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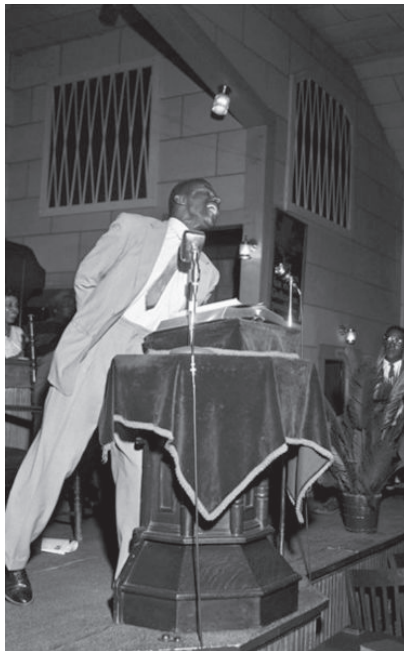
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## WORKING CLASS HEROES: THE CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE FOR BLACK ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY IN BIRMINGHAM

by Logan Barrett

Following the landmark civil rights events of the Birmingham Campaign and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom of 1963 but before the ratification of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Martin Luther King Jr. provided an illuminating description of the black freedom struggle when he wrote “Negroes are still at the bottom of the economic ladder. They live within two concentric circles of segregation. One imprisons them on the basis of color, while the other confines them within a separate culture of poverty.”<sup>1</sup> King’s writing highlights the goals of economic and job opportunity within black activism which often are left out of the triumphalist narrative of the Civil Rights Movement thus obscuring the ongoing nature of the struggle in favor of celebrating the accomplishments. Birmingham, a city in which the endeavor of economic justice still continues, remains one such heralded battleground for civil rights in which the partial nature of the victory becomes misunderstood.

Birmingham, with an abundance of raw materials ripe for mining and use in iron production, became the preeminent New South city during the twentieth century. Not coincidentally, the city also became a hotbed for civil rights activism during the 1950s and



*Fred Shuttlesworth preaching at Sardis Baptist Church on June 5, 1956.*

1960s, culminating with the Birmingham Campaign during the spring of 1963. Birmingham’s industrial and labor history coincides with its history as a pivotal location of the black freedom struggle. From Birmingham’s development as the industrial center of the south, exploitation of black labor and the use of racial tensions by the city’s industrial magnates as a means of thwarting attempts of the organization of labor produced both the violence enacted by those maintaining systemic white supremacy and the conditions necessary for radical black activism. Black activists sought not only desegregation and voting enfranchisement, but also fair employment opportunity. Geographer Bobby M. Wilson writes, “Certainly, race-connected practices in Birmingham’s coal and iron industries distinguished the city from other industrial cities in the United States. Not until the civil rights movement of the 1960s did blacks confront this legacy.”<sup>2</sup> The city’s history of labor struggles produced both the political awakening and impetus for change for the black workforce. Birmingham’s black working-class served as foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement and, in turn, helped define the goals of the movement.

From its inception in 1871, Birmingham developed the moniker the “Magic City,” which enthusiastically referenced its rapid rate of urbanization and industrialization into Alabama’s largest city. In the postbellum American South, Birmingham became the leading industrial city under the leadership of such magnates as John T. Milner, James W. Sloss, and Henry F. DeBardeleben. Often left out of the celebratory version of the story, however, is the city’s development as a competitor with northern cities such as Pittsburgh through the particularly brutal means of exploiting black labor within a white-supremacist caste system. Milner illuminates this deliberate process in writing “Negro labor can be made exceedingly

profitable in manufacturing iron and in rolling mills, provided there is an overseer: a Southern man who knows how to manage Negroes.”<sup>3</sup> Milner further argues for the subjugation of black laborers by writing “They were the lowest and most degraded of all races of man, but the most docile and easily controlled. [...]. The African has produced nothing but the results of his labor in a material way as a slave on the Continent of America under the guidance of the white man.”<sup>4</sup>

The convict leasing system proves one of the most notorious examples of the exploitation of black labor in Birmingham’s early industrial development. The convict leasing system, which operated in Alabama from Reconstruction until the end of the 1920s, became a vital replacement for slavery and provided the economic leadership of Birmingham with a shortcut toward industrial capitalism while also offering the comforts of Old South white supremacy. The industrialists of “the Pittsburgh of the South” lacked the capital necessary for mechanization, so they required a cheap source of labor.<sup>5</sup> The Magic City magnates readily embraced the convict leasing system, in which southern states and counties leased out convict laborers, overwhelmingly black, for grueling and often inhumane labor, as the answer. Placing convict leasing within this context restores the system into a central role rather than a tragic outlier in the industrial history of Birmingham.

Convict leasing became one lucrative advantage that southern industry, such as seen in Birmingham, maintained over northern industry. Whereas the established northern industry paid wages for not only free, but sometimes organized labor, the South enjoyed the benefits of a “completely artificial” labor force that only cost the leasing fee charged by the state or county.<sup>6</sup> The demand for labor became so blatantly racist and inhumane that companies put out calls for the rounding up of black men by sheriffs for their convict system. Lawmen, likewise beneficiaries of convict leasing, obliged these requests by arresting black men on charges such as “use of obscene language” and “selling cotton after sunset.”<sup>7</sup> The

abhorrent working conditions for convict laborers gained infamy across the country, and produced an outcry for change among some groups. One such group, the Statewide Campaign Committee for the Abolishment of the Convict Contract System, published a pamphlet in which they argued, “any arrangement by which private individuals can purchase for their profit the compulsory labor of other human beings is a modified form of slavery and is fundamentally wrong.”<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the human rights violation upon the convicts themselves, the leasing system also disadvantaged the free labor force. The use of convict labor made it difficult for the organization of southern laborers, as the availability of positions for free wage earners became significantly reduced. Prison labor greatly weakened the bargaining power of organized labor in the South. The black labor force proved the most impacted by the “competition” of convict leasing. Historian Martha Myers argues that during economic lows in Birmingham, “urban blacks suffered higher unemployment than whites because they were segregated in unskilled, unorganized, and unprotected jobs, precisely those most vulnerable to economic downturns and to social pressure for displacing blacks in favor of whites seeking work.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the limited job options caused by prison labor were then filled by the white workforce. This contributed toward Birmingham’s economic stratification maintained by white supremacy.

Even in the absence of the convict leasing system, black laborers found limited opportunity for upward mobility in Birmingham’s industry. The influx of black workers into the city escaping the collapsing prospects of rural agriculture competed for the most dangerous and demeaning of work considered beneath the status of white men.<sup>10</sup> Historian Robin D. G. Kelley writes that “the mine and mill owners hoped to mold an industrial proletariat in a city founded less than a generation after the abolition of chattel slavery and, peopled with two races afraid of each other.”<sup>11</sup> Birmingham’s political and industrial leadership manipulated these

conditions by provoking tensions between the city's working-class white and black populations. The strict enforcement of white supremacy in all social realms proved beneficial for the economic elite, as the cost of labor, for both white and black workers, remained low. In a system in which industry kept the white laborer low but the black laborer even lower, the potential for organization of a powerful biracial labor coalition remained limited.

Birmingham's government preserved this racist socioeconomic system in support of the region's economic leadership collective known as the "Big Mules." In fact, Eugene "Bull" Connor, who later became the political face of racial violence against the city's black population in his capacity as the city's Commissioner of Public Safety, began his career directing the steel police at Birmingham's Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company (TCI) where he prevented attempts at unionization.<sup>12</sup> Spending his political life as a staunch and violent segregationist, Bull Connor served as a lackey for the Big Mules. Historian Glenn Eskew writes that "as Connor understood, segregation reinforced the race wage in Birmingham."<sup>13</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, black workers in Birmingham found little representation within organized labor. Labor unions in the city either appeared non-existent, segregated, or stratified. In the early history of the Magic City, the majority of union activity appeared among mine workers, with notable strikes occurring in 1903 and 1908. Both strikes ultimately failed and union development remained modest in the city's industry for several decades.

Many of the labor organizations that did emerge within Birmingham strictly enforced segregation and did not allow black membership. Writing in 1948, Herbert R. Northrup observes that, "the Amalgamated [Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers] was quite hostile to the idea of organizing negroes."<sup>14</sup> Most union leaders only attempted the organization of skilled whites within industrial fields.<sup>15</sup>

Company officials informed white laborers that they were forfeiting their entitled position within the economic hierarchy if they united with black laborers in a promotion of "social equality."<sup>16</sup> An attorney for the Steel Workers Organizing Committee notes the lack of opportunity for black laborers working for U.S. Pipe being denied access into unions, writing "[they] would be certified journeymen were they not negroes, and that is the controlling factor –they are not skilled or affiliated, because they are negroes."<sup>17</sup> With black workers being rejected from joining white unions, some efforts were made toward establishing black workers unions. Lloyd Harper, an employee at Birmingham's American Cast Iron Pipe Company (ACIPCO), expressed a disillusioned view of attempts at organizing at the company in saying, "a black union at ACIPCO wouldn't have meant nothing. It was all just black. It wouldn't have been anything because they would have run you off."<sup>18</sup>

In the few unions that did encourage black and white membership, solidarity across race lines remained absent, as white members enjoyed preferential treatment within the entrenched system of institutional racism in the work place. When black workers helped whites fight for a union presence in Birmingham's industry, they found that their efforts only helped in promoting a continued system of job discrimination in which black members missed out on promotion opportunities because of prearranged negotiations.<sup>19</sup>

Three of Birmingham's black laborers implored Phillip Murray, the national president of the United Steelworkers of America, writing, "We know that we are here in the South, but can't something be done to help this black race to let us feel like we are free in our hall or on our daily occupation? We feel like the [local Steelworkers leadership] is not doing its part for the black man."<sup>20</sup> Although Murray personally strongly opposed racial discrimination, no one informed him at his office in Pittsburgh that Ku Klux Klan members led many of his unions in the South.<sup>21</sup> Jimmie Louis Warren, a machine operator at U.S. Pipe

in Birmingham, recounted that he found himself in a union that maintained white supremacy, saying he “filed complaints against the union because when I got involved in it, I went to the union hall and discovered that the union was segregated.”<sup>22</sup> He continued, “The president of the union was nothing but a Ku Klux, and he rode around with Ku Klux signs, and after I got there and went to a union meeting, I saw that they had separate rest rooms in the union hall. [...]. Here I’m paying union dues, and I’m not free at the union hall.”<sup>23</sup> Reuben Davis, fired from his job as a Louisville and Nashville Railroad tractor operator for union activity, said “ I became aware of some situations in which union contracts discriminated even within the ranks of the union. The idea of ‘department seniority’ meant that if I was hired as a laborer in a certain department, I couldn’t move out of that department to another. I think it was another way to keep black workers at a minimal level. The union itself devised that method.”<sup>24</sup>

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class, the Alabama Communist Party became an outlet that black laborers turned toward during the 1930s. The Communist Party’s headway into the South’s primary industrial city came through working-class black support, which materialized following the Party’s much-publicized legal defense of the Scottsboro Boys trial in 1932.<sup>25</sup> Kelley argues, “Alabama’s black cadre interpreted Communism through the lenses of their own cultural world.”<sup>26</sup>

The Communist Party then reignited a black radical tradition within the ranks of Birmingham’s labor force which allowed for aspirations toward significant upheaval of the city’s white-supremacist economic structure.<sup>27</sup> Kelley further contends that “The Communist Party was such a unique vehicle for black working-class opposition because it encouraged interracial unity without completely compromising racial politics.”<sup>28</sup>

The Communist Party influenced the organization of black labor in Birmingham at such companies as Stockham Valves and Fittings, where prominent Magic City communist Al Murphy recruited such employees as Hosea Hudson, who himself became noted within the Party.<sup>29</sup> The number of Marxist shop units within the city’s industrial center reached nine by 1934, and the Communist Party became the only organization that encouraged racial cooperation among the working class with the aims of forming a unified labor coalition.<sup>30</sup> Black activist Nims E. Gay said that “During the 1930s, Birmingham became sort of the southern regional headquarters for the Communist Party. [...The Communists] were obviously good organizers. Mr. Gus Hall, who ran for president on the Communist ticket, stayed at my uncle’s house so many times.” Gay continued, “My uncle worked for Vandiver Furnace, and he claimed not to be involved with the [Communist Party], but I believed he was.”<sup>31</sup>

Kelley writes that “The Communist movement in Alabama resonated with the cultures and traditions of black working people, yet at the same time it offered something fundamentally different. It proposed a new direction, a new kind of politics that required the self-activity of people usually dismissed as inarticulate.”<sup>32</sup> Birmingham’s industrial and political leadership identified the threat the radical left posed by encouraging black resistance toward the racist economic caste system. Harvey Lee Henley Jr., of ACIPCO, said that “anything that you did out there at the time was a bold move, because people were afraid.” Henley’s supervisor confronted him about his attendance at a black activist meeting, and

immediately called it a communist meeting. Henley recalled the conversation with his supervisor, saying, “I don’t know the difference between a communist and you. I associate with all kinds of people. Now, whether you think I’m being influenced by somebody, I can think you [are] being influenced by something.”<sup>33</sup>

Despite not successfully overhauling the political structure of Birmingham, the Communist Party did leave behind a legacy that influenced black activists in the subsequent years. While one cannot make the foolhardy claim that Fred Shuttlesworth, Martin Luther King, Jr., and future activists of the Birmingham Campaign maintained Communist allegiances, there remains a correlation between the economic aims of the radical left and the black activists. In the context of the Cold War era, resistance toward the economic structure often became hidden within innuendo at the fear of being called a communist and damaging the chances of public support for one’s cause. Davis said that, “I once heard Dr. Ballard, a Birmingham physician, say at a church service, ‘anytime a black man made any move towards progress, they would brand him as a communist.’ In my opinion, the American government was not fearful of communism –they were thinking that communism would advance the cause of black people.”<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Fred Shuttlesworth said, “We had to learn that to a segregationist, communism means integration. More than your Russian communists, I don’t think they were afraid about Russia coming over and taking over the country as much they were about blacks being equal with whites.”<sup>35</sup>

While bitter disappointments litter the labor history of Birmingham, one landmark 1944 Supreme Court decision stands out as a victory for black labor. In 1941, Bester William Steele, a Birmingham-based fireman for the L&N Railroad, filed a lawsuit against the discriminatory practices of both L&N and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Engineers (BLFE).<sup>36</sup> Steele, a member of the all-black union International Association of Railway Employees (IARE), argued that he and fellow black

railroad firemen toiled away in the dirtiest and most dangerous conditions while white employees gained promotion through a collective bargaining agreement reached between BLFE and L&N which secured white hegemony. The plaintiff contended that this agreement “has been hostile and disloyal to the Negro firemen, has deliberately discriminated against them, and has sought to deprive them of their seniority rights and to drive them out of employment in their craft, all in order to create a monopoly of employment for Brotherhood members.”<sup>37</sup>



*Sloss Furnaces, Birmingham, Alabama*

The Supreme Court’s decision in *Steele v. Louisville N.R. CO* found that during collective bargaining agreements, unions must “represent non-union or minority union members of the craft without hostile discrimination, fairly, impartially, and in good faith.”<sup>38</sup> Historian Robert Norrell writes that the decision’s “immediate significance in Birmingham was to show white managers and workers that some blacks would no longer accept job discrimination.”<sup>39</sup> Notably, the attorneys representing Steele and IARE were civil rights legal icons Charles H. Houston and Birmingham’s own Arthur Shores.<sup>40</sup> Historian Max Krochmal argues that the case “further illuminates the

close connections between the shop-floor battles of trade unionists and the mass movement that emerged in the streets of the Magic City in the late 1950s and early 1960s.”<sup>41</sup>

Although Birmingham’s black labor movement suffered many setbacks and false starts during the first half of the twentieth century, these provided the black working class with both a political awakening as well as a resolve against the city’s racial economic barriers. Colonel Stone Johnson, organizer of guards for the black rights movement in Birmingham and Shuttlesworth’s personal guard, said that “It was from my activism with the union [at L&N] that I really understood the way racism worked. Then, in the 1950s, when the movement started, I was basically primed for it, because I had already been doing this kind of work.”<sup>42</sup> Elias Hendrick Sr., an employee at Armour Packing and a member of the United Packinghouse Workers Union, argued that “the civil rights movement would not have been able to do a lot of the things that they were able to do had it not been for the labor movement.”<sup>43</sup>

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**“ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY BECAME AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF THE MOVEMENT THAT EXISTED AS A GOAL FROM THE BEGINNING, AND YET IT FELL BEHIND THE FIGHT AGAINST SEGREGATION AND DISENFRANCHISEMENT IN THE STRUGGLE FOR TOTAL UPHEAVAL OF BIRMINGHAM’S WHITE HEGEMONY.”**

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When the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) incorporated as a civil rights organization on August 7, 1956, it listed one of the objectives and purposes of the group as being “to

promote the economic, political, civic, and social development of all people.”<sup>44</sup> ACMHR’s president, the fiery Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth who came from a working-class background in Birmingham and whose uncle had been a local all-black union president, served as pastor of Bethel Baptist Church. James Roberson, a member of ACMHR, said that “the grassroots of the civil rights struggle was not at Sixteenth Street- it was at Bethel Baptist Church in Collegeville. And in reality, [... Sixteenth Street] was the church of bourgeoisie blacks. They were the educators and the doctors, and they had arrived.” Roberson further comments on Sixteenth Street Baptist, “In our finite thinking, they didn’t want any part [of the movement]. They were comfortable. Now, you had some that were there, but it was the poor people who wanted something better and didn’t have anything to lose.” He argued that Shuttlesworth would not have produced such a following if he had been the pastor of Sixteenth Street rather than Bethel Baptist.<sup>45</sup> Through this perspective, the civil rights movement within Birmingham reveals itself as a fundamentally working class and poor people’s movement.<sup>46</sup>

For many of Birmingham’s black laborers, involvement in civil rights protests developed from the pursuit of equality within the industrial system. Johnson, describing his beginning in the resistance for black equality, said “My involvement in the civil rights movement started early in the railroad shop. When I was hired, March 31, 1942, I saw such a big difference in the treatment of men. [...] Where the segregation came in was on the promotion. You could have a high school education and some college through correspondence courses, and a white man could be brought in right from the farm, [...] and they would hire him.”<sup>47</sup> Henley Jr., likewise, developed interest in black radical protest through his work experience, saying “I was really concerned about the labor aspect of the Movement. I had gone out to work out at ACIPCO. We head a real problem out there about discrimination. [...]. I encouraged the men to give contributions to the Alabama Christian Movement.”<sup>48</sup> Krochmal writes

that, “African American economic justice organizing clearly attracted people from throughout the black working class.”<sup>49</sup>

In turn, others felt a new sense of empowerment and political agency by participating in ACMHR and the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s, and they brought this with them in a rejuvenated fight for equal rights at the workplace. Jimmie Luis Warren, a member of ACMHR and an employee at U.S. Pipe, recalled, “A mass meeting was very inspirational to me. It was something to motivate you. It was the type of meeting that would educate you, tell you what rights you had and what the law stood for, you had that right.”<sup>50</sup>

Birmingham’s white population who desired a continuation of the status quo of the socioeconomic structure viewed the black struggle for equal rights as a threat upon their livelihood. Norrell writes that “white workers seemed to understand instinctively that their supremacy at the workplace depended partly on maintaining Jim Crow outside the plant gates.”<sup>51</sup> The black freedom struggle’s pursuit of desegregation, enfranchisement, and economic opportunity all challenged the privileged status of the city’s white citizens. The Big Mules exploited the fears of the white working class by promising them political power over the black working class, thus securing a class-transcending constituency that voted for white supremacist candidates. White laborers regarded black political and social power as a challenge toward their position in the social hierarchy and feared the potential of falling behind and losing this position they enjoyed.

The city’s industrial and political leadership intimidated black activists not just with police violence and arrest, but also the loss of their occupation. Warren said that “I got tied up in the Christian Movement, and the news broke that I was involved, and they knew about it, and they picked around until they fired me.” He further stated “They called me ‘agitator’ and they called me a Black Muslim. [...]”

You see, you were stamped when you got involved in certain things- they would mark you. And so they tried. They did everything. They put the Ku Klux sign on our job trying to discourage us, but they couldn’t.”<sup>52</sup> Companies promised termination of employment upon discovery of involvement with the black freedom struggle. James Summerville, an employee at ACIPCO, said that the company official sent out memos informing the black employees that if they were found participating in the movement, they would lose their job.<sup>53</sup> Henry Goodgame, a fellow employee of Summerville’s, recalled an even more forward tactic by the company, saying “On my job at ACIPCO, all the blacks had been called into the auditorium and told that if you’re ever caught in a demonstration or, if you were ever arrested because you were demonstrating, you’re automatically discharged.”<sup>54</sup>

While Birmingham’s black working class served as the foot soldiers of the movement, supplying the numbers necessary for successful marches and protests, they proved much more vital for the struggle than simply following the directions of the campaign’s leadership. When the Birmingham Campaign of 1963 occurred and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) joined Shuttlesworth’s ACMHR, the charismatic leadership of the city’s black freedom struggle relied on a preexisting and established working-class motivation which shaped the objectives and trajectory of the movement itself. Krochmal writes that “African American laborers brought the struggle for racial equality to work and the fight for economic justice to the larger community. Each arena of struggle reinforced and strengthened the other, and both profited from the exchange of people from work site to community and back again.”<sup>55</sup>

Economic opportunity became an important element of the movement that existed as a goal from the beginning, and yet it fell behind the fight against segregation and disenfranchisement in the struggle for total upheaval of Birmingham’s white hegemony. Davis bemoaned that the economic element of the



fight for black rights became overshadowed, saying “As I look back on the Movement, I think that, and I thought then that economic rights should have been the focus of the Movement, rather than blacks’ social equality.”<sup>56</sup> Historian Glenn T. Eskew, however, argues that the issue of employment opportunities became a crucial element of the entire goal of ACMHR. The city’s black population recognized the changes in Birmingham’s economy during the middle of the twentieth century. Unskilled positions within the city’s industry significantly diminished with modernization and mechanization, and the black workforce needed a breakthrough into the service sector for occupational advancement. The organizers of the Birmingham Campaign of 1963 sought an end of the glass ceiling that limited the black labor force’s employment opportunities within unskilled positions that secured Alabama’s white-supremacist economic structure. Eskew writes that “ACMHR members desired employment in the better-paying civil service jobs, positions reserved for ‘whites only.’ The new demand for service sector employment reflected the black community’s refusal to be left behind.” King comments on this factor as well, writing “the Negro’s economic problem was compounded by the emergence and growth of automation. Since discrimination and lack of education confined him to unskilled and semi-skilled labor, the Negro was and remains the first to suffer in these days of great technological development.”<sup>58</sup>

Inspired by the preceding successes of the Montgomery bus boycott and the Greensboro lunch counter sit ins, the Birmingham Campaign of 1963 utilized a multi-faceted disruption of Birmingham’s business sector with aims at targeting the entire white-supremacist caste system of the city.<sup>59</sup> When the joint-operations of ACMHR and SCLC started the Birmingham Campaign, they released a “Birmingham Manifesto,” which read, “Birmingham is part of the United States and we are bona fide citizens. Yet the history of Birmingham reveals that very little of the democratic process touches the life of the Negro

in Birmingham. We have been segregated racially, exploited economically, and dominated politically.”<sup>60</sup> King recognized the connection between black activism and the labor movement. In a speech before the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), King emphasized that their shared goals and common interests precipitated the reasoning of “why the labor-hater and labor-baiter is virtually always a two-headed creature spewing anti-negro epithets from one mouth and anti-labor propaganda from the other mouth.”<sup>61</sup> King and the leadership of SCLC surely recognized the potential of a resistance movement in the South’s major industrial city which contributed toward their acceptance of Shuttlesworth’s invitation for a campaign in Birmingham. ACMHR had laid the groundwork of grassroots organization, and the number of motivated and empowered black working-class activists proved exceptional.

The Birmingham Campaign, led by both King’s SCLC and Shuttlesworth’s ACMHR, did apply pressure on the city’s white business leaders and allowed for a partial victory, yet Shuttlesworth became dismayed at the moratorium on marches that King accepted in response of federal pressure.<sup>62</sup> Without securing economic opportunity for black labor, Shuttlesworth viewed the Birmingham Campaign as incomplete and a wasted chance for real progress. One of the four agreed-upon concessions promised by the city’s leadership called for the “immediate up-grading of employment opportunities available for Negroes, and the beginning of a non-discriminatory hiring policy.”<sup>63</sup> While seemingly a progressive step, Shuttlesworth rightfully feared that these terms remained too vague, and further protests applying more pressure on the city’s economic leadership carried the potential for more gains.

Although King celebrated the protests in Birmingham as a victory, he acknowledged that the activists had not yet completed the objectives of the campaign. In referencing the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing that infamously killed four

girls, King writes, “My preference would have been to resume demonstrations in the wake of the September bombings.”<sup>64</sup> While economic justice remained an important objective, the Birmingham Campaign ended without much resolution on that front. Anne Braden, a leader of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) and an activist ally of Shuttlesworth’s, argued that economic justice always remained a part of the struggle in Birmingham, but in her view fighting Jim Crow took precedence. She said, “my interpretation of that is ‘okay, we need to talk about jobs, labor organizing, farm problems and all that but they got to deal with segregation before they can deal with these.’”<sup>65</sup>

Negotiators included the release of all the jailed protesters on low bail among the concessions made by Birmingham’s white elite. In following a request made by President Kennedy’s administration, the United Auto Workers, the National Maritime Union, the United Steelworkers Union, and the AFL-CIO contributed the funds necessary for this bail cost.<sup>66</sup> Jerome “Buddy” Cooper, an Alabama native and an attorney for the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), said “I got a phone call at about eleven or twelve at night. It was the general counsel of the Steelworkers union, David Feller. Davy said, “Buddy, President Kennedy has had Bobby contact Walter Reuther (president of the United Autoworkers] and Dave McDonald [president of USWA] to put up the bond to get these kids out of jail in Birmingham.”<sup>67</sup>

In the years following the 1963 Campaign, ACMHR and other local activists continued the pursuit of economic opportunity for Birmingham’s black population. For example, ACMHR planned protests around Birmingham City Hall for August 17, 1965, demanding the hiring of black employees in Birmingham-area companies and the hiring of black police officers.<sup>68</sup> In a pamphlet published in 1966, ACMHR contended that “The integration that exists is still token, for the great masses of black people jobs are still non-existent or at the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. And the old and dilapidated houses

along the streets of Birmingham’s inner city stand as a reminder that this city has slum ghettos as depressed as any in the South or the nation.”<sup>69</sup> Illustrating that economic justice proved vital for the goals, ACMHR argued that “our society simply has not found the way to provide great numbers of its citizens with a chance for a decent life.”<sup>70</sup>

ACMHR announced that “the goals ahead will be both economic and political: an end to tokenism, decent jobs, and income for all. It was the civil rights movement of the nation that forced our society to look at hunger, deprivation, among American citizens.”<sup>71</sup> Birmingham’s black activism developed into explicit calls for jobs through the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s. In July 1967, ACMHR protested outside of Birmingham’s Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company over wage injustices against black union members. An FBI report illustrates that not every observer understood that activists pursued economic justice as a matter of the black freedom struggle, reading “Inasmuch as this picketing relates primarily to labor problems, rather than racial matters,” the picketing did not pose a serious threat for law enforcement.<sup>72</sup> In 1971, a planned visit of Birmingham by President Nixon brought plans for demonstrations by ACMHR and SCLC over welfare conditions in the city.<sup>73</sup>

Following the 1963 Campaign, King also continued a push for economic opportunity on a national level. He writes that economic promise did not equal progress and “the shape of the world will not permit us the luxury of gradualism and procrastination. [...]. The livelihood of millions has dwindled down to a frightening fraction because the unskilled and semiskilled jobs they filled have disappeared under the magic of automation.”<sup>74</sup> King identified economic opportunity as the great need for true black progress in their daily lives. He acknowledged that answers for the problems of employment and poverty were complex and demanded radical change in the socioeconomic structure of the United States. Before the ratification of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, King already called for implementation of progressive

programs for the impoverished and reparations for the damages caused by the exploitation of black labor. He writes “The ancient common law has always provided a remedy for the appropriation of the labor of one human being by another. This law should be made available for American Negroes. The payment should be in the form of a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement.”<sup>75</sup>

Before his assassination in April of 1968, King heavily involved himself with the economic blight of the working class. Although he did not live during its eventual fruition and disappointment, King envisioned a Poor People’s March on Washington in which black activists intended a display of the problems of the country’s poor before the federal government.<sup>76</sup> In combating the economic injustices, King called for a coalition between the labor movement and the black freedom struggle, writing “When labor fought for recognition during the thirties and forties, and thus became the principal civil rights issue of the time, disadvantaged Negroes joined in its bitter struggles and shared every sacrifice. Negroes battling for their own recognition today have a right to expect more from their old allies. Nothing would hold back the forces of progress in American life more effectively than a schism between the Negro and organized labor.”<sup>77</sup> Too often, non-violence becomes mistakenly equated with non-revolutionary.

Shuttlesworth likewise continued the struggle for employment opportunity. He moved from his hometown of Birmingham to Cincinnati where he established the Greater New Light Baptist Church. In Cincinnati and nationally, Shuttlesworth maintained a leadership role in organizing support for the impoverished class toward job opportunities and housing. His participation in the solidarity rallies provide an example of his prolonged and fervent activism in this matter. Shuttlesworth certainly did not approve of the Reaganomics of the 1980s. He said “You work your lifetime and now your Social Security is going to be cut out. Elected Reagan –

he told before he got in that he was going to cut it out. Rich are getting richer and poor are getting poorer.”<sup>78</sup> The AFL-CIO sponsored solidarity rallies of union members protesting Reagan’s economic policies deemed detrimental toward the working class. Organized labor became enraged by Reagan’s cuts in social programs and job safety rules.<sup>79</sup> At one such rally, Shuttlesworth directly addressed the president through his speech, saying “tonight we ordinary Americans from all walks of life meet on this Square, speaking among ourselves, talking with our God, [...], and protesting Reaganomics’ –that unsafe, unsound, improperly thought out economic policy of taking from the poor and needy and giving it to the rich and Military.”<sup>80</sup> He further said “please quit giving the economy without regulations or guidelines over to the rich, hoping that they will, like good American tycoons, let sufficient crumbs trickle down to better the conditions of the poor.”<sup>81</sup> Although based out of Cincinnati, Fred Shuttlesworth remained connected with Birmingham’s black freedom struggle, and the fight for economic justice, until his death in 2011.

In Birmingham, the struggle for economic equality and job opportunities remains ongoing. Some progress occurred for the city’s black labor force. In 1973, the city’s workers received promotions and back pay settlements of five million dollars by the United Steelworkers of America for discriminatory hiring and promotion practices.<sup>82</sup> In 1974, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit found ACIPCO likewise guilty of discrimination toward black employees, and the company paid out damages.<sup>83</sup> Still, for a majority of Birmingham’s black workforce, conditions did not improve. Eskew writes that “scattered about the city in pockets of poverty that housed generations of families, black people remained the truly disadvantaged in Birmingham. Over the years, little had changed to improve their lives.”<sup>84</sup> He further argues that “Clearly the victories of the civil rights movement failed to solve the problems experienced by many black people. The movement had gained access for a few while never challenging the structure

of the system.”<sup>85</sup> In Birmingham, as elsewhere in the country, the battle for economic opportunity remains an ongoing objective for black activism.

Focusing on the prolonged economic and employment goals of the black activists in Birmingham supports a narrative of the black freedom struggle in which the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s and 1960s becomes a segment of a long movement. The Civil Rights Act of 1963 and the Voting Rights Act of 1964 ostensibly solved the injustices of Jim Crow and black disenfranchisement with relatively straight-forward legislative procedure. The fight for economic justice, however, proves a more challenging and complex objective for activists as solutions that reach the root problems of equal employment and economic opportunity are often vague or face much more fervent opposition. Although refuting the triumphalist mythos of the Civil Rights Movement’s legacy, highlighting the ongoing nature of the fight against black labor exploitation does not diminish

the accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham and elsewhere, but rather reclaims the radicalism of the activists while illustrating the resistance they faced.

In the end, the story of black labor and activism in Birmingham becomes a story of partial victories and perpetual promise.<sup>86</sup> While many rightly celebrate the role of Birmingham activism in achieving desegregation and black enfranchisement, the black labor force still awaits equal opportunity. Black activists do not strive for three individual aims but a freedom that proves all-encompassing. Activists during the 1960s commonly said, “what good is it to sit at the lunch counter when you don’t have enough money to buy a hamburger?”<sup>87</sup> Likewise, voting becomes difficult and unfruitful when blighted by economic dependence.<sup>88</sup> Desegregation and black enfranchisement, thus, become rendered incomplete without economic justice. The black freedom struggle continues.

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