

# Pushing the Color Line

## Race and Employment in Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1933-1963

PEGGY SEIGEL

For black Americans seeking a place in the urban Midwest economy, the thirty years leading up to the August 1963 March on Washington were decades of hard-won gains amidst systemic discrimination. Black citizens suffered disproportional poverty and unemployment during the worst years of the Depression. In the defense factories that sprang up to meet World War II demands, they found new opportunities and hope. For the first time, several major industries hired blacks for skilled jobs at good wages, and federal regulations established anti-discrimination policies. African Americans were to learn, however, that regulations did not eliminate the color bar that confined them to the lowest paying and least secure jobs. Despite some wartime gains, black citizens in the postwar years once again found themselves in segregated workplaces, disproportionately trapped on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder.

Black workers in Fort Wayne shared these common experiences, but they also faced additional barriers influenced by their city's particular

---

Peggy Seigel's most recent article "Winning the Vote in Fort Wayne, Indiana: The Long Cautious Journey in a German-American City" appeared in the September 2006 *IMH*. She wishes to thank the editor of the *IMH* and an anonymous editor for comments on an earlier version of this work.

mix of politics, labor traditions, and economic pressures. Earlier studies have established the traditions, championed by the Fort Wayne Chamber of Commerce in the 1920s and continued for decades by white trade union locals, that limited black workers' access to industrial jobs. Researchers have described as well a black population so weakened by complacency and financial depression that by 1963 it had become "a kind of social drag on the community." This study will build upon these earlier analyses by looking more closely at patterns of discrimination and protest beginning in the New Deal years and continuing until the national March on Washington in the late summer of 1963. I will examine how leaders of the Phyllis Wheatley Social Center/Fort Wayne Urban League worked to open new employment opportunities for black workers during World War II, and how liberal paternalism contributed to the loss of these gains in the 1950s and early 1960s. Finally, I will look at the increasingly activist stance of the local NAACP through the mid-1950s and early 1960s. In combination with new anti-discrimination legislation and the burgeoning civil rights movement, local efforts broke through Fort Wayne's legacy of discrimination to create new employment opportunities for the city's black workers. Such an investigation will add to our understanding of the complex racial dynamics that slowly built a national civil rights movement. At the same time, a closer study will uncover patterns that contributed to long-term demoralization and economic stagnation for black citizens in urban centers such as Fort Wayne.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE NEW DEAL YEARS: 1933-1941

Since its founding in 1920, the Phyllis Wheatley Social Center had served as the recreational and social hub of Fort Wayne's African American community. Originally funded by the National Recreation Association, the Wheatley Center affiliated with the Fort Wayne Community Chest in 1925. An interracial board of religious leaders and social workers provided oversight, while a small paid staff directed an array of popular social and civic clubs for children and adults, as well as athletic leagues for youth. As the Depression set in, the Wheatley

---

<sup>1</sup>Iwan W. Morgan, "Latecomers to the Industrial City: African Americans, Jobs, and Housing in Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1940-1960," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 95 (March 1999), 31-57. Fort Wayne Urban League, R. Sommerfeld Associates, "The Report of a Study of the Socio-Economic Circumstances of Negroes in Fort Wayne," (1964), Fort Wayne Urban League Archives (henceforth FWUL Archives); *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, June 16, 18, 20, 1964.



Fort Wayne Urban League Headquarters

The Wheatley Social Center/Fort Wayne Urban League offered job training and advocated for equal employment opportunities for black citizens.

Courtesy Fort Wayne Urban League Archives

Center's board of directors invited the director of research for the National Urban League to survey the needs of the city's black population. The immediate result was that in 1930 the Wheatley Center affiliated with the National Urban League. While researchers have been reluctant to link Wheatley Center programs with better defined national Urban League programs, the center nevertheless began to address more intentionally economic and social service problems heightened by the economic crisis.<sup>2</sup>

---

J. Harvey Kerns, "A Study of Social and Economic Conditions of the Negro Population of Fort Wayne, Indiana," 1949 (Allen County Public Library, Fort Wayne, Indiana, henceforth ACPL), 74.

Among the Wheatley Center's primary challenges was the city's rising problem of homelessness and hunger. In 1932, using local funding provided by Federated Relief Agencies, the center established an annex, separate from its 421 Douglass Avenue address, at 503 East Breckenridge Street to provide shelter and meals for needy African American men. The annex accommodated as many as forty men per night; on the average the center provided seventy-five meals daily. By 1933 the Depression had created such a local emergency that even Fort Wayne's independent political and corporate leaders welcomed the coming of the New Deal. Local relief sources were threatened with depletion. Over five thousand families in Allen County now looked to the federal government for some form of aid. Consistent with national rates, one-third of the city's African Americans—approximately 800 individuals—qualified for federal relief.<sup>3</sup>

The vast majority of African Americans on federal relief received work through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), mostly doing road repair and building construction. A small number of young men were assigned to the Civilian Conservation Corps. For Fort Wayne's black citizens, New Deal programs provided means of financial survival, even if meager and unreliable. At the same time, their inclusion in a national program gave black citizens a new sense of recognition and legitimacy. While they did not question the Roosevelt administration's solid allegiance to segregation, for the first time they felt that they had allies at the national level in Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet" who would press for civil rights. New Deal programs also gave the Wheatley Center new energy and purpose.<sup>4</sup>

WPA relief projects channeled through the Wheatley Center supported the WPA's educational mission and promoted organization building. Adult part-time teachers targeted children "born into underprivileged homes" and adults with little formal education by offering classes in prenatal care, adult literacy, parenting, and home manage-

---

<sup>3</sup>*Fort Wayne News-Sentinel*, December 10, 1932, January 3, 1934; Iwan Morgan, "Fort Wayne and the Great Depression: The Early Years, 1929-1933," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 80 (June 1984), 144; "Fort Wayne's Negro Population" [1937?], Wheatley Center/Fort Wayne Urban League files, ACPL; John Brueggemann, "Racial Considerations and Social Policy in the 1930s," *Social Science History*, 26 (Spring 2002), 143.

<sup>4</sup>Brueggemann, "Racial Considerations and Social Policy," 146; Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, Volume II: *The Defining Years, 1933-1938* (New York, 1999), 153-76.

ment. Teachers also encouraged adults to “develop interests to occupy their leisure time.” On any given day the center hummed with craft classes, music lessons, and chorus and orchestra rehearsals. A WPA-funded coach trained boys to compete in Golden Glove competitions. In the tough years of the Depression, Wheatley Center programs became sources of community pride.<sup>5</sup>

At various times during the 1930s, the National Youth Administration (NYA) funded twenty-five young people to work as recreational leaders at the Wheatley Center. For black children growing up in Fort Wayne, youth programs at the center were a “life saver.” In April 1940, local NYA workers received special invitations to hear Mary McLeod Bethune, director of minority affairs for the NYA and the highest-ranking African American in Roosevelt’s administration, speak at a mass meeting at the city’s Mt. Olive Baptist Church.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to white workers, however, black citizens in Fort Wayne were largely unaffected by New Deal policies that promised to put more Americans back to work. A stark reminder of their economic marginality was the city’s 1933 Labor Day celebration. The Fort Wayne Federation of Labor sponsored a massive downtown parade accompanied by afternoon and evening festivities. With New Deal programs promising economic recovery, union leaders celebrated what they hoped would be the renewal of union power. Although the public was invited to the picnic and games at the Elks Country Club, segregation was the order of the day. According to a short paragraph in the *Journal-Gazette*, black citizens sponsored their own celebration at Booker T. Washington Park on the city’s west side. Festivities included a baseball game between “a picked team” and the Fort Wayne Giants.<sup>7</sup>

The invisibility of black workers in the city’s workforce can also be explained, in part, by Fort Wayne’s small African American population. In 1930, approximately 2,300 black men, women, and children made up scarcely two percent of the city’s total population of 115,000. The absence of black workers in Fort Wayne’s industries had deeper roots,

---

<sup>5</sup>*Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, February 9, 1936; *Indianapolis Recorder*, May 15, November 27, 1937.

<sup>6</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, March 30, 1940; *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, February 2, 1989. Dr. Bethune was in Fort Wayne on the invitation of the city’s oldest black women’s club, Ultra Art. *Indianapolis Recorder*, April 6, 1940.

<sup>7</sup>*Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, September 1, 3, 4, 1933.

however. Unlike other midwestern cities such as Detroit, Gary, and Indianapolis, Fort Wayne had a tradition of not employing African Americans in its developing industries. As Iwan W. Morgan points out, industries that sprang up in the 1920s and early 1930s were drawn to the city by the Chamber of Commerce's promotional campaign boasting of its old-stock (German, British, and Irish) workforce as being more "reliable, enterprising, and hardworking" than recent immigrants and African Americans. A survey of the black workforce in 1937 reported that of the fifteen manufacturers that established factories in Fort Wayne between 1925 and 1932, the International Harvester Corporation's truck plant, which employed 125 African Americans among its workforce of more than 4,000, stood out as the single employer of black workers. Bass Foundry and the Pennsylvania Railroad, older city employers, were the next largest employers with 45 and 15 black workers each. The majority of black men, if they were fortunate enough to have a job, worked as "family servants, day workers, common laborers" and at other miscellaneous low paying, irregular work.<sup>8</sup>

Just as black men were excluded from manufacturing jobs, so too were black women denied employment in the city's booming electrical machinery, knit goods, and clothing factories, where thousands of white women worked. Their race also excluded them from clerical work, work as telephone or telegraph operators, and teaching, nursing, and sales work—all jobs reserved for white women. More than four-fifths of African American women, consistent with national patterns, worked as servants, cooks, or cleaning ladies. A small number found work as hairdressers, caterers, restaurant cooks, and stenographers. U.S. Department of Labor statistics for 1930 show that approximately 30 percent of Fort Wayne women, both black and white, were employed, but there similarities ended. On average, black women earned roughly one-third of what white women were paid and less than one-fourth the pay of white men. Most employed black women were in the 45-to-54 age group, while white and foreign-born women most often were 25 and younger. More

---

<sup>8</sup>Morgan, "Latecomers to the Industrial City," 33; "Table 5. African American Population in Indiana, 1850-1990" in Robert M. Taylor Jr., Connie A. McBirney, eds. *Peopling Indiana: The Ethnic Experience* (Indianapolis, 1996), 655; Emma Lou Thornbrough and Lana Ruegamer, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000), 34-46; *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, April 7, 1940; "Fort Wayne's Negro Population."

often than white women, African American women also supported large families with small children, often as an essential family wage earner.<sup>9</sup>

To help African Americans find work in an ever-tightening job market, Wheatley Center's Executive Secretary Edgar J. Unthank, Girls Work Secretary Elma E. Alsup and Boy's Work Secretary John Ridley built relationships with local employers and counseled individual job seekers. Such initiatives had some success: a report for 1936-1937 indicates that during that year more than 200 men and women were placed in new jobs. Not recorded, but nonetheless implied, is that blacks were still relegated to jobs at the bottom of the economic ladder. What was different is that blacks were becoming more assertive in competing with white workers for scarce employment. In addition, Wheatley Center's efforts reflect a new emphasis on relationships to other black organizations and national leaders; black citizens began to develop what historian Kevin Gaines describes as a "collective consciousness and group solidarity."<sup>10</sup>

In March 1933, Wheatley Center's training program for female domestic servants represented a new blend of traditional racial uplift with working-class empowerment. With economic hardships at crisis levels, some whites now displaced African Americans in the lowest-paying jobs that had always been linked to race. To give black women a competitive edge, the center offered a six-week course at Central High School as part of its industrial training program. Taught by two college professors and a high school teacher, the classes gave women training in home economics and psychology. Demand was high—75 women enrolled in the March 1933 class.<sup>11</sup>

Fort Wayne's program was modeled after early twentieth-century social settlement programs developed by Nannie Helen Burroughs at the National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C. If domestic servants took pride in their work, Burroughs reasoned, they would reduce the social stigma attached to black women's traditional

---

<sup>9</sup>"Fort Wayne's Negro Population"; Sieglinde Lemke, "Introduction" in Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb* (New York, 1996), xvii; *Employed Women and Family Support* (Washington, D. C., 1939), 2, 3, 8, 14.

<sup>10</sup>"Wheatley Social Center" in "Fort Wayne Community Chest Annual Meeting, 1937," FWUL Archives; Kevin Gaines, "AHR Forum: Rethinking Race and Class in African-American Struggles for Equality, 1885-1941," *American Historical Review*, 102 (April 1997), 385.

<sup>11</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, March 11, 18, April 3, 1933.

labor. Closer to home, Indianapolis's social settlement house, Flanner House, considered the training of black domestic servants to be one of its most important functions. The Indiana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs' state headquarters in Indianapolis, with funding from the WPA, offered similar courses in home management.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to training classes, the Wheatley Center sponsored a club for working women that instilled in its members a spirit of self-worth. Part of a network of YWCA-sponsored clubs across the Midwest, the Industrial Women's Club served as an important social outlet and kept members abreast of working conditions and labor laws pertaining to African American women. A weekend institute in 1935 in Indianapolis drew women delegates from Indiana, Ohio, and Lexington, Kentucky, and included forums on "Household Employment" and "Problems of Relief." One of the featured speakers was A. Phillip Randolph, the national president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and a promising national civil rights leader. Commenting on a similar club sponsored by the South Parkway Branch of the Chicago YWCA, the club's sponsor, Thelma McWorter, emphasized her overall goal of teaching women self-confidence: "We tried to teach the women to learn to speak up for yourself."<sup>13</sup>

In December 1934, Indianapolis African American leaders called together representatives from Indiana cities with significant black populations to form an organization to promote economic progress for their race. Unthank, Alsup, and Ridley represented the Wheatley Social Center. The new Negro Economic Welfare Council of Indiana continued to meet over the next year to share information pertaining to relief programs and employment and to pressure Democratic Governor Paul V. McNutt to serve as their advocate. Unthank and other state leaders met with McNutt on at least two occasions, asserting a new public voice for Indiana African Americans. Their September 7, 1935, meeting included Unthank, prominent Indianapolis attorney and civil rights leader

---

<sup>12</sup>Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia, 1989), 98; Thornbrough, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century*, 37-38; *Indianapolis Recorder*, October 16, 1937.

<sup>13</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, May 18, 1935. For a description of a Fort Wayne conference, see "The Wheatley Center Bulletin Feb. 1935," FWUL Archives; Beth Tompkins Bates, "AHR Forum: A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941," *American Historical Review*, 102 (April 1997), 347.





Wheatley Center Executive Secretary Edgar Unthank,  
with boxer Joe Louis and Sam Stuart, 1934.

Unthank was an influential member of the Fort Wayne black community and one of the leaders of the fight for equality prior to and during World War II.

Courtesy African /African American Historical Society, Fort Wayne

Freeman B. Ransom, Mrs. Grace Wilson Evans of Terre Haute, president of the Indiana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, and J. W. Geater, executive secretary of the Anderson Urban League. According to the *Indianapolis Recorder*, the governor "manifested much interest in the activities of the organization."<sup>14</sup>

Efforts to promote racial progress were soon channeled into a new national organization, the National Negro Congress (NNC). In January 1936 militant NAACP attorney John P. Davis met with leading black citizens in Indianapolis to establish an Indiana sponsoring committee for the emerging new organization. The next month, Davis, along with fellow NAACP leader Ralph Bunche and labor activist A. Philip Randolph,

<sup>14</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, December 22, 1934, September 7, 1935. Unthank served as executive secretary of the Fort Wayne Wheatley Center from 1925 until 1942. He was a graduate of Lincoln College in Chester, Pennsylvania, and had been a social worker in Shreveport, Louisiana, and Barberton, Ohio, before coming to Fort Wayne. *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, April 28, 1942.

drew more than 5000 African Americans to the NNC two-day organizing convention in Chicago. Fort Wayne's delegates included Wheatley Center officials Unthank and Alsup, as well as seven representatives of four center-sponsored organizations: the City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, the Toujour Fidele Club, the Mothers Club, and the Men's Civic League. Randolph's message was loud and clear: African Americans could not rely on the New Deal and "white sympathetic allies" for solutions to their problems. He exhorted working-class blacks "to mobilize and rally power" on the grassroots level by joining unions and supporting black-owned businesses.<sup>15</sup>

Interest in the NNC continued. In April 1936, the organization's Indiana Sponsoring Committee called a statewide convention that brought together a cross-section of laborers and professionals to further promote black civil rights. Speakers included Indianapolis attorneys Henry J. Richardson Jr. and Ransom. In October 1937, Wheatley Center representatives attended the NNC's second annual convention in Philadelphia. Echoing his earlier impassioned calls, President A. Philip Randolph urged blacks to unite with white workers to combat the unemployment that had "taken on the picture of permanency."<sup>16</sup>

As the center's executive secretary, Unthank maintained a delicate balance between numerous, not necessarily compatible positions. More militant black leaders, including leaders of the NNC, looked to members of the black community for leadership and emphasized collective action and protest politics. Other leaders, following the more traditional approach, worked with alliances of liberal white reformers and depended on funding largely from white philanthropy. They feared that confrontation and public protest would weaken their already tenuous position. Like Bethune, black leaders also pursued strategies that were "subtle and manipulative." The available records of this period suggest that Unthank sponsored initiatives that he considered politically safe. In common with Urban League directors such as John Dancy of Detroit, he avoided direct challenges to racism that might affect his agency's

---

<sup>15</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, January 18, February 8, 15, 1936; Lawrence S. Wittner, "The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment," *American Quarterly*, 22 (Winter 1970), 885-86; Bates, "A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard," 360.

<sup>16</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, April 4, 1936, October 23, 1937.

financial dependence upon the Community Chest. At the same time, Unthank clearly promoted breaking discrimination barriers.<sup>17</sup>

Unthank's role on the Fort Wayne Interracial Commission illustrates the tightrope that he often walked. Beginning in 1934, the commission sponsored annual forums held on or around Abraham Lincoln's birthday to promote understanding and goodwill between the races. As representative of the Wheatley Center, Unthank worked with the Fort Wayne Ministerial Association, the YMCA, and dozens of elite black and white leaders to organize programs that spread out over a week. Thousands of local citizens, black and white, packed auditoriums to hear outstanding national religious and civil rights leaders, interracial choruses, and addresses by local clergy. The forums emphasized interracial cooperation and understanding, however, not the tough issues of discrimination and segregation.<sup>18</sup>

In 1936, for example, the forum highlighted Dr. Channing Tobias, senior secretary for African American work for the national council of the YMCA. His address, summarized on the first page of the *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, reportedly assured his audience that racial barriers in the United States were gradually breaking down. Specifically, Tobias found "encouraging signs of interracial tolerance in the north" because of greater opportunities enjoyed by black athletes, artists, and performers. A similar story ran in the *Indianapolis Recorder*. In addition, a proclamation from Fort Wayne Mayor Harry W. Baals, read at this same event, claimed progress in race relations: "Fort Wayne is a community blessed with tolerance, amity, understanding, and good will between races and creeds."<sup>19</sup>

While few people would have disagreed with the mayor's wishes for understanding and goodwill, even fewer people were ready to drop their society's color lines. In a study of social policy and race during the 1930s, historian John Brueggemann comments that although "most Americans were opposed to extreme manifestations of fascism . . . few

---

<sup>17</sup>Joyce A. Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune and Black Women's Political Activism* (Columbia, Mo., 2003), 33; Dominic J. Capeci, Jr., *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942* (Philadelphia, 1984), 13-14.

<sup>18</sup>Founded in 1924, the Interracial Commission sought to fulfill its mission by providing educational and cultural programs. Kerns, "A Study of Social and Economic Conditions," 67.

<sup>19</sup>*Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, January 26, 29, February 10, 11, 12, 1936; *Indianapolis Recorder*, February 15, 1936.

felt urgent about the possibilities of serious progressive social change.” Such seemed to be the case in Fort Wayne.<sup>20</sup>

As unemployment dug more deeply into African American communities, however, black leaders felt an increased sense of crisis. Fifty percent of African Americans in Gary during the early 1930s were on full government relief. By 1940 unemployment in other Midwest cities was alarming as well. Milwaukee had an unemployment rate of 29.3 percent, a rate considerably higher than those for Detroit (15.7 percent) and Chicago (19.3 percent). Higher still, although generally underreported, were the unemployment rates of Fort Wayne and Indianapolis African Americans. In 1940, 38 percent of Fort Wayne’s black citizens were unemployed; in contrast, 11 percent of the city’s whites lacked work. The following year, Indianapolis black workers described as “employable” made up 44 percent of all workers on public relief.<sup>21</sup>

For African Americans the buildup of the national defense program to support England’s war against Hitler offered the possibility of economic recovery and a “rebirth of citizenship.” Speaking at the annual meeting of the Wheatley Social Center in December 1940, Lester Granger, executive secretary of the National Urban League, emphasized the unprecedented opportunities ahead. At the same time, he urged black citizens to organize and to have courage. During the next year, in an unprecedented show of unity, state and national civil rights leaders threw their energy into effecting changes. Unthank, too, found a new public voice.<sup>22</sup>

In early 1941, J. Chester Allen, attorney and state legislator from St. Joseph County, navigated a bill (H.B. 445) through the Indiana General Assembly to prohibit discrimination against blacks in industries with defense contracts. After a nearly unanimous victory in the House of Representatives, the Indiana Chamber of Commerce spearheaded the bill’s defeat in the Senate. Allen and other black leaders, including Senator R. L. Brokenburr of Indianapolis, renewed their efforts on behalf of black workers. They reached a series of compromises with the Indiana State Defense Council, a group of politicians and Chamber of Commerce

---

<sup>20</sup>Brueggemann, “Racial Considerations and Social Policy,” 140.

<sup>21</sup>Andrew Edmund Kersten, *Race, Jobs and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-1946* (Urbana, Ill., 2000), 62, 70, 65; Morgan, “Latecomers to the Industrial City,” 34.

<sup>22</sup>*Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, December 13, 1940; *Indianapolis Recorder*, December 28, 1940.

leaders. With Governor Henry F. Schricker's firm support, a committee of industrialists and sixteen black leaders developed the Indiana Plan of Bi-Racial Cooperation, which had two priorities: to win the war and to end racial discrimination in defense industries. Unthank of the Wheatley Center and I. H. Freeman of General Electric Corporation represented Fort Wayne. Biracial committees representing labor unions, industries, and black interests were then established in twenty Indiana cities with sizable black populations, Fort Wayne included. J. Chester Allen, as director of Negro Affairs of the State Defense Council, was charged with overseeing grassroots efforts.<sup>23</sup>

During this same time, national black leaders demonstrated new determination as well. Labor leader Randolph threatened to bring as many as 100,000 black protestors to Washington, D.C. on July 4, 1941, unless President Roosevelt set a new national policy against job discrimination. In a concession to Randolph and to all African Americans, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 that June, calling for employers and unions alike to treat equally all workers in defense industries regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin. As a means to pressure employers, Roosevelt created the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practices to investigate and monitor allegations of discrimination.

In addition to finding hope in these new plans to lessen workplace discrimination, some Fort Wayne citizens continued to find direction in the NNC. In July 1941, a Fort Wayne group calling itself simply the Fort Wayne Discussion Group invited NNC field counselor Ishmael P. Flory to speak before a forum at Turner Chapel AME church. James Nash, a young labor and community leader, chaired the group. By now, the local council of the NNC had reportedly "gained national recognition" for "its splendid work" in Fort Wayne. While details of this work have unfortunately been lost, there is no doubt that the NNC was gaining local followers.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, July 7, 1945.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, July 12, 1941; (Fort Wayne) *Weekly Carrier* August 2, 1941. The *Weekly Carrier*, which includes the reference to the local NNC, was published during the early 1940s by Robert L. Sullivan. A single complete copy is known to exist on microfilm in the Indiana State Library. Fort Wayne was one of 70 local councils of the NNC. Lawrence Wittner stresses the NNC's work to organize black workers in steel areas including Gary and Chicago in "The

In the New Deal years, black leaders in Fort Wayne formed organizations and networks to help working-class citizens survive the economic crises of the Depression. They also worked within interracial associations such as the Wheatley Center and the Fort Wayne Interracial Commission that offered promises of better interracial understanding. By the summer of 1941, black citizens had reasons to believe that their efforts were beginning to show results. Their economic plight was not only gaining the attention of state and federal politicians; for the first time in their country's history, government policies now forbade employment discrimination based on race.

#### PUSHING FOR CHANGES: 1941-1946

Optimism seemed high as Fort Wayne's Defense Committee—Unthank; Rev. William Guy, pastor of Turner Chapel A.M.E. Church; Elma Alsup; and Fred D. Strong, local labor leader and postal worker—began weekly meetings in June 1941. Members of the Interracial Commission lent support as well. Occasional guest speakers such as J. W. Geater, executive secretary of the Anderson Urban League, led discussions on promoting industrial jobs in local factories.<sup>25</sup>

The committee's efforts during the first months of 1941 resulted in the employment of black men for the first time at Wayne Tank, S. F. Bowser Company, Fruehauf Trailer, and General Electric. Such successes were taken seriously by the black community; a note in the community news section of the *Indianapolis Recorder* reported that the committee was "working diligently in securing jobs for men and women." Equally heartening was the *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel's* strong endorsement: "Until Americans generally drop their anti-Negroism all over, our pious words to other countries about the need for racial tolerance can only be construed as self deception. The Negro deserves a better place in our armed forces. He also deserves a better place in our country's economic life." Praising the work of the Negro Defense Council, the editor called

---

National Negro Congress: A Reassessment," 894-96. A "best guess" is that local NNC leaders worked to get black workers accepted in CIO unions.

Born in Humbolt, Tennessee, James Nash (1911-1991) moved to Fort Wayne as a child. He graduated from Central High School and attended Purdue University, Fort Wayne Extension. About 1950 Nash moved with his family to Chicago where he worked for International Harvester. [James Nash] Memorial Service Program, November 6, 1991.

<sup>25</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, April 26, June 21, 1941.

for “the generous and cheerful co-operation of the entire community.” Further accounts of the success of Fort Wayne’s Defense Committee are nevertheless mixed, incomplete, and generally hidden from public eye.<sup>26</sup>

During the first three years of war, approximately 30,000 new manufacturing jobs in Fort Wayne and Allen County were created, expanding the workforce from 26,000 workers in April 1940 to 56,000 in June 1943. To meet emergency demands, many local companies hired black men, as well as women of both races, for the first time. Thousands of additional workers migrated to Fort Wayne in pursuit of work. Between 1940 and 1944, the city’s black population more than doubled, reaching its wartime peak of about 6000, although population increases did not necessarily correlate with employment. Critical labor shortages arose in the last months of 1943, extending throughout 1944 and into 1945, and placing unprecedented pressure on the federal employment service. In October 1943 alone, 3,888 war jobs were posted at the city’s federally directed employment center. Unemployed women were targeted by a house-to-house canvas conducted by women already employed in local factories.<sup>27</sup>

Among the 30,000 new jobs created were a small but significant number of positions newly available to black workers. The Defense Committee, working with the Wheatley Center staff, placed 871 African Americans in jobs previously closed to them. What remains hidden in reports of defense industry growth, however, are the patterns of discrimination that continued to block black workers not only from job training programs and job advancement but even from bottom-level employment. As reported in an Urban League study at the end of the decade, continuing discrimination was common: “It should be emphasized that even during the war many of the local industries would not employ Negro labor, defying even the insistence of the Fair Employment Practices Committee.”<sup>28</sup>

Occasional public protests by local African Americans leaders reveal their deep levels of frustration during the Defense Committee’s

---

<sup>26</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, June 21, August 23, 1941.

<sup>27</sup>Morgan, “Latecomers to the Industrial City,” 34; Hugh M. Ayer, “Hoosier Labor in the Second World War,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, 59 (June 1963), 100; *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, October 14, 29, 1943.

<sup>28</sup>John E. Ridley, “The Executive Says: 1943-1944 Report,” FWUL Archives; *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, April 23, 1944; Kerns, “A Study of Social and Economic Conditions,” 22.

first year. In a December 1941 letter published in the *News-Sentinel*, Perry Strum, a graduate of Central High School with some college work, described his experience of job hunting: “. . . I am told when I apply for a job that I can only be a janitor or a shoe shine boy for a salary too meager to live on. The majority of the time I am told, ‘We don’t need any help,’ but the white man in back of me who has never finished the eighth grade and cannot speak English is welcomed with open arms.” Two months later, James Nash, president of the Fort Wayne council of the NNC, called for Americans to unite in condemning a recent lynching in Missouri as an act of Hitlerism. Nash was equally emphatic in challenging Fort Wayne to end job discrimination: “We must also show by our example of filling jobs in defense industries and giving full support to the civilian defense program what unity means to democracy and the negro and white people in America.” In March 1943, Rev. William Guy, one of the first committee appointees, reported that blatant unfair employment practices in Fort Wayne continued. Despite President Roosevelt’s executive order, not a single black employee worked in industries that had recently received the government’s prestigious E Award for excellence in production. African Americans who were employed were too often limited to custodial work. Such discrimination, Guy stated, was “hindering the war effort in that it [was] subversive of civilian morale.” Not surprisingly, his comments were published in the *Indianapolis Recorder* but omitted from both of Fort Wayne’s daily newspapers. Such candid remarks were the exception in an otherwise general pattern of invisibility. Following early notices, few public reports on the work of the Fort Wayne Defense Committee and on employment of African Americans appeared, even in the *Recorder*.<sup>29</sup>

Unthank’s illness and subsequent resignation from the Wheatley Center in the spring of 1942 appear to have seriously impacted the Defense Committee’s work. In his absence, community representatives earlier assigned to the committee no longer seemed to be playing a role. Responsibilities now fell on Unthank’s successor, John E. Ridley, and on other center staff members to work with potential employers and to

---

<sup>29</sup>*Fort Wayne News-Sentinel*, December 27, 1941; *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, February 16, 1942. In 1943 James Nash worked at the Wayne Pump Company as a sand blaster. *Polk City Directory* (1943). On the NNC and its alleged relationship to the American Communist Party, see C. L. R. James, George Breitman, et al., *Fighting Racism in World War II* (New York, 1980), 20; *Indianapolis Recorder*, March 13, 1943.



provide job counseling to new workers. From its inception, however, the committee lacked crucial representation: missing were local labor, business, civic, and political leaders who could help change the resistance endemic in the city's industrial culture.<sup>30</sup>

Public champions for fair employment practices were more often religious, civil rights, and labor leaders brought to Fort Wayne as guest speakers for special forums. In February 1942, when support for new policies of fair employment was most critical, the Fort Wayne Interracial Forum's annual meeting featured Dr. James G. Heller of Cincinnati, president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Following the meeting, the Wheatley Center sponsored a patriotic rally with "prominent negro leader" Col. Roscoe Simmons of Chicago. In October 1943, Fort Wayne hosted the three-day annual convention of the Indiana CIO, featuring Dr. Adam Clayton Powell of New York City and Detroit's R. J. Thomas, president of the United Automobile Workers of America. "Let us have the unity in our labor union that Lincoln advocated for this nation," Powell urged the nearly 600 delegates in attendance. Thomas's plea for racial justice was equally impassioned: "Victory won't be complete until race discrimination is quelled." The convention's resolutions included an uncompromising objection to all forms of racial discrimination.<sup>31</sup>

Union leaders' public support for ending racial discrimination nevertheless contrasted with widespread yet rarely identified practices of segregation. Nowhere was this more evident than in training programs for defense workers. Frequent reports in local newspapers for 1942 and 1943 describe government programs at Central High School, at the National Youth Administration Center at 1700 North Calhoun Street, and at the Purdue University war training center. By September 1943 companies were so desperate for welders that they offered immediate on-the-job training. Still, black applicants were not encouraged because of the expectation that employers would not risk hiring them. The local United States Employment Service came close to admitting this by

---

<sup>30</sup>*Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, April 28, 1942. The contrast between the Fort Wayne Defense Committee and Metropolitan Detroit Council on Fair Employment Practices formed in January 1942 is particularly sharp. Andrew E. Kersten, "Jobs and Justice: Detroit, Fair Employment, and Federal Activism during the Second World War," *Michigan Historical Review*, 25 (Spring 1999), 83-84.

<sup>31</sup>*Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, February 16, 1942, October 17, 1943.

revealing that “employer specification as to physical qualifications” determined assignment of workers. The War Production Training Center at Central High School advertised “equal opportunity to all . . . without cost” but did not explicitly include African Americans in its notices. In contrast, the National Youth Administration training centers in Indianapolis and South Bend became known for training young African Americans from across Indiana for defense industries.<sup>32</sup>

Such discrimination conforms to studies that have found that most government-financed training programs for war workers were segregated. Instructors excluded African Americans using the rationale that white workers would go on strike before working with blacks. Wheatley Center records indicate that segregated training programs were expected: John E. Ridley’s 1943-1944 report, for example, stressed that the center encouraged the black worker “to train himself.” Similarly, longtime civil rights leader and retired FWUL staffer Jacqueline Patterson recalls that, public policy to the contrary, most young black workers had to leave Fort Wayne for job training.<sup>33</sup>

On at least one occasion black citizens in Fort Wayne demanded that fair employment practices be enforced. At the local Studebaker Corporation that manufactured B-17 aircraft engines, management and union leaders alike kept well hidden their practice of hiring African Americans only as janitors and common laborers. Once this violation of official United Auto Workers Union policy came to light in June 1944, Fort Wayne blacks filed “a chorus of complaints” with state officials. As a result, management agreed to change its practices. Unlike labor conflicts in other midwestern cities such as Detroit, Indianapolis, and Toledo, however, publicity surrounding this conflict was omitted from local newspapers.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>*Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, January 7, April 8, July 15, 22, September 13, November 7, December 15, 1942; January 3, 9, 14, 17, March 19, 21, April 12, 13, May 31, September 3, 1943; *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 30, March 26, 1943.

<sup>33</sup>Fred Stanton, “Introduction” in James et al., *Fighting Racism*, 17; Richard W. Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington, Ind., 1992), 153; John E. Ridley, “Annual Report of the Wheatley Social Center 1943-1944,” FWUL Archives; interview with Jacqueline Patterson, January 25, 2007.

<sup>34</sup>Morgan, “Latecomers to the Industrial City,” 36; Max Pavin Cavnes, *The Hoosier Community at War* (Bloomington, Ind., 1961), 120, 128; Kersten, “Jobs and Justice,” 82, 91; *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, April 23, 1944.

Various theories suggest why African Americans in Fort Wayne so often failed to protest employment discrimination. One theory is that demand for workers allowed blacks to change jobs if they objected to a company's work environment. Another explanation is that Fort Wayne never experienced hate strikes such as those at the Allison plant in Indianapolis in May 1943 or race riots such as those that took place in Detroit later that summer that would have drawn the attention of the overworked and understaffed state and federal officials charged with investigating discrimination. Fort Wayne's small black population might also have made the city's black residents less likely to file complaints.<sup>35</sup>

Other explanations are more subtle. A 1943 survey by the Fort Wayne Interracial Commission concluded that "Fort Wayne had a far more tolerant attitude on race questions than most northern communities." Among its other findings, the study showed general support for fair employment practices: only 19 percent of Fort Wayne residents favored employment discrimination. The following year, National Urban League investigator Julius A. Thomas also drew favorable conclusions: Fort Wayne had "above the average" industrial relations during peak wartime production in 1944. Such positive findings masked the city's deeply entrenched traditions of job segregation and discrimination; so, too, did the city's tradition of addressing racial problems behind closed doors—public protests were not part of the city's culture.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, Fort Wayne African Americans simply lacked the essential support, more common in larger cities, of local community organizations and labor activists. Had the city been home to a local NAACP branch, for example, NAACP executive secretary Walter White would have urged the chapter members to demonstrate against industries that practiced job discrimination. In contrast to Fort Wayne, Indianapolis's African Americans were supported by an NAACP branch, a variety of civic clubs, and a strong local black newspaper. Community support resulted in massive rallies, such as those in 1941 and 1942, to monitor progress in defense industry spending.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup>See Cavnes, *Hoosier Community at War*, 120-37, for a description of African American employment in various Indiana cities during World War II. Kersten, "Jobs and Justice," 82-83, 91.

<sup>36</sup>*Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, November 14, 1943; *Indianapolis Recorder*, June 24, 1944.

<sup>37</sup>Kersten, *Race, Jobs and the War*, 27; *Indianapolis Recorder*, March 15, 1941, June 20, 1942.

Fort Wayne's black citizens, even lacking such local organizations, had a hand in bringing about a public relations bonanza in June 1944 that involved one of the nation's most famous black flying aces, Captain Charles B. Hall. A native of Brazil, Indiana, Hall was brought to the city for a massive war bond fund drive by his family connections—his mother Anna Hall and his sister Victoria Littlejohn lived in Fort Wayne—to be honored alongside hometown hero and fighter pilot Major Walker Mahurin. Hall's military medals included the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal with 12 oak leaves for over 100 missions during the past two years in Italy. Together with Mahurin, Hall appeared in a flurry of events promoting war bond sales. He was a special guest at a Civilian Defense meeting honoring area men and women serving in the armed forces and was interviewed on local radio station WOWO. With his wife and Rev. William Guy, Hall rode through the city streets as part of a massive parade of soldiers, the Indiana State Guard, veterans, Boy Scouts, police and fireman, the Fort Wayne Civilian Defense organization, and representatives of the city's industrial workforce. Following the parade, Hall was among those honored in front of the courthouse. Afterwards, Hall greeted local African Americans at Turner Chapel AME church at a meeting arranged by the local chapter of Women's Army for National Defense (WANDS), a service organization of African American women.<sup>38</sup>

During this great show of patriotism, the color line seemed to fade. In many of the city's industrial workplaces, however, race still limited opportunity. The Fort Wayne Industrial Union Council, composed of CIO unions, rarely upheld anti-discriminatory practices supported by the constitution of the national CIO. Local 57 of the UAW-CIO which represented production workers at the Fort Wayne International Harvester Company, for example, made little effort to educate union members in race relationships and non-discrimination. Similarly, bulletins issued by the national American Federation of Labor condemning racial and religious persecution were largely ignored by Fort Wayne affiliates. As shown by a Fort Wayne Urban League study following World War II, racial tension and conflict often lay just under the surface. Members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Local 116 at

---

<sup>38</sup>*Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, June 7, 8, 9, 1944; *Indianapolis Recorder*, June 24, 1944. Hall's mother, Anna, worked at the Wayne Pump Company as a toppler. *Polk City Directory* (1943).

Pollack Brothers Incorporated threatened management with a walkout strike when the first black employee was hired at the end of the war.<sup>39</sup>

Despite continued discrimination, however, in the tight wartime labor market, some local black workers found a higher standard of living than they had ever known. Moreover, prodded by government policies, several local factories enforced anti-discrimination practices, giving black workers new skills and union support. Greater democracy, at least for some, seemed in the making.

Wartime employment at Fort Wayne's General Electric Works serves as the clearest example of the weakening of the city's color and gender lines during periods of full production. The company's local payroll jumped from 6,200 employees in 1940 to peak production employment in the summer of 1943 of 20,000. The percentage of women workers grew from approximately 30, in late 1942, to 50 by the next summer. At the Taylor Street Plant, where supercharger engines for military aircraft were manufactured, women made up 58 percent of the 3000-member workforce at peak production in 1944. While there are no statistics showing the number of African Americans employed, evidence is clear that General Electric hired blacks in significant numbers.<sup>40</sup>

Despite GE's national corporate pledge to follow fair employment procedures, when production first increased in 1940, personnel managers were reluctant to hire blacks. The first black women were not hired until the summer of 1942, and then in begrudging compliance to the government's order. I. H. Freeman, human resources representative for General Electric, gave Wheatley Center a few days' notice to recruit twenty women for work at the Taylor Street Plant's lunch counter. Years later a Wheatley Center employee remembered that Freeman was surprised when applicants were found. "I knew deep in his heart he hoped we would fail because of his racial prejudice. . . . But we went to the churches and recruited the 20 women in time for work on Monday." Discrimination was evidenced as well in the total exclusion of black workers in notices and photographs of training programs in the

---

<sup>39</sup>Fort Wayne Urban League "A Survey of the Racial Policies of Organized Labor in Fort Wayne, Indiana," 1953, pp. 2, 8, 11, 22 (ACPL).

<sup>40</sup>*Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, October 9, 1942, June 4, 1943; Clovis E. Linkous, *General Electric At Fort Wayne, Indiana: A 110 Year History* (Baltimore, Md., 1994), 326.

*Fort Wayne General Electric Works* newsletter, confirming the general practice of placing black workers in low-skilled jobs. Nevertheless, as wartime emergencies increased and production stepped up, the company hired more black workers and trained them to perform essential work. According to a national Urban League investigator, in June 1944 at the Taylor Street Plant alone, “nearly 300 colored women were performing skilled operations on production and assembly lines and on machines” manufacturing turbocharger fans for B24 bomber engines.<sup>41</sup>

African Americans also appear to have been accepted by coworkers and supervisors. Local 901 of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (UERMW) went on record in support of fair employment and encouraged black employees to participate in union activities. Nevertheless, color lines in social clubs followed segregation patterns of the day. The most obvious example was the Elex Club, a General Electric Works institution for women in Fort Wayne that in 1942 had a membership of 2,700 female workers. Between 1943 and 1945, African American women met separately as the Carver Club at the Wheatley Center. Just like their white co-workers, Carver Club members supported soldiers, enjoyed holiday parties, and went on group excursions. The Carver Club also shared in common with white coworkers their club advisor, Irene Meyers, sponsor of GE women’s programs. Integration appears to have been initiated in 1946 with a policy announced in the August *Fort Wayne Works News*: “All Women Employees Invited to Join Elex Club.” Meyers, remembered fondly by African American employees, was instrumental in facilitating positive relationships among female workers. “She pushed to integrate. She was a wonderful person,” recalled a retired GE worker with forty years experience.<sup>42</sup>

Local unions representing United Steel Workers of America also supported anti-discrimination clauses in their contracts with management. Following national union policies, workers at Joslyn Manufacturing Company, members of Local 14 USW–CIO, prodded by

---

<sup>41</sup>(Fort Wayne) *Frost Illustrated*, March 25-31, 1987; *Indianapolis Recorder*, June 24, 1944; Karen Tucker Anderson, “Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers during World War II,” *Journal of American History*, 69 (June 1982), 88.

<sup>42</sup>Morgan, “Latecomers to the Industrial City,” 41; *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, December 5, 1942, March 24, 1945; *Fort Wayne Works News*, January 28, 1944, March 2, June 29, July 20, September 28, 1945; Aug. 23, 1946 (frequent meeting notices for the Carver Club appear in the *Works News* from December 1943 to September 1945); interview with Hana Stith and Jaqueline Patterson, May 2, 2006; telephone interview with Minnie Bryant, May 2, 2006.

management, began to accept black workers on an equal basis during the war. Local 1808, representing workers at Central Foundry Company, backed management's policies of employing or upgrading Negro workers "to their highest skill."<sup>43</sup>

The *Indianapolis Recorder's* special World War II edition offers contrasting evaluations of wartime employment under Indiana's Plan for Bi-Racial Cooperation. J. Chester Allen's report, dated December 1943, praises the "voluntary cooperative effort of leaders of both racial groups" for putting blacks to work and claims that the program was a general success. Eight months after the program began, the unemployment rate for Indiana blacks, which in early 1941 had been as high as 54 percent, had dipped to less than 20 percent. Thousands of African American women found new positions in defense industries. "In short you can find a Negro doing any job for which he is qualified," Allen claimed. A Fort Wayne correspondent reached a more guarded conclusion. As the war wound down, 1800 blacks were regularly employed in local factories. For the first time African Americans belonged to trade unions; James Nash, a member of the UERMW, served on the Fort Wayne Labor Council. Aside from a few trained and skilled workers, however, blacks were still predominantly trapped in unskilled jobs.<sup>44</sup>

A fuller assessment of black employment at the end of the war shows that the city's black workers lacked the support of political leaders, labor activists, and civil rights organizations. Deep racial prejudices still blocked the vast majority of African Americans from all but the most menial jobs in the city's industries and other businesses. The small Wheatley Social Center staff, largely on its own, had nevertheless built new alliances with some industrial leaders. Hundreds of black workers, swept up in the unprecedented demand for defense workers, had temporarily been hired into skilled jobs with good paychecks; many of those in union positions had enjoyed the support of national unions and those corporations with non-discrimination policies. At the end of World War

---

<sup>43</sup>"A Survey of the Racial Policies of Organized Labor in Fort Wayne", 26-27.

<sup>44</sup>The July 7, 1943, *Indianapolis Recorder* reports that black women held jobs at the General Electric Company, Bowser Corporation, Wayne Pump, and Inca Magnavox Corporation. By June 1944, black women worked alongside of white women as line inspectors at the Farnsworth Radio and Television Corporation. Cavnes, *Hoosier Community at War*, 128; Morgan, "Latecomers to the Industrial City," 36. Marjorie Wickliffe worked in the personnel department of Magnavox Corporation. "Interview with Marjorie Wickliffe, October 10, 1981," Allen County History Center Archives (Fort Wayne, Indiana).

II, however, whites were rehired and blacks were demoted, unions and corporations ignored their new policies, and racial prejudice was the order of the day.

The struggle for fair employment practices was far from over, however. Federal and state efforts during World War II had established precedents that civil rights leaders continued to support. In 1945 the Indiana General Assembly passed a FEPC bill, a bitter disappointment because it lacked enforcement powers, but nevertheless a step forward. It sent the message that job discrimination could be eliminated.

At the end of the war, civic leaders in Fort Wayne were awakened to the need to push harder for fair employment practices in local industries. In December 1945, the Fort Wayne Interracial Commission brought national advocates of fair employment legislation to the city with the hope of mobilizing "public spirited citizens" to improve "the racial minorities problem." "There is plenty of good will in America," remarked A. A. Liveright, the executive director of the American Council on Race Relations, "but a lack of action introducing democracy into race relations." Mrs. Anna Arnold Hedgeman, secretary of the National Council for a Permanent FEPC, expressed outrage that Congressional committees were stalling a House vote on the FEPC bill. Hedgeman pointed out that seven Indiana congressmen, including fourth district Republican George Gillie, had not signed the petition to bring the bill to the floor of the House of Representatives. Other speakers included Charles Patterson, a recently discharged veteran who stressed the difficulties black citizens faced in seeking employment, and Jacob Rish, executive secretary of the Fort Wayne Jewish Federation. Confirming Patterson's remarks, Rish reported on data collected to show the increase of local anti-black discrimination since the Japanese surrender. Resolutions passed at the meeting urged support for the Permanent FEPC Bill and for establishing a local FEPC committee in Fort Wayne. A coalition of community activists concerned with racial discrimination now included conference co-coordinator Rev. Aron Gilmartin, pastor of the Unitarian Society, and Jacob Rish of the Jewish Federation. So much talent and energy focused on the plight of black workers convinced even nonbelievers that a better day was coming.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, December 8, 1945. By the mid-1940s, there were at least 100 interracial commissions across the United States. Harvard Sitkoff, "Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War," *Journal of American History*, 58 (December 1971), 678.



## POSTWAR YEARS: 1946-1963

In a study of race relations in Detroit from 1940 to 1964, historian Thomas J. Sugrue argues that the “liberal consensus” of the New Deal was eroded by “a newly assertive working-class whiteness.” While Sugrue pays particular attention to the bitter racial battles over housing in Detroit, his analysis of whites’ attitudes is relevant to Fort Wayne’s struggle over employment discrimination in the years following World War II. As FWUL leaders were to learn painfully, white working-class union members proved to be the most formidable obstacles to changes in the workplace. Other obstacles, less well-known, came from white community leaders connected with the FWUL and from internal struggles within labor and black leadership.<sup>46</sup>

More than any other institution in the city, the Wheatley Center remained at the center of efforts to confront the intractable problems of race. In 1949 the center, under the leadership of executive secretary Robert E. Wilkerson, directed a researcher for the National Urban League to undertake an in-depth study of its programs and of Fort Wayne’s black community. Chief among J. Harvey Kerns’s recommendations was that the center abandon its focus on recreation and community organizations in order to strengthen its emphasis on improving the economic status of local black citizens. Under its new name, the Fort Wayne Urban League (FWUL), the center adopted the mission of the National Urban League to serve as “a social planning agency primarily concerned with the general social welfare of the Negro population and with race relations.” Stressing that the well-being of black citizens and the larger community depended on economic prosperity, the FWUL recruited board members from the city’s business leaders. Furthermore, in its renewed efforts to extend job opportunities, the FWUL attempted to follow Kerns’s recommendations to build more positive relations with employers and rank-and-file union members.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup>Thomas J. Sugrue, “Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940-1964,” *Journal of American History*, 82 (September 1995), 552. For a discussion of racism practiced by unions in the 1950s, see also Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1982* (Jackson, Miss., 1984), 54-57.

<sup>47</sup>Kerns, “A Study of Social and Economic Conditions,” 76. Robert Wilkerson (1933-1996), a graduate of Fisk University and the University of Minnesota, moved to Fort Wayne from Anderson, Indiana, in 1946 to serve as executive secretary of the FWUL. He resigned in 1967. *Indianapolis Recorder*, August 17, 1946; *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, July 20, 1996.

The reorganization of the FWUL came in direct response to the racism experienced by Fort Wayne's African Americans. For most black citizens, uncertainty, discrimination, and financial hardships again became a way of life. In 1947, black women made up the majority of the city's 4,000 unskilled unemployed workers as reported by the United States Employment Services. In a job market seeking highly skilled workers and tightened by economic recession, African American women were once again sidelined. In 1949, 22 percent of Fort Wayne's African American workforce was unemployed, twice the unemployment rate for both the city's total local workforce and for black workers in Indianapolis. Equally significant, Fort Wayne's unemployment rates for black workers were over twice as high as national averages. With few exceptions, blacks were still largely barred from any but low level jobs. Out of necessity, black women once again reverted to domestic service.<sup>48</sup>

FWUL leaders were frustrated by the deep resistance they met in local industries, but public expressions of discontent produced conflict with their white power base. In the summer of 1949, for example, Wilkerson candidly described employment barriers in the FWUL's newsletter *Broadcast*. Mincing no words, he stated that black men and women, even in periods of full employment, were never hired for better-paying jobs: "Discrimination on account of color, as we know, is the main reason for this satanic condition." In a letter to Wilkerson dated August 30, 1949, white realtor E. H. Kilbourne, president of the board of directors of the FWUL, expressed his "strong objections" to the article, making it clear that Wilkerson's candor had gone too far. A booklet published by the National Urban League the following year, *Decent and Fair*, emphasized a more positive public face: Fourteen local factories worked with the Urban League chapter to help blacks find jobs, and Fort Wayne was to be congratulated for providing exceptional opportunities for African Americans.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, December 8, 1945, November 29, 1947; *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, July 19, 1949; Morgan, "Latecomers to the Industrial City," 38; *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel*, June 8, 1999. According to Karen Anderson, in 1950 the largest percentage of employed black women [40 percent] worked as domestic servants. Anderson, "Last Hired, Last Fired," 96; Richard B. Pierce, *Polite Protest: The Political Economy of Race in Indianapolis* (Bloomington, Ind., 2005), 87; Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, 58.

<sup>49</sup>E. H. Kilbourne, President Board of Directors, to Robert Wilkerson, Executive Secretary, August 30, 1949, FWUL Archives; "Decent and Fair," (Fort Wayne, Ind., 1950), FWUL Archives.

The FWUL persisted nonetheless. Its 1952-1953 survey of 70 local unions verified Wilkerson's earlier remarks. The Fort Wayne Federation of Labor, made up of 39 AFL unions, had no policy regarding minority workers in its organizational manuals; 33 of the 39 affiliated unions had no black members. Six of the 15 CIO unions affiliated with the Fort Wayne Industrial Union Council made little if any effort to enforce the council's public non-discrimination pledge. Even in unions with black members, such as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (AFL), black members were penalized because of race. Unlike white members, they had to own their own vehicles or be guaranteed a job as condition of membership. Among AFL unions that represented some of Fort Wayne's largest employers, including Dana and Essex Wire, black workers represented less than one-half of one percent of the workforce. At General Electric and International Harvester, companies known to hire significant numbers of black workers, race was still a limiting factor. Local 901 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers boasted a total membership of 11,000 but only 350 members were black. While the "general relationship" between black and white workers was found to be "good," the union also was aware of the need to initiate "a more vigorous program" in educating workers against discrimination. At International Harvester, 300 black workers—out of a total of 3,500 production workers—belonged to Local 57 UAW. Despite anti-discrimination policies, racial tensions had prompted "several grievance cases" on behalf of black workers. Moreover, black workers expressed little confidence in the union's regard for fair treatment.<sup>50</sup>

The survey's other findings were equally disturbing. Racial prejudices among AFL union members in Fort Wayne were stronger than those among members of the same unions elsewhere in the country. Moreover, "[s]ave in only a few instances, most officials interviewed did not feel that discrimination is both undemocratic and wrong," researchers were told. Among CIO unions, whose members were generally more supportive of non-discrimination practices, "a gradual change in attitude" had occurred since World War II. For all but a few local unions, educational programs to encourage positive race relations were sorely needed.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup>"A Survey of the Racial Policies of Organized Labor in Fort Wayne."

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

As Iwan Morgan demonstrated in his study of black industrial workers in Fort Wayne, local industries lost jobs in the changing post-World War II economy. Shrinking job markets intensified job competition and increased racial prejudice. Labor unions also retreated from their support for desegregation because of decided changes within Indiana CIO leadership and the broad backlash caused by the fear of Communist influence.<sup>52</sup>

In the summer of 1947, the Fort Wayne CIO Council and the Indiana State CIO, working with "several interracial groups," sponsored an anti-discrimination rally at Central High School. The principal speaker was George L.P. Weaver, national director of the CIO Anti-Discrimination Committee. Affirming the position taken by the union during World War II, Weaver stressed that the United States needed to "live up to her moral code and prove to the rest of the world that democracy can work." Similar meetings took place in Gary and Muncie.<sup>53</sup>

Two months later, however, whatever statewide support for fair employment practices had existed within the CIO suddenly disappeared. The president and secretary of the state CIO, James McEwan of South Bend and Walter Frisbie of Indianapolis, were voted out of office. According to the *Indianapolis Recorder*, the removal of Frisbie, known for his advocacy for black workers during the past six years, "stunned many observers." James Nash of Fort Wayne, by a surprising turn of events, was elected to the state executive board. By the spring of 1948, however, Nash and two other black executive board members were purged from union membership. The reason given for their expulsion was their support for Henry Wallace, the controversial third-party candidate for President who supported the outlawing of racial discrimination and refused to denounce Communists.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup>Morgan, "Latecomers to the Industrial City," 37.

<sup>53</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, June 21, 1947.

<sup>54</sup>Expulsion of Wallace-leaning union members in Indiana anticipated the 1949 purge of progressive CIO unions, including the 50,000 member United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers Union that both Nash and Frisbie belonged to. Nash was elected to the Fort Wayne Labor Council at the end of World War II and was known for his earlier leadership in the local chapter of the NNC. In 1946, Walter Frisbie was a national vice president of the NNC; with Indianapolis UAW leader Edna Johnson, he organized an Indianapolis NNC chapter. *Indianapolis Recorder*, September 28, 1946, August 30, 1947, March 27, July 10, 1948; Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, 19-20.

As union support for job desegregation faded in the first years after World War II, a newly organized local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) joined efforts to move the city forward in the struggle over racial discrimination. In January 1946, a cross-section of 70 community activists, black and white, signed a charter with much public support. One of their first initiatives was to co-sponsor an ambitious three-day conference in late November 1946 to address the hard issues of employment, housing, and education. For what was no doubt the first time in the city's history, a broad cross-section of local organizations and civic leaders worked together to bring issues of race before the public. Popular long-term Mayor Harry Baals addressed the 300-plus in attendance. A panel discussion led by Jacob L. Risk, director of the Fort Wayne Jewish Federation, drew particular attention to the problems of employment. Conference highlights and future plans were broadcast on local radio station WOWO. Such open and frank discussions and broad support buoyed hope and gave the appearance of change.<sup>55</sup>

During the next few years, leaders of the local NAACP played a key role in reenergizing and redirecting programs of the Indiana State Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In January 1947, they hosted a three-day conference at Union Baptist Church for delegates from the state's eighteen branches. Priorities for future actions included enforcing Indiana's 1885 civil rights law; dropping racial barriers for federally funded housing; immediately eliminating segregation in Indiana schools; and strengthening Indiana's weak FEPC law. Conferees elected Rev. Aron Gilmartin as vice president, Indianapolis attorney Willard B. Ransom as president, and James Nash, chairman of the resolutions committee, to the board of directors. The following year Nash was appointed the state chapter's committee chairman for labor and industry.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup>Working with the NAACP were the Fort Wayne Interracial Commission, the YMCA, the Wheatley Social Center, the Unitarian Society of Fort Wayne, Teachers' Council No. 700, the AFL, the Union Baptist Church, the Allen County Association of Social Workers, the Turner Chapel AME, the Jewish Federation, the Northeast Indiana Chapter of the American Association of Social Workers, the Fort Wayne Federation of Labor and the Mothers of World War II, Unit No. 144. Earlier NAACP chapters had existed in the 1920s and 1930s but ceased meeting during the Depression and World War II years. *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel*, November 22, 23, 25, 1946.

<sup>56</sup>*Indianapolis Recorder*, November 8, 1947; December 11, 1948.



Delegates to the 1947 state NAACP convention in Fort Wayne  
After the war, Fort Wayne's chapter pushed for fair employment practices.

Courtesy Indiana State Museum

Along with Robert Wilkerson of the FWUL, Fort Wayne NAACP leaders lobbied the General Assembly as part of an all-out effort to add enforcement powers to Indiana's weak 1945 FEPC law. Fort Wayne's NAACP chapter also sent delegates to the January 1950 march on Washington to demand passage of federal civil rights laws, first and foremost being stronger FEPC legislation. Despite new organizational strengths on both fronts, however, results were bitterly disappointing. Furthermore, efforts to achieve stronger FEPC legislation were diluted by the broader civil rights agenda. Attention turned to the fight in the Indiana General Assembly, led by state NAACP president Ransom, to desegregate public schools. In another setback, the NAACP's Walter White led a sweep against left-leaning supporters of Henry Wallace and pushed them out of office. Nash once again became the victim of power politics.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., February 28, December 3, 18, 1948, March 19, 1949. Andrew W. Ramsey, *Recorder* columnist, describes the "name calling" and "economic reprisals and social ostracism" that Willard Ransom faced as a Wallace supporter. Ibid., November 2, 1963.

By the early 1950s both Gilmartin and Nash had moved away from Fort Wayne, and with leadership changes, local NAACP program priorities changed as well. While state leaders continued to work for stronger FEPC legislation, in Fort Wayne a small group of activists, working outside of media spotlights in a cautious and gradual way, sought to eliminate segregation in public accommodations. Dr. Clyde Adams, the new pastor of Union Baptist Church, led efforts to desegregate restaurants while embarking on a weekly evening radio broadcast to spread a positive picture of African Americans through music and worship.<sup>58</sup>

Despite continued resistance from white industrial workers in skilled trades, as the 1950s wore on, black men and women in Fort Wayne had some reasons for optimism. More than fifty employment “firsts” throughout the decade gave them a footing in new white-collar and professional positions. The first black registered nurse was hired by Methodist Hospital (the forerunner of Parkview Hospital). In the early 1950s, Fort Wayne Community Schools hired its first three black teachers. Bell Telephone Company hired two black customer service operators. In the mid-1950s, Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Northern Indiana Public Service Company, and Fort Wayne Transit Company offered blacks employment for the first time. Due to pressure from the local Unitarian Universalist congregation, Wolf & Dessaur Department Store hired their first black sales clerk. Sears and Roebuck hired its first local black saleslady in 1959. That same year marked the first time that black maintenance workers were hired by Fort Wayne Community Schools.<sup>59</sup>

In the Urban League’s Annual Report for 1959, Robert Wilkerson expressed confidence that cautious progress over the past ten years had contributed to “progressive social change in this city.” “While this degree of accomplishment has been slow, time consuming, and costly,” he wrote, “it is unequaled in any other city in the state. We are not likely to lose these gains.” Only two years later, however, unemployment once again plagued the African American community in Depression-era

---

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., November 12, 1955. In November 1950, Gary became the first and only Indiana city to pass a local FEPC law. Indianapolis civil rights leaders had failed to win support of the city council for a FEPC ordinance during the summer and fall of 1946. Ibid., July 6, October 12, 26, November 2, 1946, November 25, 1950.

<sup>59</sup>“Fort Wayne Urban League 39th Annual Report” 1959, FWUL Archives; interview with Larry Burke, June 12, 2008.

percentages. Two thousand African Americans in Fort Wayne were unemployed, one-third of the total number of unemployed workers. Quoted in the *Recorder*, Wilkerson charged that “[s]ome forces in the community would prefer to emphasize the areas of job upgrading that have occurred rather than face up to the acute unemployment and under employment among Negroes.”<sup>60</sup>

Wilkerson became freer to speak without fear of reprisals following a double victory in 1961 for civil rights legislation: the passage by the Indiana General Assembly of the Indiana Fair Employment Practices Act and the establishment of the Indiana Civil Rights Commission (ICRC). The ICRC’s original powers to investigate complaints of racial discrimination relating to employment and public accommodations were strengthened two years later by the Indiana Civil Rights Act of 1963. In addition to the authority to hold public hearings, the commission now had power to impose cease-and-desist orders upon companies found to practice racial discrimination. In February 1963, Wilkerson and Dr. Bernard Stuart, president of the Fort Wayne NAACP, aired grievances at an ICRC hearing held at the Hotel Van Orman. Wilkerson and Stuart criticized the Mayor’s Commission on Human Rights for inadequately reporting racial discrimination and the city as a whole for housing and employment restrictions. Asked if either the FWUL or the NAACP prosecuted known legal violations, Wilkerson repeated the frustration he had expressed more than ten years earlier in a FWUL newsletter: “You can imagine what would happen if we started prosecution against a company that was a heavy contributor to the United Fund. He would naturally call the United Fund and ask ‘What is this guy Wilkerson trying to do?’”<sup>61</sup>

In spring 1963, Wilkerson spoke out to local business and industry leaders with the same directness. Of the 30,000 workers employed in Fort Wayne’s fourteen largest industries, only 1,100 were black. Over three-fourths of black workers, moreover, were employed by two companies. Labor unions continued to block blacks from apprenticeship programs. Unemployment for blacks was at 12.4 percent, while the rate for the city was only 3.9 percent. Average yearly income for blacks was \$2,400 less than that for whites. “There must be a turning point,”

---

<sup>60</sup>“Fort Wayne Urban League 39th Annual Report”; *Indianapolis Recorder*, March 4, 1961.

<sup>61</sup>Thornbrough, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century*, 336; *Broadcast*, February 28, 1963, FWUL Archives.





Bob Wilkerson, c. 1960

Wilkerson, during his years as leader of the Fort Wayne Urban League, was an outspoken opponent of paternalistic discrimination.

Courtesy African / African American Historical Society, Fort Wayne

Wilkerson told the businessmen. “We are in the midst of another emancipation, such as that proclaimed 100 years ago. The Negro is determined to get all his rights now. He wants first-class citizenship. He cannot be patient any longer.” In reference to the expanding civil rights movement in the South, Wilkerson warned, “Don’t say Birmingham can’t happen here.”<sup>62</sup>

In June, the growing urgency and impatience of the national civil rights movement were made clear on a local level when Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to an overflow crowd of more than 3,000 packed into the downtown Scottish Rite Auditorium. “Now is the time to get rid of segregation, now is the time to make the American dream a reality,” King told his cheering audience. “We have learned to stand up against evil and still not hate. We have discovered love works miracles.”

<sup>62</sup>Broadcast, February 28, 1963; *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, May 2, 1963.

On August 27, nineteen local residents, including Dr. Bernard Stuart, boarded a bus at Pilgrim Baptist Church for the ten-hour ride to Washington, D.C. Together with 200,000 black and white citizens from across the country, they converged at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in the largest civil rights protest in the nation's history to hear Dr. King's challenge.<sup>63</sup>

In the months following the March on Washington, the unemployment, poverty, and discrimination experienced by African Americans in Fort Wayne were confirmed in another FWUL study. Blacks were a "social drag on the community" because of their lack of economic power and their complacency. Roughly 12 percent of the black working force was employed in white-collar positions, compared with over 50 percent of white workers. The instability of the black industrial working class was a major, yet largely unrecognized, deterrent to community progress, the study's authors stressed: "Negroes will be able to contribute proportionately to the total welfare of the community only when they are in a position of reasonable social and economic equality." To Wilkerson and black leaders nationwide, urban black ghettos were powder kegs ready to go off.<sup>64</sup>

In *Polite Protest: The Political Economy of Race in Indianapolis, 1920-1970*, historian Richard P. Pierce describes efforts to break employment barriers as "a one-note song . . . played to a familiar tune": "African Americans pressed for change and increased opportunity, and white business, labor, and political leaders forestalled their advancement through legal and extra legal means." Such was also the case in Fort Wayne. From the early years of the New Deal, black leaders of the Wheatley Center/Urban League had pressed for new employment opportunities with only limited success. They had few allies in the public arena of white political, business, and labor leaders. Black citizens also faced restraints brought on by their own internal political conflicts and societal priorities. The local NAACP branch, late to organize, was hurt by the Communist scare that purged social activists and by the failure of leaders to move from educational forums to direct protests. By the

---

<sup>63</sup>Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette, June 16, 18, 20, 1964.

<sup>64</sup>Pierce, *Polite Protest*, 86.

mid-1950s the compelling national civil rights agenda also drew attention away from their community's needs.<sup>65</sup>

African Americans in Fort Wayne experienced unemployment rates among the highest in the nation during the Depression and following World War II. In the latter period, economic recessions further eroded their job opportunities and provoked racial discrimination. While Indiana's overall economy continued to grow, Fort Wayne lost manufacturing jobs. Contrasts with Indianapolis's labor force are particularly striking. During the 1950s, Indianapolis's expanding economy and low unemployment rates allowed black workers to find new opportunities for skilled work. Fort Wayne's African Americans, in contrast, were not only under-employed; they were unemployed.<sup>66</sup>

More than anything else, black citizens in Fort Wayne were hindered by a complex pattern of liberal interracialism that hid their city's deep structural racism. The outstanding annual forums sponsored by the Fort Wayne Interracial Commission added to the city's reputation as being progressive in terms of race relations. Unlike other cities going through rapid changes during World War II, Fort Wayne was spared hate strikes and race riots. The city's progressive leaders, like many Americans, perceived the apparent racial peace as promoting racial justice. Black and white leaders alike failed to understand how deeply embedded racism was in their city's industrial culture. They followed patient, polite methods, believing a better day was coming. Repeatedly, their efforts were blocked by white workers and employers who held on to the status quo and by their own reluctance to alienate their economic base.

By 1963, black community leaders were again pushing back, and now the country was beginning to move with them. The decades of patience and accommodation, of polite protest with the expectations of voluntary compliance, were over. Black citizens had built an urban community, but their community was broken with unemployment and poverty. They faced challenges equal to, if not greater than, those of the Great Depression. Changes meant building economic security and

---

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 104; *Indianapolis Recorder*, August 18, 1951; James H. Madison, *Indiana Through Tradition and Change, 1920-1945* (Indianapolis, 1982), 380.

<sup>66</sup>Sitkoff, "Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence," 662.

community coalitions in a city that lacked traditions of fair employment, public protest, and minority leadership. Equally important, changes depended on turning despair and apathy within the black community into hope. More than ever, black citizens needed to believe in Martin Luther King's dream for America.

