fight, Says Church".<sup>133</sup> The unnamed author

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<sup>131</sup>"Southern Worker Finding Guide," Southern Worker, <https://dlib.nyu.edu/southernworker/>.

<sup>132</sup> "Thieving Preacher-Landlord Robs Whole Cropper Family," Southern Worker, October 3, 1931, 3., "Fly In Pie of Well Paid Church Heads," Southern Worker, April 19, 1931, 3, "Communist Sets Preachers Right In Red Debate," Southern Worker, Dec 6 1930, 2

<sup>133</sup> "World Is Coming To End— Don't Fight, Says Church", Southern Worker, Dec 27, 1930, 1

wrote about his dissatisfaction with the Church's assertions that workers should not worry about unemployment or poor working conditions because "the world is going to end in a few years, so why worry about conditions because we only have a short time to live anyway," he continues to argue that "this is but a scheme and a trick to keep the workers from organizing for better conditions. To hell with these fakers, fellow workers, fight for real unemployment relief."<sup>134</sup>

In an article early the next year titled "'Speed-Up' Holy Song of Boss Preacher In Ga.," another laborer complained about a preacher who forced him to go to church only to watch the preacher lambast the church's employees, telling them that they needed to work harder unless they wanted the church to shut down. The worker offers sharp criticism of clergymen, warning readers that what's wrong with workers is that they stand for "men like him poisoning our minds."<sup>135</sup>

Early issues of *Southern Worker* took no issue with essentially asking its readers to abandon their religion in favor of Communism. In an article titled "Texan Ex-Preacher, Farmer Calls For Fight Right Now," the author wrote about how class consciousness and Christianity are incompatible.<sup>136</sup> "We are in Hell now. Let's organize, rebel and get out like our Russian comrades did. We do not have to die to go to heaven. Russia is building that heaven right here on earth."

After three years of adopting intense anti-Christian rhetoric, *Southern Worker* tempered its approach to religion, publishing relatively few articles to do with the topic between 1933 and 1936. During that time, the magazine did change from a weekly to a monthly publication, but the lack of religious fervor is still notable in the monthly issues. By 1936, the staff at *Southern Worker* came to understand that Christianity held an important role in Black Communist

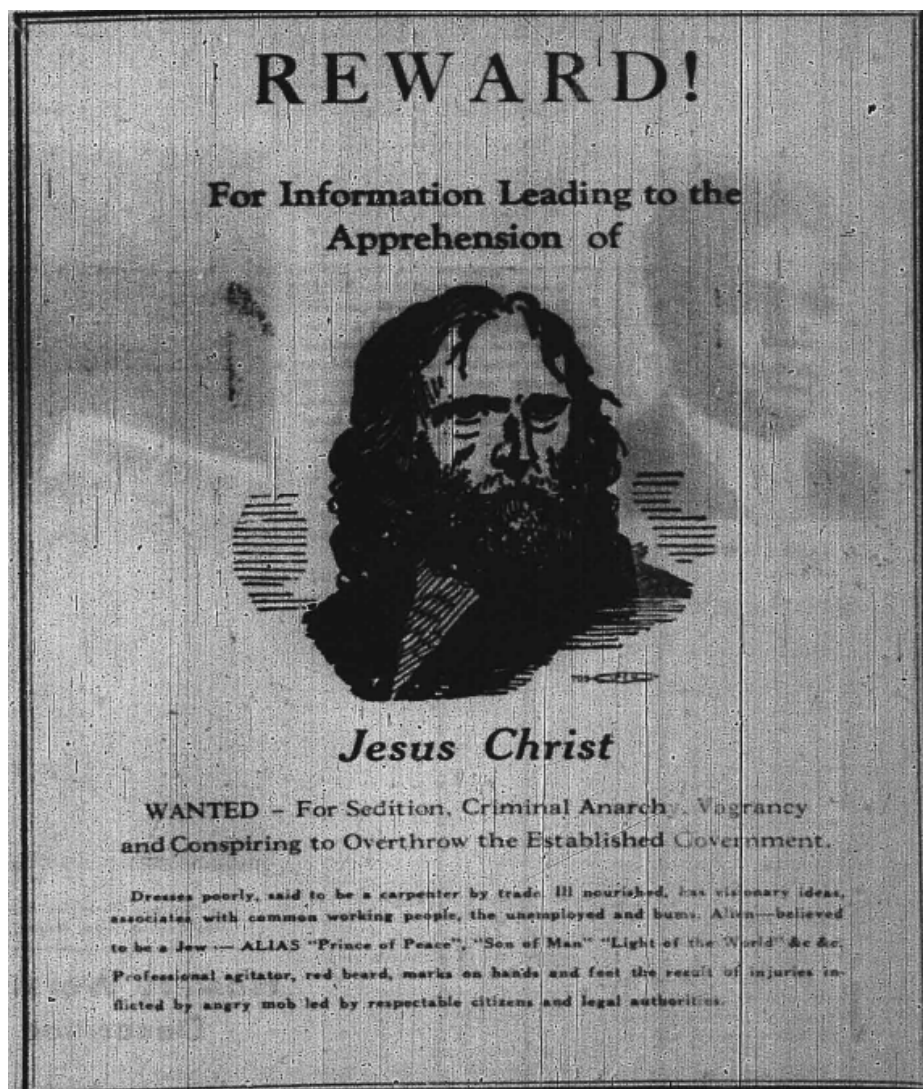
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<sup>134</sup>Ibid.

<sup>135</sup>"'Speed-Up' Holy Song of Boss Preacher In Ga.," *Southern Worker*, Dec, 1934, 2

<sup>136</sup>"Texan Ex-Preacher, Farmer Calls for Fight Right Now," *Southern Worker*, Jan 24 1931, 4

organizing and began publishing a column titled "From Churches". While hesitant to cast the Church in a positive light, *Southern Worker* came to understand that "religion was the way to approach the masses in the South."<sup>137</sup> The July 1936 issue even dared to directly link Jesus to the Communist Party, comparing his fight against equality to modern struggles communists faced.



"Reward! For information leading to the apprehension of Jesus Christ. Wanted for sedition, criminal anarchy, vagrancy, and conspiring to overthrow the established government.

<sup>137</sup> Kelly, 135

Dresses poorly, said to be a carpenter by trade. Ill nourished, has visionary ideas, associates with common working people, the unemployed and bums. Alien, believed to be a Jew. — ALIAS “Prince of Peace”, “Son of Man” “Light of the world. Professional agitator, red beard, marks on hands and feet the result of injuries inflicted by angry mob led by respectable citizens and authorities.”<sup>138</sup>

The next year, *Southern Worker* published an article titled “The Baptists Have Fighting Traditions” by Richard Frank, praising the “spirit and traditions of the first Baptists”.<sup>139</sup> In the article, Frank argues that the first Baptists were historically poor farmers who struggled to attain their land and freedom and that Baptists of the 1930s were “still poor people, many of them Negroes, but few modern Baptists remember their heritage of militant fighting for workers’ rights.”<sup>140</sup> Frank praised Baptists as a people who historically struggled for religious freedom, freedom of press and assembly, who were “zealous believers in peace... refused to serve in armies” and only fought in their own interests.<sup>141</sup> Frank argued many Baptists in the Middle Ages were *Communists*, fighting against dictatorship and rich church leaders, demanding land and freedom, and raising a red flag as their emblem.<sup>142</sup>

In Frank’s piece, the blame no longer fell on local preachers or clergymen— instead the “big capitalists like Rockefeller” who “obtained power in the Baptist church and [hid ]the early Baptist traditions from poor church members” were to blame. Frank did not argue that readers should leave the church or shun their traditions. Instead, Frank urged that readers should “Revive the fight of the Baptist church” reasoning that because most Baptist preachers were poor men

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<sup>138</sup> Art Young, “Southern Worker,” *Southern Worker* (Birmingham, Alabama: The Southern Worker, 1936), p. 3.

<sup>139</sup> Richard Frank, “The Baptists Have Fighting Traditions,” *Southern Worker*, January 1937, 15.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

that the Communist Party “should be fighting like early Baptists for land to till, for freedom of speech, press and assembly.”<sup>143</sup> Frank finished his essay by writing, “The communist party welcomes the voice raised in the last Baptist Southern convention for peace and against the oppression of the sharecroppers. We communists hope that the millions of poor baptists, negro and white, will revive the fighting traditions of the Baptist Church.”<sup>144</sup> *Southern Worker*; and many other Southern Communist movements, were learning that they needed to treat the Church with respect if they wanted to have any success in their movements. While they could certainly critique Christianity, the movement of the South was coming to understand that more tact and consideration would be essential if they wished to attract the proletariat of the South to their side.



Like many Black political struggles of the time, the Richmond Tobacco Strikes were heavily influenced and supported by the Black church. In 1937, when the first strike broke out at Carrington and Michaux the strikers immediately turned to church leaders for help in organizing and motivating members of the community. While a number of church leaders were contacted, only the Reverend C.C. Queen was willing to help the strikers, allowing for the Leigh Street M. Church to become the headquarters of the movement.<sup>145</sup> Over the next four years, the Leigh Street M. Church would serve as a place to hold meetings, strategize, and communicate with strikers and community members about how to advance the strategy.

Meetings at the church were half strategy session, half sermon—often including prayer, and hymns, in addition to organizing and planning. The union would sing hymns and add lyrics such as “We want a better entrance, we are tired of boiler water”, a reference to the fact that the

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Love, “In Defiance”, 28

factory had no water fountains, forcing employees to drink from the water boiler. The picket lines were the same— one could just as easily hear singing union chants as they could “We Shall Not be Moved”.<sup>146</sup>

Many of the protesters not only had faith in the movement, but also some faith in a God who called them to the work that they were doing. In one meeting, a woman “asked God for the righteous victory of his servants; thanked him for Mr. Alston, the Moses sent to guide them through the wilderness, and for Mr. Grandison, the Joshua who would lead them into battle.”<sup>147</sup> For the women of the movement, the strikes were not just an opportunity to improve their material conditions, they were a way to fight for a world that was more like Christ.

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<sup>146</sup> Jackson, 322

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

Almost thirty years after the Richmond Tobacco Strikes, another act of civil disobedience further down South would catch the attention of Americans across the country. A radical student movement would strike an alliance between a leader of the church in order to organize a boycott for better living conditions for Black Americans across the country, using the home of a prominent Black pharmacy owner as a refuge from angered city officials and Klansmen. This movement would face similar struggles to those in Richmond—the same intimidation from corporate powers and government officials, the same tension between conservative and progressive Black leaders, and the same struggle to maintain momentum as the leaders of the movement became larger figureheads and became well known across the country. A significant difference, of course, is that the names of Louise Harris, James Jackson, and Ted Alston are far less known than those of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Congressman John Lewis, and Doctor Richard Harris.

To state outright that the histories of the tobacco strikes and the Freedom Riders are the same would be an obvious overstatement. Congressman Lewis and Reverend King have become deified in American history for their own reasons. But it also cannot go without saying that the work of SNYC and the Jackson family set the stage for what we now know as the Civil Rights Movement. The similarities between the Richmond strikes and the Alabama movement are notable, and the histories are intertwined in a way that is quite remarkable.

Perhaps the most striking similarity would have to be the names of the organizations born out of the movements. The Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) of the 1930s and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) of the 1960s would both be colloquially known as “snick”. Debbi Amis Bell, a leader of the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) and

close friend of the Jackson family, moved to the South to volunteer with SNCC at lunch counter sit-ins, voter registration drives, and demonstrations in the 1960s.<sup>148</sup> When speaking about the similarities in names, Bell told *The People's World*, an extension of the Communist paper *The Daily Worker*, "When people say 'snick,' I always think first of the Southern Negro Youth Congress and Jim and Esther Jackson SNYC was the great forerunner. Without that movement in the 1930s and 1940s, SNCC and the civil rights movement of the 1960s would not have been possible."<sup>149</sup>

Leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) even noted that Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) was an inspiration for the civil rights work that they would go on to do in the 1960s. Past chairman of the NAACP and founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Julian Bond, noted that Jackson and SNYC provided a blueprint of sorts for the leaders of SNCC decades before SNCC spearheaded the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. "SNYC was a model of what Black youth should and ought to do," Bond said, and "preceded us, dared as we dared, dreamed as we dreamed."<sup>150</sup> The work that SNYC did provided a tangible model for what young and progressive Black organizers could do to mobilize Black Americans and strike change in local communities. Indeed, the model of identifying the issues faced by the Black population of a city and further mobilizing an entire city around it was just as much the framework of SNYC as it was SNCC. And the first example of this model was created in Richmond, Virginia in the name of 400 Black women striking for living wages and better working conditions.

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<sup>148</sup> Wheeler.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

In 1940, James and his wife Esther left the movement in Richmond and moved to Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>151</sup> Birmingham became the new SNYC headquarters and the site of many emerging political leaders.<sup>152</sup> In Alabama, the Jacksons worked to organize steel workers, coal workers, and other disenfranchised laborers in order to repeal poll taxes and enforce voting rights for Black voters.<sup>153</sup> The Jacksons' work for the Communist Party and civil rights movement in Alabama was not without consequence. The next year, Mildred McAdory Edelman, a Domestic worker, leader of the Communist Party, and SNYC leader, would refuse to give up her seat on a bus to a white person in Birmingham and SNYC launched a campaign in her defense.<sup>154</sup> In 1955, Rosa Parks would follow in Ms. Edelman's footsteps, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycotts and formally beginning what we now consider the modern Civil Rights Movement.

James would soon go to war, while Esther stayed in Alabama and continued to organize with SNYC. When James returned to the United States, the Jacksons continued to immerse themselves in SNYC organizing for as long as they could. James specifically took on the project of registering Black veterans to vote in Mississippi in 1946.<sup>155</sup> The next year, James became the chairman of the Communist Party of Louisiana, spearheading the movement to organize the maritime industry in New Orleans. While working in New Orleans, James became a target of the city and was forced to flee for his life with Esther.<sup>156</sup> The Jacksons then moved to Michigan, where Jackson became a leader of the Communist auto workers at the Ford Dearborn plant.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

Unfortunately, the Jackson's momentum would not last for long. As the threat of the Cold War and the Red Scare began to loom large, leftist organizing became increasingly dangerous. In 1948, the Smith Act allowed for the arrests of leaders of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), and SNYC was forced to disband which led to the Jackson's work moving underground.<sup>158</sup>

This problem of a charismatic leader unilaterally holding the lifeforce of a movement has been a common dilemma in Black organizing. The Jacksons' departure from Richmond sparked life into the Birmingham movement, and quite possibly changed the course of American history. SNYC's work in Birmingham would have a great impact on both the Bus Boycotts and Freedom Rides, which were two of the most important campaigns in the Civil Rights Movement. Still, leaving Richmond would leave the women of the strike without a Messiah to lead them through the movement. Shortly after the Jacksons left, the strikes officially ended and the factory workers returned to their marginally-improved lives.

The conclusion of the strikes includes a problem still being parsed today. Many Black political movements rely on the grassroots organizing of ordinary citizens while assigning most of the political clout to a charismatic and respectable leader, typically heterosexual, married, Black men. As a result, a number of Black leaders have been sidelined or hidden in the margins in favor of their more "respectable" counterparts. There is a reason that Mama Harris and Ms. Edelman's names are missing from the history books. Not being light-skinned enough, or rich enough, or educated enough, or respectable enough has sidelined Black leaders for generations.

The same movements have struggled to not collapse when their charismatic leader moves on to other endeavors. Just as SNYC would flail in the aftermath of the Jacksons' departure, SNCC would have the same concerns with regard to Dr. King's place in the movement. Tensions

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

about this very issue would contribute to Kwame Ture's decision to leave SNCC and form the Black Power movement. Ture, and others before and after him, felt that giving so much power to one individual could lead to power vacuums and the death of a movement should said leader leave their movement.<sup>159</sup> Whether due to assassination or relocation, charismatic leaders left their communities vulnerable to chaos in their absence.

The Richmond Tobacco Strikes provide both warning and inspiration for those willing to learn from its history. As the movement grew, it strayed away from the principles that originally made it successful. Reliance on the CIO, a national and decentralized organization, meant that the rank-and-file members of the movement would have an increasingly smaller ability to directly influence the operations of their union. This, coupled with the fact that the leadership had nothing tying them down to the movement would ultimately lead to the demise of the union. Key to the movement's success had been the fact that all parties involved were near each other, in the same city. This allowed the union to strategize with any and all members of the community who were able to dedicate their time to the movement. When TSLU headquarters moved from the basement of Leigh Street Church to Washington, D.C., organizers lost the ability to directly connect with and listen to their workers, which would begin to unravel the aspects of the union that made it successful. The failures of the TSLU are a reminder to organizers about just how essential community-led organizing is.

At the same time, the grassroots organizing and dedication to a local issue would prove to be an ingenious choice when SNYC decided to adopt the strikes as its first movement. The militancy of Richmond's tobacco workers was also an asset to the movement. Not only were the strikers committed to changing their workplaces, they were willing to sacrifice in order to

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

achieve those changes. The Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Union improved the lives of thousands of workers in Richmond, and are a shining example of the ways that radical Southern politics and organizing the Black proletariat can result in changes never imagined before.

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And even after all my logic and my theory

I add a "Motherfucker" so you ignorant niggas hear me

—Lauryn Hill