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PRECEDING FOOTSTEPS IN REVOLUTION: THE HISTORY OF THE SOUTHERN
NEGRO YOUTH CONGRESS

by

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A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,
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Master of Arts

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2023

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PRECEDING FOOTSTEPS IN REVOLUTION: THE HISTORY OF THE SOUTHERN
NEGRO YOUTH CONGRESS

DONNAE'HAMPTON

HISTORY

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a comprehensive history of the Southern Negro Youth Congress including the social circumstances that led to its formation, the work and people of the organization, and its impact and influence on future civil rights organizations and Black leftist movements of the late 1960s. The Southern Black communist organization was formed in 1937 and officially disbanded in 1949. SNYC committed itself to unionizing, educating, registering people to vote, and exposing racial horrors in the South for Black southerners. In 1939, SNYC moved its headquarters to Birmingham, Alabama. The segregated city of Birmingham in 1939 was the industrial center of the South therefore the SNYC thought it was the perfect place to headquarter operations to fight for both labor rights and civil rights. Eugene "Bull" Connor, Birmingham's racist Commissioner of Public Safety, and the United States government were direct threats to the work of the SNYC. Members and supporters were harassed, threatened, and arrested, and by 1949, the organization ended its operations. The Black communist organization is at the foundation of both the overall moderate Civil Rights Movement and Black leftist movements in the mid to late-twentieth century.

Keywords: Congress, SNYC, leftist, anti-communism, Civil Rights

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BPP	Black Panther Party for Self Defense
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
HUAC	House of Un-American Activities Committee
NNC	National Negro Congress
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SNYC	Southern Negro Youth Congress
US	United States of America

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on SNYC is not vast and that is due to the lack of teaching about the organization. The published works on the SNYC include the book *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* written by Erik Gellman in 2012, the academic article published in the Black academic journal *Phylon*, “We Demand Our Rights: The Southern Negro Youth Congress, 1937-1949,” written by C. Alvin Hughes in 1987. It also includes the articles “Fundamentally Determined: James E. Jackson and Esther Cooper Jackson and the Southern Negro Youth Congress – 1937-1946,” by Johnetta Richards that was published in 2008, and Robin D.G. Kelley’s 2008 article “The Left” discusses the legal defense work of SNYC. Additionally, the organization is discussed in the literature with overarching themes of Black liberation and or Communist history, like the books *Red, Black, White: The Alabama Communist Party, 1930-1950* by Mary Stanton and *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* by Robin D.G. Kelley.

Erik Gellman’s work is a collaborative history of both the National Negro Congress and the Southern Negro Youth Congress. He tied both organizations together while recognizing both organizations worked independently from each other. Hughes’ 1987 article discussed the SNYC, solely. This twelve-page article emphasized the role of Black women in SNYC and the success of the first major campaign by the Congress helping “black workers organize the Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Industrial Union

and assisted them in drafting a list of demands” and their voting campaigns.¹ He also attributes the end of the SNYC to McCarthyism. However, he downplayed the fact that they were a communist organization as well saying “For years the SNYC cooperated with Communist Party members in their campaigns, although the SNYC was not an anti-American or subversive organization. It simply challenged the established segregationist and racial norms of the time.”² The organization did more than challenge the racial norms of the time, but also challenged the economic norms of the time by unionizing workers. He did not expound on the relationship between the Communist Party and the SNYC. During the time the article was published in 1987, the United States was at the height of the free-market economy and communism was still a taboo ideology to agree or sympathize with. Towards the end, he discussed the harassment and surveillance that the activists and local Black preachers for being associated with the organization by police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Conner and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Hughes failed to discuss the impact that the SNYC had on future generations and organizations and argues as if its work did not move past the official ending of the organization in 1949.

Red, Black, White: The Alabama Communist Party, 1930-1950 by Mary Stanton published in 2019 and *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* by Robin D.G. Kelley published in 1990 both discuss the importance of the SNYC to Southern Black activism. Kelley wrote in depth about the communist leaders of the organization like Louis Burnham and Esther Cooper Jackson and their work within

¹ Hughes, C. Alvin. “We Demand Our Rights: The Southern Negro Youth Congress, 1937- 1949,” *Phylon* (1960-) 48, no. 1 (1987): 44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/275000>.

²Hughes, “We Demand Our Rights: The Southern Negro Youth Congress, 1937-1949,” 48.

the organization, while also putting a spotlight on the Black women who lead the organization. Stanton discussed the influence of the SNYC within modern-day protests and movements.

Southern Black communist historian Robin D. G. Kelley also published an academic article titled, “The Left,” in 2006. Kelley wrote on the work of Black women in the SNYC, calling it an “important site for the elaboration of a class-conscious black womanist perspective.” The Black women leaders of the Congress included Esther Cooper Jackson who served as the executive secretary during WWII, Augusta Jackson who served as the editor of SNYC’s newspaper, *Cavalcade*, and other leaders like Dorothy Burnham, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Grace Tillman, Thelma Dale, Sallye Davis, and Ethel Lee Goodman. Kelley argued that because Black women held leadership positions in the organization, the SNYC focused on Black women’s legal defenses like the cases of Black domestic worker Nora Wilson of Alabama who was convicted of assault with the intent to kill her boss, and the case of Recy Taylor who was kidnapped and brutally sexually violated by six white men in Abbeville, Alabama. Kelley argued that the focus of Black women’s legal defenses by the SNYC impacted the actions of the Civil Rights Congress a left-wing legal defense organization organized in 1946 to emphasize justice for Black women.³

The academic article “Fundamentally Determined: James E. Jackson and Esther Cooper Jackson and the Southern Negro Youth Congress – 1937-1946,” by Johnetta Richards was published in 2008 in the *American Communist History* academic journal.

³ Kelley, Robin D. "Left, The." *Oxford African American Studies Center*. 1 Dec. 2006; Accessed 14 Mar. 2023. <https://oxfordaasc-com.uab.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-44268>.

The author has different arguments than what is agreed upon in its history. Richards has the end of the organization in 1946, three years before the official end, however, she did not explain why. Richards also argued that the reason for the creation of the SNYC is because Black Americans wanted to challenge Jim Crow laws and advocate for civil and economic rights, which is slightly different than what the SNYC says about themselves meaning that it was created for young Black folks to focus on the issues they face and to get them involved in fighting for their rights. Richards also discussed one of SNYC's first big civil liberties cases in detail, the case of Nora Wilson. Richards also discussed Esther Cooper Jackson's work with the Fair Employment Practices Commission and her work in Birmingham, Alabama for desegregating the benches in the park. Richards tells a profound story of Cooper's work in Birmingham. In 1942, Cooper created a proposal for Black people to be able to sit on park benches before the city's council members, but Eugene "Bull" Connor tried to keep her from going before the city council. Despite the obstacles, Cooper successfully presented before the city council and the council submitted the proposal. Connor threatened Cooper while she was there and she smartly did not go straight home after presenting nor did she follow her usual routine the next few days.⁴ Compared to other literature, Richards does a great job of discussing in detail different specific stories of the Southern Negro Youth Congress that are not discussed in great detail in other literature on the SNYC.

⁴ Richards, Johnetta. "Fundamentally Determined: James E. Jackson and Esther Cooper Jackson and the Southern Negro Youth Congress-1937-1946." *American Communist History* 7, no. 2 (December 2008): 191–202. doi:10.1080/14743890802580016.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of labor, race, and gender is prominent in the southern United States' history of the early 20th century. The work of the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) fills in the gap in the social history of young Black workers in American history. The organization lasted for twelve years, from 1937-1949. The main argument of this thesis is that the organization of the Southern Negro Youth Congress serves as the antecedent of both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1950s and 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement history is moderate, but at the foundation of the movement is the work of the Black communist organization, SNYC. The SNYC paved the way for organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party (BPP) to reach the successes of the mid-20th century.

The formation of the organization occurred during the Great Depression. Its creation came from its parent organization, the National Negro Congress in 1937. The organization allowed for southern Black youth to get involved and educated in economic justice and civil rights. McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare after the end of World War II by the United States government is the reason for the systemic destruction of the organization.

It is the work of Black leftists that is at the center of change for Black Americans that happens during the twentieth century, embodied by the Southern Negro Youth Congress. Without the Black communists and radicals of the SNYC, social and civil

rights are not won. They are the foundation of why successful progress happened. Although repressed, harassed, threatened, and surveilled, Black Communists like James E. Jackson, Esther Cooper Jackson, and Louis Burnham as leaders of the SNYC are vital to the foundation of the revolution that happens within the next twenty years for both the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.

CHAPTER 1:

BACKGROUND AND CREATION OF THE SNYC

To tell the story of the anti-racist and leftist organization known as the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the historical forces that led to its creation of it, are a significant part of the story. In 1937, at the National Negro Congress Conference in Richmond, Virginia on February 14, 534 young Black people formed the Southern Negro Youth Congress. They chose to focus on the South because of the labor and race issues that Black people in that area dealt with.⁵ Its parent organization, National Negro Congress (NNC) was created out of Communist party discussions for Black labor in February 1936 to combat racial discrimination. Two leaders of the NNC John P. Davis and A. Phillip Randolph were elected as national secretary and president, respectively over the NNC. Their first convention was held in Chicago, Illinois on February 14, 1936.⁶

In 1937, the United States and the rest of the world went through one of the worst economic downturns that capitalism created, known as the Great Depression. This depression led to mass unemployment, homelessness, and starvation for people of all

⁵Pamphlet of "Negro Youth Building A New Storm: Official Proceedings of the Third All-Southern Negro Youth Conference," Series XI: Southern Negro Youth Congress: Documents, Publications, Clippings, 1939. MS, Southern Negro Youth Congress and the Communist Party." n.d. TAM347, box 11, folder 27, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University. *Archives Unbound* (accessed February 7, 2023). <https://link-gale-com.ezproxy3.lhl.uab.edu/apps/doc/SC5106294618/GDSC?u=birm97026&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=dcc618f6&pg=1>.

⁶Wittner, Lawrence S. "The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment." *American Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1970): 884-5. (Accessed March 14, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.2307/2711875>.

nationalities and races. Mass unemployment or little to no wages created at the very least a question about the capitalist system, especially in comparison to the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union, in 1917.

Another set of historical forces that affected the creation of this impactful organization was the Industrial Revolution. Although there have been labor conflicts before this era, the Industrial Revolution of the late 19th and early part of the 20th century, also brought along new labor practices including strikes and labor unions. The organization of workers became a vital part of the power that workers have in the workplace. Labor unions fought for safe workplace conditions, shorter workdays, higher wages, and more.

Most social issues regarding Black people are because of the enslavement of African people and their descendants for over two-hundred-fifty years. Because of the institution of slavery and the lack of substantial reconciliation and reparations after abolition, Black people in America have always felt the need to organize to make the realities of Black people improve whether that may be economically, socially, or legally. The period of Reconstruction, following Emancipation, is an important part of Southern Black history that also led to the creation of the SNYC. When slavery ended, Black people endured different forms of economic exploitation like sharecropping and convict leasing to keep them subjugated and oppressed. Simultaneously, they endured domestic racial terrorism from the Ku Klux Klan and the passing of Black Codes. The long era of Jim Crow included legalized segregation as the dominant part of social life operated. *Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)* set the legal precedent of “separate, but equal” that the South lived by, although public and private practitioners separated themselves in unequal ways.

Jim Crow laws did not become illegal until, five years after the end of the Southern Negro Youth Congress. Great Migration is the social historic phenomenon that occurred during the early first few decades of the twentieth century when millions of African Americans moved from the South to the North to flee the dangers of domestic terrorism and for better economic opportunities.⁷

The American society during and after World War I impacted the political climate of the 1930s and 1940s. During WWI, the United States passed many major pieces of legislation, including the Sedition Acts and the Espionage Acts. The purpose of these two acts was to control the information that the public spread and could see during wartime. The Sedition Act of 1918 prohibited “any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the former government of the United States, or the Constitution of the United States, or the flag the United States, or the uniform of the Army or Navy, or any language that might bring those institutions into contempt, scorn contumely or disrepute.”⁸ The Espionage Act of 1917 provided the government with enough tools to force the suppression of those who opposed the war. People obstructing military operations in wartime could face ten-thousand-dollar fines and imprisonment up to 20 years or five-thousand-dollar fines and up to five years imprisonment for the use of mail and violation of the statute. The Socialist Party was the main organization that felt the effects of the Espionage Act.⁹

⁷ Trotter, Joe William. “The Great Migration.” *OAH Magazine of History* 17, no. 1 (2002): 31. (Accessed March 15, 2023). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163561>.

⁸ Kennedy, David M. *Over Here: The First War and American Society*, Oxford, New York, 2004, 80.

⁹ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 26.

In 1918, the famous socialist leader Eugene V. Debs, who received over a million votes in the 1920 presidential election, was arrested on ten counts of sedition on June 30, twelve days after giving a speech to workers in Canton, Ohio that protested the war. He was found guilty on three counts and was sentenced to ten years in prison. While imprisoned he ran for president, and he received one million votes. The acts and arrests of leftist activists like Debs in the late 1910s and 1920s during the First Red Scare, made way for anti-communist paranoia to reach its highest peak in the 1930s-1950s. During both Red Scares, socialists and communists are painted as anti-American, which justifies the intense surveillance and harassment in public and in private that people like Eugene V. Debs in 1918 and organizations like the Southern Negro Youth Congress during the 1940s.

The purpose for creating the SNYC is for the youth to “awaken youth’s interest in the problems of the Negro and to develop action around them,” for the youth to “develop a deeper appreciation of the cultural contributions of the Negro people to America,” and to create a “friendly cooperation with Southern white youth.”¹⁰ Black people organizing together for social justice is something that occurred since slavery, starting with the abolitionist movements of the 18th century. At all times in the history of the United States and prior, Black folks worked towards improving social conditions and debated on how

¹⁰ Pamphlet of “Negro Youth Building A New Storm: Official Proceedings of the Third All-Southern Negro Youth Conference,” Series XI: Southern Negro Youth Congress: Documents, Publications, Clippings, 1939. 1939. MS, Southern Negro Youth Congress, and the Communist Party.” Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University. *Archives Unbound* (accessed February 7, 2023). <https://link-gale-com.ezproxy3.lhl.uab.edu/apps/doc/SC5106294618/GDSC?u=birm97026&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=dcc618f6&pg=1>.

to reach their goals and improve the conditions of the community.¹¹ The Southern Negro Youth Congress is no different in that regard.

¹¹ Tate, Gayle T. "Free Black Resistance in the Antebellum Era, 1830 to 1860." *Journal of Black Studies* 28, no. 6 (1998): 764. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784816>.

CHAPTER 2: THE SOUTHERN NEGRO YOUTH CONGRESS

At the Third All-Southern Negro Youth Conference in Birmingham, Alabama in 1939, the SNYC handed out informational booklets in Birmingham, Alabama that gave a history of the SNYC. It tells the who, what, and why, of SNYC and recaps all three of the Southern Negro youth conferences. The third conference was held between April 28 and April 30, 1939, and 603 people attended. The organization started in Richmond, Virginia, in 1937 on February 14th the same day as Fredrick Douglass was born. As stated in the pamphlet, “The second stage of existence means building a solid leadership, drafting a program of action, financing that program, and implementing it.” After this conference, the organization decided to move its headquarters from Richmond, Virginia to Birmingham, Alabama. The organization described Birmingham as a “typical southern city.” Few believed that a meeting like the All-Southern Conference could occur there. The focus of the Congress was “Negro youths are the hope of their race as the youth are the hope of every race.”¹² The SNYC focused on educating and organizing Black youth because the progress of the Black

¹² Pamphlet of “Negro Youth Building A New Storm: Official Proceedings of the Third All-Southern Negro Youth Conference,” Series XI: Southern Negro Youth Congress: Documents, Publications, Clippings, 1939. 1939. MS, Southern Negro Youth Congress, and the Communist Party.” Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University. *Archives Unbound* (accessed February 7, 2023). <https://link-gale-com.ezproxy3.lhl.uab.edu/apps/doc/SC5106294618/GDSC?u=birm97026&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=dcc618f6&pg=1>

community relied on them. That same sentiment rang true in the Civil Rights Movement.

In the pamphlet, SNYC leaders reveal that the purpose of this Congress involved “waking the youth’s interests and the problems of the Negro, to develop action around them. For youth to develop a deeper appreciation for the cultural contributions of the Negro people to America and to develop friendly connection and cooperation with southern white youth.” The SNYC was organized as a federation of southern youth programs to be carried out through councils formed from the clubs in various communities.¹³ One major reason why the leaders of the SNYC moved the headquarters from Virginia to Birmingham was “to get involved with the Black steelworkers and coal miners, who became the basis for the Youth Congress at that time.”¹⁴ The steel and coal industry was the basis of Birmingham’s economy and SNYC saw the need and opportunity to organize Black workers who were discriminated against by white labor unions and for civil rights in the city they lived in. They organized them for better work conditions and pay and voting rights.

¹³Pamphlet of “Negro Youth Building A New Storm: Official Proceedings of the Third All-Southern Negro Youth Conference,” Series XI: Southern Negro Youth Congress: Documents, Publications, Clippings, 1939. 1939. MS, Southern Negro Youth Congress, and the Communist Party.” Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University. *Archives Unbound*

¹⁴ *Interview with Esther Cooper Jackson*. 2011. Available through: African American Communities. http://www.aac.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/whc_oralhistory_esthercooperjackson [Accessed January 27, 2023].

The Leaders

The main leaders of the SNYC were Edward Strong, James E. Jackson, Esther Cooper Jackson, and Louis Burnham. These names frequently are seen on the primary sources from the organization, especially Cooper Jackson and Burnham because both served as executive and organizational secretaries for most of the time the organization was headquartered in Birmingham, mostly during World War II. Esther Jackson went to Oberlin College for her bachelor's degree and then to Fisk University for her master's degree, where she met James Jackson who was a researcher and writer there. Cooper Jackson worked as a vital member of the SNYC and during wartime when her husband left to fight in the war, she ascended to the position of SNYC's executive secretary. Louis Burnham worked as the organizational secretary and his wife Dorothy Burnham served as the educational director. James Jackson worked as the special project director and leader when he was not at war.¹⁵

Before becoming the executive director, Esther Cooper Jackson worked as the main correspondent and communicator of the organization. There are numerous SNYC corresponding letters written by Cooper Jackson reaching out to different supporters for updates and support. For example, she corresponded with Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune about being a keynote speaker at an event. She also was in correspondence with important Black political, intellectual, and artistic figures.¹⁶ Other historical Black

¹⁵ Hatch, James Vernon. Interview of Esther and James Jackson by James V. Hatch. New York: 1992. <https://uab.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/interview-esther-james-jackson-v-hatch/docview/2352579859/se-2>.

¹⁶ Letters of "National Council of Negro Women cooperation with War Department, Bethune health problems, government retirement fund, interracial conference with national women's organizations and Bethune keynote speech at Southern Negro Youth Congress, 1941-1944" Collection: Mary McLeod Bethune Papers: The Bethune Foundation Collection, Part 1: Writings, Diaries, Scrapbooks, Biographical

activists, leaders, celebrities, and creatives showed support and or served on their advisory board including Dr. W.E.B Du Bois, who gave a speech titled “Behold the Land” at their 1946 conference in Virginia, Paul Robeson, Dr. Alain Locke, and Countee Cullen, to name a few.

Groundwork

The first action of activism the SNYC completed was organizing tobacco workers in Richmond, VA, who were mostly black women in 1937. The tobacco stemmers who were being paid pennies and. Esther Cooper Jackson and James E. Jackson described the first major campaign as a success because they were able to organize over five thousand tobacco workers within a year.¹⁷ Another major accomplishment in their early years is the creation of the Black community theatre and over twenty councils created in the South. Leaders made “four tours during which they contacted thousands of people in North Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia,” and hosted a youth leadership seminar in North Carolina.¹⁸ SNYC completed activism work that focused on work and recreational activities.

The Southern Negro Youth Congress integrated art and performance with fighting for civil rights through the Caravan Puppeteers. The Puppeteers traveled throughout the South to rural Southern Black people to educate them about the focuses of the Congress

Materials, and Files on the National Youth Administration and Women's Organizations, 1918-1955. (Accessed February 11, 2023). <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001387-015-0605&accountid=8240>

¹⁷ Hatch, James Vernon. Interview of Esther and James Jackson by James V. Hatch. New York: 1992. <https://uab.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/interview-esther-james-jackson-v-hatch/docview/2352579859/se-2>

¹⁸Hughes, C. Alvin. “We Demand Our Rights: The Southern Negro Youth Congress, 1937-1949.” *Phylon* (1960-) no. 1 (1987): 45. (Accessed January 27, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.2307/275000>.

including voter registration, abolishing the poll tax, and labor unions. To keep the white people of the town, specifically the white authorities on low alarm, the performers would say they are there to teach them about personal topics like dental hygiene, but when they have left alone, they continued to educate their audience on more pressing matters like Jim Crow.¹⁹

The SNYC not only cared about the political and social status of Black youth but also the health issues they faced. Health problems that affect a certain demographic of people are often directly correlated with social conditions. At the Third All-Southern Youth Conference in 1939, the Congress handed out printed materials on the matter of health including a sheet of paper titled “The Community We Live In: Health Problems are Directly Related to Social Conditions.” This article by Harold H. Whitted, acting assistant surgeon of the U.S. Public Health Services claimed that in Southern states in the past years. Birth rates were lower than whites and so death rates were at least 50% higher. A health problem that young Black people faced was illegitimate births which were being had by young girls, mostly under 14 years old, which led to babies being born with physical disabilities. Whitted argued that the cause of this is illiteracy and rates are five times more than in some southern states. Other causes included “a lack of recreational facilities and poor environmental conditions under which majority is forced to live.” Another issue was venereal diseases, which caused unnecessary deaths and blindness of little children annually physical incapacity, which increased the economic burden on

¹⁹ Richards, Johnetta. “Fundamentally Determined: James E. Jackson and Esther Cooper Jackson and the Southern Negro Youth Congress-1937-1946.” *American Communist History* 7, no. 2 (December 2008): 197. doi:10.1080/14743890802580016.

Black people.²⁰ The SNYC knew that social injustices directly affect the health of the oppressed and education about social injustices they face was important to improving the overall health of the community.

The Southern Negro Youth Congress as an organization committed itself to different issues which meant different actions toward change. They organized laborers and protested for voting rights. They took very public stances against imperialism, fascism, and segregation and exposed horrible stories of police brutality and lynching in the South. They hosted conferences around the South to continue to garner support. They also advocated for people to join World War II to fight against fascism and after the war, they helped Black veterans to help them receive benefits from the GI Bill.²¹

Exposing Domestic Terrorism

An important faction of SNYC's work was exposing the horrors of domestic terrorism that Black folks endured in the South. The organization reported many lynchings. On December 19, 1945, SNYC released a newsletter on a serial killer police officer in Union Springs, Alabama. Three Black men, Edgar Thomas, Ed Day Gary, and Jesse Hytower were victims of police brutality all in separate instances. The first victim

²⁰ Pamphlet of "Negro Youth Building A New Storm: Official Proceedings of the Third All-Southern Negro Youth Conference," Series XI: Southern Negro Youth Congress: Documents, Publications, Clippings, 1939. 1939. MS, Southern Negro Youth Congress, and the Communist Party." Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University. *Archives Unbound* (accessed February 7, 2023).

<https://link-gale-com.ezproxy3.lhl.uab.edu/apps/doc/SC5106294618/GDSC?u=birm97026&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=dcc618f6&pg=1>

²¹ Newsletter, Ala. State Conference of Negro Veterans, 1946. 1946. MS 1:9/7/36, Civil Rights and Social Activism in Alabama: The Papers of John LeFlore, 1926-1976 AND Records of the Non-Partisan Voters League, 1956-1987. University of South Alabama, Mobile, AL. *Archives Unbound* (accessed February 11, 2023).

<https://link-gale-com.uab.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/FDDSPS300210749/GDSC?u=birm97026&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=faa4943f&pg=5>

was Edgar Thomas, a Black businessman and landowner in Union Springs. On October 7, 1945, he was in his store discussing the “race problem” with a few people. Officer Dewey Bradley overheard him talking, got angry and broke into his store, and arrested Thomas for disorderly conduct. Shortly thereafter, Thomas was released from jail with the help of some of his white friends. The next week, on October 13, Bradley, who claimed that Thomas made threats to his life, went back to his store with another officer and shot Thomas with a pistol and a sawed-off shotgun with no remorse. A witness, Rev. J.L. Pinkney, a Black minister who owned the store next to Thomas, received threats too. He fled town before sundown to Chicago. Other witnesses refused to have their names associated with the tragedy in fear for their own lives due to threats made by Bradley.

Next, in the case of Black war veteran Ed Day Gary, Bradley shot him in the eye, causing Gary to get his eye removed at the Tuskegee Veteran Hospital, a few weeks after Thomas’s murder. Bradley also fatally shot Jesse Hytower after badly beating him for the crime of being in possession of a knife. At the time of this news release, Bradley was removed from the police force but still walked around free. SNYC student staff member, Kenneth C. Kennedy reported on the horrific realities of police terrorism against Black people in the South and forwarded a complete report to the Department of Justice with the hope of direct action being taken.²²

On another SNYC news release titled “Florida Attorney General Recommends Suspension of Sheriff in Payne Lynching: Report to Governor Calls for Special Grand Jury,” on November 1, 1945, the SNYC reported on good news. The Florida Attorney

²² Newsletter of “Southern Negro Youth Congress News Release: Youth Congress Investigator Exposes South Alabama Terror Campaign” December 19, 1945. Collection: Civil Rights and Social Activism in Alabama: The Papers of John LeFlore, 1926-1976 and Records of the Non-Partisan Voters League, 1956-1987.

General, J. Tom Watson forwarded a report to the organization that Governor Millard F. Caldwell recommended the suspension of Sheriff Lonnie Davis of Madison County and called for a special grand jury for his involvement in the Jesse James Payne lynching. Payne was kidnapped from his jail cell and lynched. Because of the lack of evidence of the jail being broken into by vigilantes and evidence that his cell was opened with keys, Davis faced accountability. The SNYC demanded that all who were involved in the lynching and “guilty of negligence and complicity in the case be punished.”²³ SNYC’s work was important in exposing the horrors of police brutality and domestic terrorism because they knew for change to happen, they had to publicize the truth about what Black southerners faced. Exposing the horrors of police brutality in the South later becomes a vital tactic in the Civil Rights Movement.

SNYC’s Anti-Imperialist and Anti-Fascist Stance

Not only did this organization actively work against police brutality, but it also was actively anti-imperialist and anti-fascist. The SNYC members protested the use of both Black and white troops in the Far East. In the SNYC news release of December 19th, 1945, titled “Myitkyina Nigro Soldiers Want Out: Send us home,” SNYC published a letter that 250 Black soldiers of the 823rd Engineer Aviation Battalion stationed in Myitkyina, Burma wrote to President Harry S. Truman. The American soldiers declared that it was their “firm conviction that American troops and naval forces in the China and India Burma Theaters no longer serve purpose. On the contrary, are being used as

²³ Newsletter of “Southern Negro Youth Congress News Release: Florida Attorney General Recommends Suspension of Sheriff in Payne Lynching: Report to Governor Calls for Special Grand Jury” November 1, 1945. Collection: Civil Rights and Social Activism in Alabama: The Papers of John LeFlore, 1926-1976 and Records of the Non-Partisan Voters League, 1956-1987. Page 8

pawns in dangers of...imperialist power politics.”²⁴ Publishing this letter in their newsletter is a clear display of their anti-imperialist politics. It was also a risky move because it is specifically against Truman’s imperialist policies which meant a bigger target on their back because of the surveillance from the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the country’s paranoia about a communist revolution.

The soldiers wrote “It is our pride and glory that we have contributed our mite—such as we were allowed toward the liberation of the enthralled peoples of the world who had fallen under the heel of the fascist boot and in the defense of our ‘hearth and homes.’” Later in the letter, the soldiers confronted Truman on his job as commander-in-chief and the hypocrisy of the intervention of American soldiers in the Far East. They asked him if “we,” referring to the United States, “would tolerate a Chiang Kai-Chek sending a Corp of political propagandists and ‘technical experts’ to the task of entrenching Chiang Kai-Chek in power and the military destruction of all opposition force to his unbridled rule.” The soldiers then proposed an important question:

But who are these Chinese Communists that American-trained Chinese troops, American planes, tanks and guns, American Marines, ships, and airmen are so intent upon destroying for the sake of a ‘United China?’ Are they not also men who love China and have proven their patriotism in thousands of battles against the Japanese during long years of warfare under the most trying circumstances?²⁵

²⁴ Newsletter of “Southern Negro Youth Congress. August 8-October 30, 1945. TS 1:15/10A/85-86, Civil Rights and Social Activism in Alabama: The Papers of John LeFlore, 1926-1976 AND Records of the Non-Partisan Voters League, 1956-1987. University of South Alabama. Mobile, Alabama. *Archives Unbound*.<https://link-gale-com.uab.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/FQFVFF799696794/GDSC?u=birm97026&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=c89c97c1&pg=1>.

²⁵ Newsletter of “Southern Negro Youth Congress. August 8-October 30, 1945. TS 1:15/10A/85-86, Civil Rights and Social Activism in Alabama: The Papers of John LeFlore, 1926-1976 AND Records of the Non-Partisan Voters League, 1956-1987. University of South Alabama. Mobile, Alabama. *Archives Unbound*.

Black and white soldiers during American intervention at the start of the Cold War, not only denounced the presence of American soldiers in the Far East but also denounced the target and killing of Chinese Communists.

The soldiers then argued:

That we are helping the unification of China in precisely the same way. And for the same reason as the British did in Greece and as they are doing now in Indonesia and Indochina... We do not want to be associated with the British imperialist mercenaries in shooting and bombing to death the freedom urges of the peoples of the Southeast and American lives. We feel that the Chinese people (that) fought the invader for ten years alone are fully qualified... to choose their leaders and form of government.²⁶

The Black soldiers end the letter writing that as Black people “We haven’t known freedom ourselves” and so “we don’t want any parts of suppressing the freedom of other people.” Although not every single soldier of the 250 stationed men were not members of the SNYC, their radical stance against the continued American intervention and occupation of the Far East was impactful because of the influence that the SNYC had over young Black men with sharing their politics.²⁷ Publishing this letter is an example of the SNYC ideology on display as a clear agreement to their anti-imperialist politics, their sympathy for other communists around the world, and the acknowledgment of the global oppression of all colonized people. Publishing this letter showed that they knew liberation was not complete until all who were oppressed were free. This sentiment does

²⁶ Newsletter of “Southern Negro Youth Congress. August 8-October 30, 1945. TS 1:15/10A/85-86, Civil Rights and Social Activism in Alabama: The Papers of John LeFlore, 1926-1976 AND Records of the Non-Partisan Voters League, 1956-1987. University of South Alabama. Mobile, Alabama. *Archives Unbound*.

²⁷ Newsletter of “Southern Negro Youth Congress. August 8-October 30, 1945. TS 1:15/10A/85-86, Civil Rights and Social Activism in Alabama: The Papers of John LeFlore, 1926-1976 AND Records of the Non-Partisan Voters League, 1956-1987. University of South Alabama. Mobile, Alabama. *Archives Unbound*.

not gain more traction until the Black socialists and communists of the Black Power movements expressed it.

On August 8, 1945, in another SNYC news release, the organization called for the impeachment of former governor and then U.S. Senator Theodore G. Bilbo of Mississippi. In 1945, the Southern Negro Youth Congress created a petition campaign to have Senator Bilbo impeached and removed from the United States Senate for being a fascist. The organization addressed the petition to President Truman and the United States Senate to denounce Bilbo's pro-fascist activities. In the SNYC monthly bulletin announcing the petition titled "A Fascist Criminal is a Member of the U.S. Senate," SNYC "has called upon people throughout the South to join with them in a petition campaign to have Senator Theodore Gilmore Bilbo ousted from the Senate of the United States," and to "let millions of disenfranchised Negroes of the South to let their voices be heard," because Bilbo was elected with less than ten percent of the population voting. Bilbo broadcasted a call for action to all "lynch-minded fascists who are taking up the fallen banner of Hitlerism." In this petition, the SNYC cleverly and accurately labeled Bilbo as a fascist to have the U.S. Senate understand the level of hate is comparable, if not equal to the fascists that they were then at war with.²⁸ SNYC encapsulated the fact that during WWII, Black people not only had to fight a fascist war abroad but also in their own country. Sadly, the fascist war in the United States did not end in 1945.

²⁸ Newsletter of "Southern Negro Youth Congress. August 8-October 30, 1945., Civil Rights and Social Activism in Alabama: The Papers of John LeFlore, 1926-1976 AND Records of the Non-Partisan Voters League, 1956-1987. University of South Alabama. Mobile, Alabama. *Archives Unbound*. (Accessed February 11, 2023). <https://link-gale-com.uab.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/FQFVFF799696794/GDSC?u=birm97026&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=c89c97c1&pg=1>

Behold the Land!

At a Southern Negro Youth Conference in South Carolina on October 20th, 1946 W.E.B. Du Bois, who served on the advisory board of the SNYC, gave a speech titled “Behold the Land.” Du Bois’s speech matched well with the goals and political ideology of the organization. At the beginning of the speech, he discussed the importance of the South, saying “The future of the American Negro is in the South.” Just as the SNYC worked towards interracial collaborations with poor white workers and youth for true freedom, Du Bois advocated for the same, saying “The working people of the South, white and black must come to remember that their emancipation depends upon their mutual cooperation; upon their acquaintanceship with each other; upon their friendship; upon their social intermingling.” He implored that the youth “instead of running away from the battle here in Carolina, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi... grit your teeth and make up your minds to fight it out right here even if it takes every day of your lives of your children’s children.” Du Bois argued that Black southerners needed to stay in the South and fight for it no matter how hard it may be. He then implored his audience to be vocal what is going on in the South and “use every field of publicity to force the truth into their ears, and before their eyes.”²⁹

He advocated inexplicitly for a “socialist state” which was beginning to be more and more dangerous to do in the United States in 1946. He claimed that in the South, “there is a chance for a new cooperative agriculture on renewed land owned by the State with capital furnished by the State, mechanized and coordinated with city life,” and “for

²⁹ Du Bois, W.E.B, “Behold the Land,” October 20, 1946, 1.
<https://credo.library.umass.edu/cgi-bin/pdf.cgi?id=scua:mums312-b198-i047>

strong virile trade unions without race discrimination, with high wages, closed shop and decent conditions of work to beat back and hold in check the swarm of landlords, monopolists, and profiteers who are today sucking the blood out of this land.”³⁰ Du Bois advocated for a new economic system that the leaders of the SNYC all worked towards a socialist to an eventual communist society.

Both Du Bois and SNYC were anti-colonialists. He stated that the South “is the gateway to the colored millions of the West Indies, Central, and South America. Here is the straight path to the greater, freer truer world.” If the American South can be freed, then so can the global South. Towards the end of his keynote speech, he argued that it is nothing short of cowardice to surrender the land to the “thugs and lynchers, the mobs and profiteers, the monopolists and gamblers who today choke its soul and steal its resources.” The natural resources the land provides “belong to you the workers, black and white, and not to the thieves who hold them and use them to enslave you.” The way to save the South is to make the “Great Sacrifice... because you are embarked on a great and holy crusade, the emancipation of mankind black and white; the upbuilding of democracy; the breaking down, particularly here in the South, of forces of evil.” The speech embodied the purpose and radicalism of the organization. It expressed the importance of poor southern Black workers joining with other poor white workers to “build in the world a culture led by black folk and joined by peoples of all colors and all races without poverty, ignorance, and disease.”³¹ According to Du Bois, interracial solidarity was key to winning over the land.

³⁰ Du Bois, W.E.B, “Behold the Land,” October 20, 1946, 1.

³¹ Du Bois, W.E.B, “Behold the Land,” October 20, 1946, 2-3.

CHAPTER 3:

THE END, THE IMPACT, THE INFLUENCE

Although the FBI's counterintelligence program COINTELPRO did not officially start until 1956, the SNYC were still targeted and surveilled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The public hysteria of anti-communism and surveillance by the government ramped up during wartime in the early 20th century. For example, the Palmer Raids that happened between November 1919 to January 1920 involved the arrest and deportation of many suspected socialists, communists, and anarchists during the Red Scare, following the success of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in the Soviet Union. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and J. Edgar Hoover started the General Intelligence Division of the FBI to target leftists in 1919.³²

The targeting and surveillance by the FBI led to the demise of the SNYC. After WWII there was a second wave of the Red Scare spearheaded by McCarthyism. McCarthyism refers to a period in American history during the early to mid-twentieth century when Senator Joseph McCarthy led a series of hearings and investigations based on unfounded and paranoid allegations of subversive and communist activities. The SNYC fell victim to the red-baiting of that time. There was extreme danger attached to

³² Dehler, G. "Palmer Raids." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 27, 2022.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Palmer-Raids>.

being labeled a communist or socialist or being associated with any leftist organization.³³

A newspaper article from the *Evening Star* published on March 26, 1947” titled “Listed Among Red Groups” reported that the HUAC and Attorney General Thomas C. Clark listed the Southern Negro Youth Congress as communists. Esther Cooper Jackson described the end of the SNYC as a horrifying time:

Perhaps on instructions from Washington, when many things were being looked into and investigated, every effort was made to alienate people from the Youth Congress. As Jack mentioned, the last conference was broken up, churches were closed, people were jailed, and some received threatening phone calls. Some of us, at the same time, were getting older and were going on to other pursuits. I think that it could have continued if it hadn't been for the terror in the land. I think for young people it may be hard to realize the fright in this country where people were committing suicide, people were being indicted, and people lost their jobs. There was a whole number of Black people who worked in government at that time who lost their jobs because their names seemed to be similar to someone else's who was active in some cause.³⁴

She later described the McCarthy era as it “seemed as though it were a prefascist period taking place with the Un-American Activities Committee, with people under threat or pressure.”³⁵ An example of the “prefascist period” is when presidential and vice-presidential candidates Senator Glen Taylor and Henry Wallace of the Progressive Party came to speak at what would be the last regular meeting of the SNYC. The meeting was to be held at the 16th Street Baptist Church but had to be at a smaller church which happened to be the only church left in Birmingham to open its doors for the Congress.

³³Achter, P. J.. "McCarthyism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 5, 2022.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/McCarthyism>.

³⁴ Hatch, *Interview of Esther and James Jackson*, 1992.
<https://uab.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/interview-esther-james-jackson-v-hatch/docview/2352579859/se-2>

³⁵ Hatch, *Interview of Esther and James Jackson*, 1992.
<https://uab.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/interview-esther-james-jackson-v-hatch/docview/2352579859/se-2>

The church had to place segregation signs of “White Entrance” and “Colored Entrance.”

According to Esther Cooper Jackson, the last SNYC meeting ended like this:

The young minister there, who was a worker, defied the police by saying, "This is a House of God, not of Bull Connor. He has this city, but God has this church." He was God's instrument, so he opened the doors to it. He said that people shouldn't be disturbed about the signs, and they would be safe in this church. It was holy ground up until Bull Connor came and arrested Louis Burnham, Senator Taylor, and the minister himself and threw them all in jail. He sent the delegates out of town, with curfew and all. By sheer terror, he smashed this last meeting of the SNYC. Nevertheless, it left its historic mark.³⁶

In Taylor’s trial, the SYNC received the label as communists once again, which solidified that they were perceived as “un-American” and therefore an enemy of the state.³⁷ The SNYC quickly rose on HUAC’s radar as a subversive anti-American organization. Congressman Martin Dies of HUAC on January 3rd, 1940, submitted a report to the committee that the SNYC is a front organization of the Communist Party, and they are conducting un-American activities. Un-American activities were defined as “directed, controlled or subsidized by foreign governments or agencies” that want to transform the U.S. government and policies.³⁸ Edward Strong, the executive secretary of SNYC before Esther Cooper Jackson, in a letter to Congressman Dies, denied the allegations and exposed that the committee has no evidence of the claims. Additionally, they never properly told the organization that they were being investigated, which meant that they never wanted the actual truth. Strong firmly stated in the letter “It would seem

³⁶ Hatch, *Interview of Esther and James Jackson*, 1992.

<https://uab.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/interview-esther-james-jackson-v-hatch/docview/2352579859/se-2>

³⁷ *Nashville Banner* March 31, 1949 “Taylor Loses Motion for Mistrial”

³⁸ “Youth Group Scores Finding in Dies Report Says Committee Branded Southern Negro Youth Congress Unfairly.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967), Jan 27, 1940

that your committee has deliberately failed to investigate the most barbaric hangover from the Dark Ages known to the modern world, lynching, and burning to death innocent Negro men and women.” Strong called out the hypocrisy of being labeled “un-American” while there were millions of disenfranchised Black citizens in the United States.³⁹

Locally, SNYC also dealt with Eugene “Bull” Connor. Connor was one of the greatest American direct adversaries to Black people gaining suffrage and equal rights to public spaces. Before becoming Commissioner of Public Safety of Birmingham in 1937, Connor was a feared security man for the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company. During his first reign of terror, many strikers went missing and were never found or heard from again.⁴⁰ Connor as Commissioner of Public Safety, “used all the clout that he could muster to prevent the SNYC from carrying on its business as usual in the South by physically restraining members and supporters of the SNYC from holding public meetings.” Simultaneously, the FBI wiretapped SNYC members’ telephones, followed its leaders, and planted informants among its members.⁴¹ The organization did not survive after 1949 after being targeted, harassed, and arrested by both local police and the FBI. The same tactics are used in the 1950s and 1960s to end civil rights and Black power organizations. However, by the 1960s, Birmingham’s police brutality became international news, and Connor and the South were on full display to the world for racist and sanctioned violence. Exposing the horrors of the changed the course of democracy

³⁹ “Ask Dies to Investigate Ku Klux Klan,” *Chicago Defender*, November 11, 1939.

⁴⁰ Eskew, Glen T. *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997, 89.

⁴¹ Hughes, “We Demand Our Rights,” 48.

for Black people in the United States, just like what W.E.B. told the South Carolina audience during the “Behold the Land” speech.

The Impact

Southern Negro Youth Congress’s largest impact is seen in the Civil Rights Movement fifteen to twenty years later in the 1950s and 1960s with organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). As stated in section two, the primary focus of the Congress was Black Southern youth and to educate and organize young Black college students and workers to fight for civil liberties. The same conceptual framework applied in the 1960s with organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. SNCC was made up of young Black students who saw the need to organize and demonstrate for their rights and played an indispensable role in the Civil Rights Movement.

Youth protests like the Children’s Crusades in the Birmingham campaign in May 1963, used the same conceptual framework as well. Activist Rev. James Bevel strategized to use children as protestors and put them at the forefront to join the movement as protesters on the front line. Civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. initially did not feel comfortable allowing children to be put in harm’s way. However, the children wanted the opportunity to protest for their equality.⁴² The Black youth’s willingness to get together, knowing there was a strong possibility of harm is comparable to the reason why the SNYC started in the first place. The youth’s importance to change is exemplified in the SNYC and that idea is carried to the next generation. Since the

⁴² Cook, Erin, and Leanna Racine. “The Children’s Crusade and the Role of Youth in the African American Freedom Struggle.” *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no. 1 (2005): 31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163740>.

SNYC was headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama where the Civil Rights Movement was center stage, their concept of youth activism influenced the next generation's work toward equality.

Southern Black college students were an important demographic to the social progress of Black people in the United States. Black college students played integral parts in both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s. Two founders of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, Bobby Seale, and Huey P. Newton were students at Merritt College of Oakland, California in 1966. The one way that the SNYC inspired the Black Panther Party is through its radical ideology. Both the SNYC and Black Panther Party leaders both subscribed to Marxist anti-capitalist politics. The SNYC cared immensely about the state of Black youth and workers and that same sentiment is applied the next twenty years after the end of the SNYC as Black movement leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr who before he was assassinated, started organizing workers and the inequalities of capitalism and speaking out against the imperialist Vietnam War.

Leaders of the Next Generation and the City of Birmingham

Another way that the SNYC paved the way for the success of future civil rights organizations and people to be successful is that people who later becomes influential in the Civil Rights Movement and in the late 1960s and early 1970s have roots in the organization. The primary example of this is activist Edgar Daniel Nixon. E.D. Nixon worked in both the Southern Negro Youth Congress and then later in the Civil Rights Movement alongside Dr. King in Montgomery.⁴³ As a young man, Nixon worked as a

⁴³ Hatch, *Interview of Esther and James Jackson*, 1992.
<https://uab.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/interview-esther-james-jackson-v-hatch/docview/2352579859/se-2>

Pullman sleeping car porter. While working, he met A. Phillip Randolph, then leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porter, a union founded in 1925 for railway workers. Randolph is also one of the founders of the National Negro Congress. Nixon became a follower of Randolph and began his activism in the South and specifically in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1945, Nixon was elected as president of the NAACP, and he worked on desegregated jobs like the Montgomery Police Department and public transportation. He and his NAACP branch decided to make Rosa Park's arrest to be the case to challenge segregated public transportation, instead of fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin who refused to give her seat to a white man first, thinking that she was not mature enough to withstand the scrutiny and it would garner more sympathy if it happened to someone who was in the middle class.⁴⁴

Another example of a famous activist having roots in the SNYC is Angela Davis. Davis was born in 1944 and grew up in Birmingham, Alabama. Davis's mother, Sallye Davis, worked in the Southern Negro Youth Congress when it was headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama. Furthermore, in an interview she stated that her mom's best friend Dorothy Burnham informed her in the film *The Great Debaters* (2007) in the scene the character Denzel Washington played, Melvin Tolson is organizing black and white tenant farmers is "apparently based on the work of the SNYC" and Burnham told her "That was our organization. That was the SNYC. That is the work that we did."⁴⁵ The organization is at the root of one of the most influential Black-American communist's works.

⁴⁴Brooks, F. Erik, "Edgar Daniel "E. D." Nixon," <http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/Article/h-1355>.

⁴⁵Davis, Angela, and Tony Platt. "Interview with Angela Davis." *Social Justice* 40, no. 1/2 (131-132) (2013): 38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24361660>.

SNYC had the most impact is where it was headquartered for most of its time, Birmingham, Alabama. Although it was first started in Richmond, Virginia, leaders decided to move it to Birmingham. The city is referred to as the “magic city” because of its rapid economic growth during the Industrial Revolution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the southern states, Black people were working both agricultural and industrial jobs and SNYC felt that Birmingham at the time was the most advantageous place to reach all the South. One reason is that the Birmingham area itself has a rich history of labor unions and strikes, especially in the mining and steel industry where numerous Black people unionized for better work conditions and better pay.⁴⁶ If the Southern Negro Youth Congress was not headquartered in Birmingham, the Civil Rights Movement would not have reached the successes that it did. Birmingham’s foundation of Black labor and equal rights activism in the 1930s and 1940s by the SNYC, primed the city to make a major democratic change in the 1960s.

By the time of the 1950s and 1960s in Birmingham, there was a clear divide between the Black bourgeoisie and the Black working class, especially in terms of what progress meant. During the Birmingham campaign, leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Reverend Ralph Abernathy often criticized the Black middle class and the Black traditional class for not joining in the movement and actively working against it because they benefited from the status quo. Black traditional leaders were often in negotiations with the white leadership class, so it gave presented the image that all

⁴⁶ Camp, Jordan T., and Robin D. G. Kelley. “Black Radicalism, Marxism, and Collective Memory: An Interview with Robin D. G. Kelley.” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2013): 220-1. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41809558>.

classes agreed, however, that was not the case in the beginning.⁴⁷ By the 1950s and 1960s, Birmingham's Black masses forced the Black middle classes' hand to join the movement.

Freedomways

SNYC influenced the future generations in most ways that are not tangible, however, one example of influence is the periodical, *Freedomways*. *Freedomways* was a periodical newspaper created by W.E.B. Du Bois and later edited by Esther Cooper Jackson who worked as the founding managing editor of *Freedomways*. The periodical was originally spearheaded by Shirley Graham Du Bois and Louis Burnham, who also worked on Paul Robeson's *Freedom* newspaper. However, Burnham passed away before he could get started on the forum. Along with Esther Cooper Jackson, her husband James E. Jackson and historian John Henrik Clarke were also founders of the periodical.

The magazine lasted from 1961-1985 and during its time it published works from Black and Pan-Africanist activists like Kwame Nkrumah, James Baldwin, Paul Robeson, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Walker, and Nikki Giovanni.⁴⁸ Like the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the magazine served as a connection between the radicalism of the Left and the struggle of Black people. Just like the SNYC, the literary forum operated within the space of Black radicalism focusing on fighting the injustices that Black people domestically and the oppression of colonized people endured globally.

⁴⁷ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 230-232.

⁴⁸ Vassell, Olive, and Todd Steven Burroughs. "No Common Ground Left: *Freedomways*, Black Communists vs. Black Nationalism/Pan-Africanism." *Journal of Pan African Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 2016): 26-27. <https://search-ebscohost-com.uab.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=113894669&site=ehost-live>.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

The work, people, and focus of the SNYC of the late 1930s throughout the 1940s headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama influence is essential to the trajectory of the social change that happens in the next twenty to thirty years. The leaders like Edward Strong, James Jackson, Esther Cooper Jackson, Louis Burnham, and Dorothy Burnham as Black communists helped organize thousands of young Black folks to focus on what they needed. The work of the SNYC included organizing workers into unions, exposing police brutality and murders, helping Black soldiers returning from war, voting drives, calling for politicians to be removed from office, hosting conferences in different cities and around the South, and protesting segregation. Their work is anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, interracial, and materially focused. The significance of this organization is it showcased the leadership of Black women. SNYC's first project was organizing a union of Black women tobacco workers. Without the work of the Black women leaders like Esther Cooper Jackson, Dorothy Burnham, and Charlotte Hawkins Brown, the SNYC would not have had the impact that it did.

The end did not happen abruptly, but slowly and systemically. Surveillance, harassment, and repression all came at the hand of both the local and federal governments. Members were jailed, intimidated, and targeted by the police. Local police like the Birmingham Police Department and its leader Eugene "Bull" Connor harassed,

arrested, and surveilled Southern Negro Youth Congress activists, so much so that Congress ceased all operations. Some members left Birmingham and the South completely and joined other organizations. Esther and James Jackson moved to New York in 1950 and continued their social activism.⁴⁹

SNYC's work, and history should no longer fade into the background in the history of the Civil Rights and leftist Black Power movements. Black communists and radicals are at the foundation of both movements. Therefore, the historical frameworks of both movements should focus on the crucial and unsung role of Black communists.

⁴⁹ Hatch, James Vernon. Interview of Esther and James Jackson by James V. Hatch. New York: 1992. <https://uab.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/interview-esther-james-jackson-v-hatch/docview/2352579859/se-2>

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