

## CHAPTER 5

# "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work"

Harlem's unionizing efforts coincided with another sort of jobs campaign: one to win clerical positions for qualified blacks in white-owned Harlem businesses. If some unions came to understand the advantages of including blacks and treating them as equals, most employers did not. Hiring blacks for menial tasks or threatening to replace white workers with lower-paid blacks served many private employers well, and the Depression saw no shift in their thinking comparable with that of many unions.

In the absence of laws barring racial discrimination in private industry, black political action became the critical force in securing positions, particularly skilled and white-collar, for qualified black workers. Numerous Harlem organizations devoted their energies to this struggle, relying on the activism of the Harlem community. Many considerations made this an attractive issue. Non-manual employment would grant higher status to the entire community. The displacement of black workers by white all over the city intensified black frustration with the inequality of economic opportunity and generated greater sympathy for a "buy black" or "hire black" solution. The energies of middle-class blacks who had lost their white-collar and skilled jobs to whites galvanized black organizations and the wider community. Perhaps the unskilled also hoped to receive jobs from middle-class blacks once the latter had won white-collar employment and opened businesses. Certainly the absence of blacks in these positions was visible to the entire black community. Thus, challenging discrimination in white-collar work captured the imagination of thousands of blacks, including those who could not benefit from it personally. This effort became known as the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign, which used mass protests and boycotts as its most important weapons. The story of this campaign offers an example of how the varied political expressions of the community came together in a broad movement. It also suggests the strengths and limits of such alliances in this era.

With a population already organized in disparate and diverse groups, Harlem needed only a focus to unify protest action. Aldon Morris found in his study of the roots of the modern civil rights movement that political efforts were most successful in communities or "movement centers" that already contained organized groups, generally church-centered. Existing networks could then be used to organize a broad-based and unified campaign in the local community. Harlem in the Depres-

sion was such a "movement center." Church-based programs, fraternal and women's groups, and political and social organizations already existed, and many individuals held membership in several simultaneously. Thus Harlem leaders had a network in place and could work (theoretically) in unison when the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns spread across the country to Harlem. The New York effort was aided further by the presence of a charismatic minister, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who managed for a time to unify the diverse strands of the movement.<sup>1</sup>

But while this campaign tapped the talents of existing groups and fostered new connections, it also gave voice to those who dissented from the mainstream effort. The community agreed on the broad goal of increased employment for black Harlemites, but disagreed on other goals, and on the means to achieve them. More radical activists, impatient for additional and more dramatic victories, first splintered the moderate movement. Later they moved the mainstream toward more radical positions. If black leaders organized and galvanized the Harlem community, the community in turn pushed black leaders to move farther and more energetically than established organizations are often wont to do.

Black leaders sought to create one coherent movement, but the diversity of Harlem's population proved an obstacle. The problems facing the black community were deep and intractable. To make a significant impact on the practices of white employers, black political efforts had to be both strong in numbers and unified in tactics and goals. Yet the diversity of the backgrounds of the participants often meant conflicting political beliefs and aspirations. Thus, while coalitions of the various black organizations provided numerical strength, they could not always coordinate strategy, since constituent groups viewed the problem of discrimination from different perspectives and often sought different goals. Bitter sectarian battles often raged, focusing energies inward rather than on white employers. At first, therefore, the "Don't Buy" movement was unable to press for change as vigorously as necessary, nor could it maintain a presence effective enough to prevent employers from backsliding once gains had been won.

Ultimately, though, as with most successful political movements, diversity provided the movement's real strength. A coalition allowed for broader community participation because individuals with differing needs and outlooks could find a home within a movement that embraced varied positions. Because the several member organizations served different constituencies, joint efforts spread information to all segments of black society.

Sometimes the programs of one group inadvertently strengthened others. While vocal extremists most dramatically publicized the struggle, for example, their tactics frightened some who, though mobilized by the radicals' exhortations, joined with the more moderate groups within the coalition. Much of the movement's successes can in fact be attributed to the diversity of coalition membership; the agitation of the more radical organizations convinced those at whom the protest efforts were directed of the need to negotiate with centrist groups to forestall the possibility of facing more radical demands. In sum, diversity offered great possibilities and imposed severe limits on the development of political organization and coalition-building in the Harlem community.

An ever-changing coalition, the "Don't Buy" campaign sought to boycott stores in Harlem that refused to hire blacks in white-collar positions. It took almost a decade for Harlem activists to organize a sufficiently wide, yet sufficiently unified campaign to win such jobs. Because it sought to place already trained and educated blacks in white-collar employment in existing white stores rather than to establish training programs or community-owned cooperatives, the movement could be viewed as having primarily middle-class goals, yet it galvanized the poor as well as the middle class to action.

### Building a Base

As with unionizing, the drive to place blacks in white stores began in the 1920s. In 1925 the *Amsterdam News* urged the use of consumer pressure to increase the number of local jobs for blacks. The New York Urban League, the NAACP, and the Harlem branch of the State Employment Service had been fighting for such goals for years, albeit through quiet negotiation, not mass action. The NYUL, for example, through its Cooperative Committee on Employment, wrote letters to merchants in 1926 and surveyed 300 Harlem stores on their attitude toward hiring blacks. Little was accomplished. The Negro League for Equal Political and Civic Rights surveyed Harlem businesses the next year with the aim of selecting three or four that refused to hire blacks and trying to "correct this inequality. A peaceful but forceful manner will be carried out to induce the proprietors . . . to change their methods. Failing, the combined strength of the League will be brought to bear to the end that the places under watch will feel the loss of patronage without which they cannot function." It appears the Negro League's "combined strength" was not enough to persuade any owners.<sup>2</sup>

The onset of the Depression impelled some further action. In a 1930 speech to the New York Urban League, Joseph Bibb, the editor of the *Chicago Whip*, described that city's "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign and suggested that a similar effort be launched in New York. He reminded his listeners that whites owned most of the businesses in Chicago's black neighborhoods, just as they did in Harlem. Through a combination of boycotts, picketing, and meetings with white business leaders, blacks in Chicago had secured jobs—white-collar jobs—in several local businesses. While this proposal had been made before, this time many Harlem political groups and coalitions explicitly endorsed the idea. Still, little progress was made for the first few years.<sup>3</sup>

In the forefront of the early efforts to encourage local stores to hire blacks was "a group of serious and determined women" organized as the Harlem Housewives League. By 1931, less than a year after its inception, the group claimed over a thousand members, meeting every Monday night in the NYUL building. Its leaders, by and large, were better off, prominent in the community, and had long been politically active. A. Philip Randolph's wife Lucille, for example, was the group's vice-president, and Bessaye Bearden, journalist and activist, served as publicity chairman. The women visited the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P), Woolworth's, and "other chain stores having branches throughout Harlem," and

requested that the management hire blacks as "clerks, messengers, etc. in proportion to the amount of money spent in those stores by Negroes in Harlem." When Blumstein's, a large local department store, hired a black doorman and elevator operator, the Housewives League thanked the owner "for this recognition of the purchasing power of Negroes." The group encouraged all Harlem wives to shop only at stores that belonged to the Colored Merchants' Association or that hired blacks. Even more than the Urban League, which at least urged businesses to allow blacks access to better-quality jobs, the Housewives League accepted the given limits on black occupational mobility. It demanded only that employers hire more blacks; it made no efforts to ensure blacks would be hired for non-menial jobs. The League did not believe it had the resources to wage such a battle.<sup>4</sup>

Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., headed Harlem's Citizen's Committee on More and Better Jobs, which, in addition to collecting food and clothing for the poor, tried to organize a drive to boycott stores refusing to hire black employees. Other churches and political organizations did the same. Through its "New Economic Program," the NAACP negotiated with white merchants in black neighborhoods like Harlem to hire black clerks. Still, these early Depression programs could devote little energy to the cause of white-collar employment. Because of the lack of relief funds, most gave priority to the requirements of the desperately needy.

These efforts indicated a general recognition of the employment discrimination problem, but without a broad base, none posed enough of an economic threat to have any impact on white employers. Nor was there a sufficiently high level of awareness in the community of the potential for black action to establish such a base. As James Allen, president of the local branch of the NAACP, complained, "I don't know any section in New York City that is harder hit by unemployment than Harlem and I don't know of any section that is doing so little about it."<sup>5</sup> Harlemites were devoting their energies to "making do" in the sudden hard times.

Internal differences also slowed the movement's progress, for each group involved in the effort to increase black employment sought different and often contradictory goals. Much of the impetus for the struggle had come from blacks who believed that integration into the larger world of economic opportunities offered the only hope for black workers, but black nationalists joined the effort to further their own cause. Black nationalism cut across class lines. Many middle-class and professional blacks joined with Garveyites in advocating the creation of a separate economy, since a commitment to "buy black" meant more business for them.

Thus, early in the Depression, a few black merchants launched their own version of a jobs campaign. An advertisement for an African-American clothing store in the *American and West Indian News* featured the headline, "American Negroes Competing Against Jews in Haberdashery World." The rest of the advertisement described the black-owned store, its goods, prices, and service, and made no further mention of Jews. Rather, the plea for race solidarity allowed merchants to use the campaign to boost sales, announcing

a drive for more and better business . . . a profit sharing plan that will not only help to reduce expenses but also decrease unemployment. Colored businessmen invariably employ colored help. Each of us CAN and WILL add from 1 to 10 employees, if you will

support us. We are doing our utmost to give you low prices, correct weight, and superior service, in return for your patronage. Think it over. Trade with Negro stores or only with those that employ colored help.

These merchants designed a "Race Loyalty" button for blacks "not ashamed of their Negro ancestry" to be worn by those who agreed to shop only at such stores. The button proclaimed: "I hereby pledge myself to buy from Race Enterprises whenever and wherever practicable (or from stores employing Negro help) thereby helping to create MORE and BETTER jobs right here in Harlem." As August Meier and Elliott Rudwick point out, for black businessmen the campaign was "essentially petit bourgeois" in nature. It sought to increase their sales and profits rather than to alter the structure of black employment opportunities.

Not all black leaders supported these "buy black" attempts. E. Franklin Frazier, for instance, insisted black shopkeepers simply wanted Harlem to "be reserved as their field of exploitation." Nevertheless, this drive to support black businesses as the best hope for black employment did enjoy ample and continued support in the community. The Reverend John Johnson of St. Martin's Protestant Episcopal Church preached: "If you want to do something for the Negro race today . . . you can start right here. . . . We must spend our money among our own people."<sup>6</sup>

A further barrier to united action was the disagreement within the community over whether boycotts (and later, pickets) were an appropriate or effective solution, especially in light of the ongoing debate over black nationalism versus integration into the larger work force. The *Amsterdam News* editorialized that even if every store in Harlem hired black help, thousands more would remain unemployed if they could not find jobs elsewhere in the city. Why antagonize white employers with boycotts and protests, and possibly jeopardize that much larger pool of jobs by provoking a white backlash? The *News* feared an intensification of segregation outside Harlem in retaliation. Most white Harlem stores also advertised heavily in the *Amsterdam News*, which may help explain that paper's position.

Black businessmen had their own reservations about a "Don't Buy" campaign. While they supported the drive to patronize black stores, several felt less happy with the concurrent effort to persuade white employers to hire black help. They feared white stores would then woo still more black business away from their own establishments.<sup>7</sup>

The Socialist party and the Negro Labor Committee opposed the jobs campaign because they believed it conflicted with their primary goal of integrating blacks into the AFL (and later the CIO). They feared the campaign would antagonize unions because it ignored union hiring agreements and negotiated directly with employers. They also worried that employers might seize the opportunity to hire blacks at sub-union wages or as strikebreakers, and that the effort would generally divert energy and attention from their trade union struggle. The words of some campaign advocates justified that fear. In a defense of the boycott effort, Vera Johns noted that white store owners did not hire blacks out of love but rather "because it is found that the colored worker can do better work and may be paid a lesser wage." Even in the campaign for economic equality, at least some accepted unequal pay scales for white and black.<sup>8</sup>

Another group conspicuously absent from the action was Harlem's Communist party. Seeking the solidarity of the working class, black and white, the party feared increased racial antagonism as a result of a campaign that might cause white workers to be fired to make room for black. Instead, it sought to redirect protest energies towards class-oriented problems, such as blue-collar unemployment and inadequate relief—problems local boycotts and pickets could not solve but that required a far broader organizing base. Also, until the Popular Front period, party members were reluctant to work with organizations that sought solutions within the capitalist system. When the jobs campaign did become active after 1933, the party organized a parallel movement called the Committee Against Discrimination of Negro Workers on Jobs. This awkwardly titled group demanded the hiring of blacks in Harlem stores without firing whites. By 1935, the "Don't Buy" campaign was having such success that the party did join the picket line for a time.

Interestingly, the NYUL and NAACP had doubts about the jobs campaign for similar reasons. The Urban League feared the potential for increased racial antagonism in the jobs campaign would jeopardize the tenuous cooperation it had established with white employers elsewhere in the city. Yet rather than stay aloof from the "Don't Buy" effort, the NYUL sponsored letter-writing campaigns and used personal connections to promote black hiring in white-owned shops. For example, in its attempts to place blacks in department stores, white League members sought to persuade white store owners of the advantages of hiring black help. Next, NYUL leaders would "cultivate a top industrialist" and ask him to persuade others. The League also sponsored Vocational Opportunity Campaigns reminding blacks of existing opportunities and urging whites to provide more.<sup>9</sup>

When asked what his organization had done for black employment, James Hubert, executive director of the NYUL, replied:

A. The Urban League has written numerous letters and has had one conference. . . . It has cooperated with other organizations. . . .

Q. What has the league done by way of protesting publicly?

A. That is not the Urban League's method of procedure—not through protest. . . . [That] may be the way to get what you want, but it is not our method.

The NYUL trod a difficult road in the Depression, determined to remain visibly active in black efforts to improve economic opportunity, yet struggling to maintain its good relations with the white business and professional community. The League recognized the growing black activism and sought to use it as leverage but feared it could alienate the League's white allies. The resulting schizophrenia prompted pronouncements such as this one in 1933:

There is no doubt that this prolonged unemployment period has had its effects upon the political and social ideology of the Negro. . . . Throughout the country Negroes are expressing continued dissatisfaction with an industrial system fraught with such dire unemployment. . . . It should not be concluded, however, that the whole Negro group has become "radical." . . . [Negro business and professional leaders are] in the main,

very conservative . . . [while Socialists and Communists are followed] largely by sections of the working classes, students and the so-called intellectuals.

Similarly, the NAACP diverged in two important ways from the jobs campaign. First, it sought city-wide opportunities for blacks, focusing on questions of segregation as well as employment. Second, the NAACP preferred different methods than direct street action. The organization challenged the status quo of segregation, for example, by taking discriminatory public facilities to court, since such segregation was illegal in New York. NAACP efforts apparently had an impact on such practices: "Of late, law suits have compelled many . . . to alter their policy," commented the Federal Writers' Project. Still, because the organization's major thrust was litigation, few in the black community had any deep or active involvement with it. In job discrimination cases the NAACP generally became involved when the discrimination was obvious, as in the struggle to integrate the work force on the Eighth Avenue subway or to place black nurses in municipal hospitals, and worked behind the scenes rather than joining in visible public actions.<sup>11</sup>

The majority of black leaders, however, supported the boycott efforts. By 1934 they were able to begin organizing a formal campaign as New Deal programs freed them somewhat from meeting the immediate needs of the hungry. Furthermore, grass-roots community activism had been building, as Harlemites took to the streets in ever-increasing numbers to protest evictions or to demand equal treatment from relief and municipal agencies. Each episode of activism inspired more. The unwillingness of moderate groups like the NAACP to embrace more activist or confrontational tactics left those who clamored for mass action to form their own organizations and thus dominate the early jobs campaign. The impatience of many in the black community, their frustration at the seeming foot-dragging of the NAACP, the Urban League, and others, had helped spur new mass movements for black jobs in Chicago, Baltimore, Detroit, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere, and would do so in Harlem as well.

In February of 1934, Effa Manley called a meeting of "progressive women" to discuss the employment situation on 125th Street. After surveying the problem, she requested help from local black ministers. First to respond was the Reverend John Johnson of Saint Martin's Protestant Episcopal Church. He and Fred Moore, publisher of the *New York Age*, called a mass meeting to form the Citizens' League for Fair Play. As the Reverend William Imes told it:

The next step was to bring the matter before the group of the Special Citizens' League. It was not . . . [our] desire to form another organization. We were already in too many. [If Johnson would agree to run it] there are some of us in other churches, lodges, labor unions and the like who will be very glad to combat this particular effort to displace colored people or discourage colored people from seeking employment. . . . A great many organizations came in. The thing was rather new and got some publicity. . . . Finally it seemed that nothing short of the actual demonstration in the form of picketing would do.<sup>12</sup>

Participants included eighteen churches and forty-four other Harlem groups, including women's, political, fraternal, and social clubs; and business organizations. Street-corner orators like Ira Kemp, Georgia-born president of the African

Patriotic League, and Arthur Reid from Barbados, both black nationalists from the Garvey movement who had been preaching their versions of black separatism from soapboxes, joined with the more traditional activists of the black churches, the *New York Age*, the Unity Democratic Club, a Fusion-Republican club, the Cosmopolitan Social and Tennis Club, Young West Indian Congress, Premier Literary Circle, and the New York Chapter of the UNIA to promote black employment—evidence of the diversity of the Harlem groups involved in political action.<sup>13</sup>

Sufi Abdul Hamid and his Negro Industrial Clerical Alliance worked alongside the coalition. Hamid, who claimed Egyptian ancestry (but who was actually native-born) and dressed dramatically in flowing robes and turban, had come from the successful Chicago campaign a year before. There he and his followers had won 300 jobs in two months with the use of pickets requesting blacks not to shop at stores that practiced systematic racism in hiring. It was this early success that prompted the *Chicago Whip* and others to join the struggle there. But his anti-white slogans and black separatist arguments alienated many in Chicago, as they would in Harlem, and led the *Whip* to launch a parallel campaign rather than join his efforts. Now, through street corner speeches in Harlem, Sufi Hamid carried on the rhetoric and tactics that had worked in Chicago.

Division on the goals of the jobs campaign had not disappeared with the formation of the Citizens' League for Fair Play. The nationalist political beliefs of Hamid, Kemp, and Reid could not be reconciled easily with the more traditional views of those in the coalition eager to expand the range of opportunities available to blacks in the larger work force. Furthermore, the participants were not always ideologically self-consistent. The fact that the Reverend John Johnson also preached "buy black" sermons and that the *Amsterdam News* first recommended putting pressure on white Harlem store owners but later opposed this strategy indicate that the boundaries between the people who believed in integration and those who sought black nationalist goals were often quite fluid. Personal disagreements played their part in creating internal tensions as well. Clashes between Hamid's group and the UNIA, for example, had become so fierce in 1932 that police temporarily barred both from street speaking.<sup>14</sup>

All agreed on the primary goal of black employment in a period of intense hardship. In an interview with the *Amsterdam News*, Kemp explained his activism: "Harlem in 1932 was in a sorry condition. The depression and discrimination against Negroes and the suffering that was the lot of these people forced me to action." But the consensus between the nationalists and the moderates reached no further. This created severe internal tensions that eventually led to the dissolution of the coalition.

### The First Campaign

The Citizens' League for Fair Play chose as its first target Blumstein's on 125th Street, Harlem's largest department store. The Reverend Mr. Johnson preached to his congregants: "I want our meeting this morning to begin a 12 day campaign to persuade Blumstein's department store where 140 persons work (with 16 colored menials) to hire colored girls as sales clerks."<sup>15</sup>

The coalition began with traditional tactics. Approaching Mr. Blumstein, CLFP representatives reminded him of the volume of black patronage and requested that he hire blacks. He replied that he did in fact have several blacks in his employ. All worked in menial positions, however, and Blumstein refused to hire black clerks. He promised to consider the possibility of doing so in the fall, when new positions became available, but insisted that currently he had a sufficient number of workers.

The CLFP found this unacceptable. Churches raised money to print thousands of leaflets advertising a protest parade, and the League set up a picket line in front of the store. The Reverend Mr. Imes testified at a hearing:

... The Reverend Johnson and I were there, just as many other clergymen were there and numbers of men and women from various organizations and leagues. The real demonstration went on for a number of weeks. . . .

Q. Is it not a fact that some of our most respected and qualified citizens in Harlem took part? . . . There has been propaganda . . . it is done by the lower element.

A. In all these troubles there have been cross sections of people involved. You will find society people, religious people, atheists, you will find cross sections of each community interested in these problems.

Carrying signs that read "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work," picketers pleaded with would-be shoppers to take their business elsewhere. League leaflets requested "all self-respecting people of Harlem to REFUSE TO TRADE WITH L. M. BLUMSTEIN . . . Refuse to Buy There!" At times the pickets became disruptive. Several shoppers reported that picketers seized their bags and destroyed the purchases inside or yelled derogatory remarks. Some picketers pulled patrons' hair. While boycotts were a time-honored tactic for otherwise powerless black communities, pickets were newer, reflecting the shift toward broad-based, visible political strategies. The numbers of participants were impressive. Between 400 and 1,500 attended any given weekly meeting, and the "honor roll" of picketers included 58 men and 83 women who marched regularly.

Blumstein bowed to the pressure and the threat of lost revenue, particularly acute in a depression, and agreed to hire fifteen black women as clerks immediately "to offset any loss of good will," and twenty more in the fall. Yet his difficulties were not over. As he explained to an interviewer in 1935, "the store naturally picked the most attractive personalities among the Negro girls." He meant that Blumstein's selected only light-skinned women. Kemp and Reid, the black nationalists of the picket committee, protested vigorously. They argued that light and mulatto women received employment, "while black ones did all the [picket] work." Again, Blumstein agreed. As he told the story, "This [complaint] was remedied, and Reverend Johnson seemed satisfied." The CLFP called off the picket. Other local stores, fearing pickets and loss of sales themselves, also promised to hire black clerks. Woolworth's, for example, agreed to hire thirty-five.<sup>16</sup>

It is not surprising that Reid, a West Indian and a follower of Garvey, made an issue out of color. In the West Indies color distinctions among blacks determined social status and economic class to a large extent. The lighter one's skin, the higher one's status. This suggests that to Kemp and Reid, the issue was one of class as well

as race—lower-class (dark) blacks worked for change, while upper-class (light-skinned) blacks benefited. This charge of class bias was valid, in part. By seeking only to obtain white-collar positions, the campaign mainly helped blacks with middle-class skills, since they were most likely to be qualified for such jobs. Nevertheless, in a sense it was unfair to blame the CLFP for fulfilling its explicitly stated goal of placing white-collar workers in appropriate (middle-class) jobs. Moreover, Kemp and Reid did not acknowledge that, as with other ethnic and minority groups, the potential for unskilled job opportunities would increase once educated and skilled blacks rose in the economic world and established businesses with their own labor needs.

Although the association of lighter skin with higher class had no legal basis in American society, Reid's charge did have resonance for native-born dark-skinned blacks. Historically, many slave masters and, later, white employers demonstrated a bias toward lighter-skinned blacks (as Blumstein had), so economic level, social status, and color did overlap to some extent. Presumably, Reid hoped his charges of bias would win him the allegiance of the dark-skinned, the West Indians, and the poor.

Kemp's and Reid's accusation of color discrimination also represented an attempt to change the jobs campaign into a nationalist movement represented by "true" (dark-skinned) blacks, equating dark skin with race pride. In the spirit of Marcus Garvey, Kemp and Reid told a *New York Age* reporter they were "black people, not Negroes." Ultimately, they hoped blacks would fill all Harlem jobs, creating an all-black, independent economy there. Finally, Kemp and Reid broke from the CLFP to organize a more strongly nationalist Harlem Labor Union, Incorporated. Most members were young and from the West Indies. When Kemp died two years later, Reid continued to run it.

The separation from the Citizens' League was also the result of a more personal power struggle. In part, the color issue was a screen for the struggle to control job allocation. Reid's picket line was sustained by men and women who joined it to gain employment. Since under the terms of the League agreement Blumstein's was not obligated to hire his people, Reid felt his power base was threatened and he left the coalition. Despite the Blumstein's victory, then, the color issue and internal disension splintered the Citizens' League.<sup>17</sup>

Sufi Abdul Hamid was no more satisfied with the Blumstein's settlement than were Kemp and Reid. He wanted Blumstein's and other white-owned stores to hire more black clerks—and members of his own group—and to guarantee job security. According to Mr. Snyder, manager of the 125th Street store of the W. T. Grant Company chain, he "was approached by Abdul Hamid who wanted the manager to place some of his followers in jobs in the store." The interviewer concluded: "It appears that Hamid was not interested in the employment of Negroes generally but only those who were his 'disciples.'"<sup>18</sup> This claim would be leveled again. Both Kemp's group and the Negro Industrial Clerical Alliance reinstated their picket lines at Blumstein's. Hamid demanded Blumstein hire seventy-five blacks, with a provision against arbitrary firing. The Alliance also picketed Beck's Shoe Store on 125th Street with similar demands. The *New York Age*, until this point a staunch supporter of the jobs campaign, lamented the behavior of the two groups. It

described Reid's organization in the article "Renegade 'Boycott Committee' Runs Wild, Assaults Shoppers":

Intimidating store-keepers, assaulting shoppers and by a campaign of maliciousness with no regard as to the results of their vicious tactics, a group of members of the Citizens' League . . . have broken away from the parent body, constituted themselves a separate group . . . and are demanding complete control of the allocating of jobs to Negroes in 125th street stores. With propaganda against Negroes of light complexion, they are charging that the girls employed by L. M. Blumstein's Department Store are not dark enough to suit them and have even gone so far as to demand of employers that light colored clerks be fired and men and women associated with their organization be hired in their stead. . . . Their tactics are said to be the same as those used by racketeers.

These pickets became disruptive—or effective—enough for the merchants to seek redress from the city government. According to the president of the Board of Aldermen in September of 1934:

I have had considerable complaint during the last few weeks from merchants throughout the northern end of Harlem in the colored section, complaining that several colored organizations are picketing their places of business.

The first effort is an attempt to compel the employment of colored persons, then, where colored persons are employed, some of the organizations object to the light or dark color of the employees, and attempt to dictate to the storekeepers first as to the kind of colored employees, then the positions in which they are to be placed, and they finally wish to dictate the personnel themselves.

The merchants claimed they were "perfectly willing to employ a fair percentage of colored people provided they are competent to fill the positions, but they do not feel called upon to appoint to positions certain personnel dictated by various groups, nor to create unnecessary positions to which colored help may be employed, nor to discharge one set of colored help and substitute another." This claim is disingenuous, as the merchants demonstrated very little "perfect willingness" to hire black clerks from the Citizens' League picket, either. White store owners complained that black clerks were poorly trained, and that both black and white patronage fell after black clerks were employed. They also admitted, however, that the newly hired clerks "learned readily enough."<sup>19</sup>

Hamid was arrested for disorderly conduct and otherwise hindered by police several times, but he continued the picket until the A. S. Beck Shoe Company received a court injunction. On October 31, 1934, New York's Supreme Court ruled that picketing was illegal because there was no labor dispute. By this time, the Citizens' League had disavowed the increasingly confrontational actions of the pickets, and the black press almost universally condemned it. John Johnson reported he was unhappy with "the uncontrollable forces [the] movement had unleashed." All the opponents of black nationalism rushed to assert the superiority of their approach and heap criticism on Hamid, Kemp, and Reid. James Hubert lambasted the

"soapbox orators who . . . heckle and vilify publicly anyone and every other organization that is attempting to deal with the problems at hand . . . a most disgusting scene."<sup>20</sup>

Hamid reorganized his picketers into the AfroAmerican Federation of Labor, reasoning that a union picket would be considered legal. The state Supreme Court ruled otherwise, recognizing that a title did not make a union. Hamid left the business of organizing in 1935 to marry "policy queen" Madame Stephanie St. Claire and found the Temple of Tranquillity on Morningside Drive, which operated a cooperative vegetable market and a garage. He died in a plane crash in 1938 during an attempt to rise (literally) higher than Father Divine, whom he perceived as his foremost rival.<sup>21</sup>

Without the broad-based picket, the hard-won triumphs of the Citizens' League evaporated. Other stores on 125th Street that had agreed to hire blacks never did. Blumstein's kept the first fifteen black women on staff, but never hired the promised twenty in the fall. Without a continuing, visible presence, the League could not force store owners to keep their agreement. Meeting in early 1935, the League found half of the blacks who had won clerical jobs in 1934 had been laid off. Without the legal right to picket, the Citizens' League collapsed. Alternative strategies, such as leafleting or using church pulpits to publicize the boycotts, were certainly still possible, but the League would not or did not adopt them. In view of the large numbers of participants in church activities and the centrality of churches in the campaign, the lack of enthusiasm for continuing the boycott through church efforts is puzzling. Nor did the churches join the ongoing efforts of the NAACP and the Urban League to improve job opportunities by quieter means. Perhaps the Depression gave Harlem activists more than enough else to do. Perhaps the prospects for success were still too discouraging, once the courts took the side of the white merchants. Certainly the Citizens' League was not alone in failing to find viable alternative tactics in the face of the ban. Picket and boycott activities dwindled all over the country as a result of similar court rulings.<sup>22</sup>

In any event, by 1935, conditions were little better for skilled and educated blacks than they had been two years previously.

Q. In regard to the retail stores in New York, could you tell me whether it is a general custom to abstain from employing Negro clerks?

A. Yes, unless the girl is very light in complexion. . . .

Q. Does this apply to Harlem?

Interjection: Yes, even in Harlem

Interjection: Some stores . . .

Interjection: Kress stores

Chairman: Order!

The fact was that any improvements that had come resulted from the pickets. Little hope remained for continued improvement so long as boycotts and pickets were

not used, as Cecilia Saunders' testimony before the Mayor's Commission on Conditions in Harlem suggests:

Q. You are familiar with the employment of Negroes in the stores on 125th Street. When did that begin?

A. Less than a year ago.

Q. Did the employment of Negroes precede or come after the picketing on 125th Street?

A. After the picketing.

Q. The merchants to your knowledge, had they done anything before the picketing began in order to give the Negro consideration by way of employment?

A. I never heard that they had.<sup>23</sup>

More radical groups in Washington, D.C., Atlanta, and elsewhere defied court orders and continued pickets, despite arrests. Some Harlem groups did so as well. Both the Harlem Labor Union (HLU) and the Negro Industrial Clerical Alliance continued their work after the dissolution of the Citizens' League and turned the drive for black jobs increasingly into an explicitly anti-white campaign, often targeting particular white ethnic groups. Certainly such a tactic was effective in achieving their nationalist political goals; by stirring up the people against a group of whites who were also tradespeople in the area, the two groups encouraged patronage of black-owned stores. Thus, for example, the HLU used the anti-Italian fervor that swept Harlem after Italy invaded Ethiopia to urge a boycott of Italian and white pushcarts in Harlem in favor of black ones. Hundreds of blacks joined these protests and demonstrations.<sup>24</sup>

Their strongest invective, however, was reserved for Jews. Jewish store owners in Harlem, having helped form the Harlem Merchants' Association at the time of the initial pickets, first complained of Hamid's anti-Semitism in 1934. They accused him of repeating Nazi propaganda, and called him "Black Hitler." The *Amsterdam News*, the *New York Age*, and others corroborated these claims, and reported anti-Semitic remarks he had made. He was brought to municipal court in 1935 on charges of disorderly conduct and "instigating a race war." He denied the charges and was released with a warning.

Equally anti-Semitic was the Harlem Labor Union, which, according to the Eighth Avenue merchants, relied to a large extent on Nazi propaganda and some of Garvey's teachings to protest "Jewish control" of black economic life. These merchants reported to the police commissioner that the Harlem Labor Union representatives "used the[ir] platform to vilify the Jewish race and in their addresses have used such expressions as . . . 'The Jews are the exploiters of the colored people'. . . 'Harlem's worst enemies are the Jews'. . . 'Jews and leprosy are synonymous.'" A Federal Writers' Project researcher concluded that the HLU "assumed the character of a 'crusade against Jewish merchants'" and that Sufi Hamid preached anti-Semitism and race hatred. In a rare show of agreement, both the Harlem Merchants' Association and the Communist party protested Hamid's and the HLU's rhetoric.<sup>25</sup> The party opposed the anti-Semitism as divisive and a barrier to

the goal of uniting the working class of all races and religions. It opposed such bigotry also because so many party members were Jewish.

While anti-Semitism was only part of the broader anti-white rhetoric, Jews did make the most visible target. The majority of store owners were Jewish, since the Jews had settled in Harlem before the blacks, and remained in their stores after they moved from their apartments. Therefore, anti-white feeling could easily be translated into anti-Semitism. The relationship between blacks and Jews was tense in other economic areas as well (at the Bronx "slave market," for example, most of the housewives hiring domestic workers were Jewish), which undoubtedly encouraged anti-Jewish sentiment in the jobs campaign.

The issue of anti-Semitism polarized the activist black community, with the groups from the original Citizens' League and black trade unionists protesting such tactics, while supporters of Hamid, Kemp, and Reid denied all charges of anti-Semitism. Claude McKay came to Hamid's defense: "No one was more astonished than the Sufi himself when he was accused of organizing an anti-Semitic movement. . . . There was never any anti-Semitism in Harlem and there still is none, in spite of the stupid and vicious propaganda which endeavored to create an anti-Semitic issue out of the legitimate movement of Negroes to improve their social condition. . . . In fact, it is that reactionary attitude that is increasing anti-Jewish feeling." Even this defense, then, conceded the presence of anti-Semitism in Harlem, but denied that Hamid or Kemp was the source. Other defenders viewed anti-Semitism, or anti-white feeling in general, more benignly as simply part of the struggle for black nationalism. Once again, differences in political aspirations prevented the formation of a workable jobs coalition in Harlem.

Questions of corruption and self-interest served to further widen the division between the nationalists and the more moderate, integrationist groups. The remaining members of the League argued that the Harlem Labor Union and the Negro Industrial Clerical Alliance were undermining the campaign for black clerical jobs by using political means for personal ends, fighting for the employment only of workers who supported them. Sufi Hamid promised all who joined the Alliance a clerical job, but membership dues were \$1 each month even if no job was obtained. Store managers like Mr. Snyder of Grant's were not the only ones to charge Hamid with exploiting the situation for his own benefit. Several black employees reported threats of violence from him if they refused to join his "union," even if they already belonged to another. There is also some evidence of bribery of store owners. According to Bernard Deutch, president of the Board of Aldermen: "There has sprung up a racket whereby some of those colored leaders are forcing small storekeepers who employ no help at all to pay a certain sum each week in lieu of employing unnecessary help."<sup>26</sup>

Kemp and Reid's Harlem Labor Union was reported to be equally corrupt. "This organization," reported the *Amsterdam News*, "is racketeering of the most vicious type. It not only lines the pocket of its leader, but plays up the most ancient of prejudices—race hatred." The HLU's arch-enemy, the Negro Labor Committee, called the HLU "a terroristic campaign in Harlem against Jews, against whites and against the legitimate trade union movement. The leaders of this Incorporated union have literally terrorized many merchants into not only giving employment to members

of this alleged union at the expense of both Negro and white union men, but they have also been known to extract money from certain Harlem merchants as insurance against a picket line." Given the NLC's position as competitor, one might suspect it of hyperbole, except that independent investigations by the city and testimony by several merchants corroborated these complaints. The owner of the Owl Shoe Company on 125th Street told Frank Crosswaith that the HLU tried to organize his two black workers in June of 1939. They refused. The HLU picketed and "indulged in dangerous anti-white propaganda." The owner, frightened, signed a contract with the HLU that made no change in work conditions, and agreed to pay \$2 a month to the union to prevent another picket. Whether or not the pickets were as "dangerous" as he claimed, certainly they did not win benefits for the staff.

Occasionally these practices flew in the face of the explicitly nationalist commitment of the HLU, calling the sincerity of that position into question. Had the HLU's intent honestly been to promote black employment, it would not have picketed establishments where blacks were already employed, demanding they be fired and that HLU members be hired in their place. In 1933, the owner of Orkin's Dress Shop, fearing that the Blumstein's pickets might soon extend to his store, hired blacks until they made up half his work force. The Harlem Labor Union established a picket line there two years later that demanded a 50 percent black staff. Realizing its error, the HLU quickly changed its signs to 75 percent and demanded that present employees be fired in favor of picketers. The HLU justified its action by arguing that since the clerks had not picketed to win their jobs in the first place, the hard-working HLU members deserved first fruits of the picket committee's success.<sup>27</sup>

Apparently, Reid's organization sometimes seemed more committed to furthering the fortunes of its members and leaders than to furthering the cause of black nationalism. In fact, Reid did not deny that inproprieties occurred. In a defense of Sufi Hamid's racketeering practices and presumably by implication, his own, he explained to an interviewer that while Hamid and his colleagues did use organization money to support themselves,

[a]n agitator must eat to live, and no matter how noble the cause, petty graft will occur and no one could have grown rich on the amount of money involved. As for the rough tactics which his group employed, such methods were not out of keeping with the necessities of organizing reluctant workers. . . . The fact that Sufi put pressure on employers to fire Negroes and hire members of his own group was a natural corollary to his desire to strengthen the union. . . . Furthermore, many of the Negroes who found employment on 125 Street during the months following the Blumstein affair, were light skinned Negroes who had been employed for the sole purpose of forestalling future boycotts. . . . It was this tactic on the part of the employers which forced Sufi to agitate for the dismissal of the newly hired Negroes.<sup>28</sup>

Accusations of corruption aside, it was clear the Alliance and the HLU had very different organizing styles from that of the League, as Reid's statement hints. Even when anti-white rhetoric was not explicit, the methods used by these groups to integrate white-owned stores also set them apart from the moderate non-nationalists in Harlem. In general, the Harlem Labor Union used more confrontational tactics. It successfully tapped the anger and frustration of black working people who had been

consistently denied fair treatment by unions and employers. In an interview, an organizer working for the HLU in 1938 described the strategy used to integrate Harlem's butcher shops. He entered shops when many black women were inside purchasing meat and inquired loudly why no black butchers worked there. The women would murmur assent—their husbands and sons were unemployed. The butcher would reply that the AFL butchers' union already had a contract there. "I'd say to hell with the AFL, they are downtown and we are in Harlem and they can't help you if we throw a picket line around the place. . . . We finally put in Negro butchers all over Harlem. . . . You see we could always depend on the Harlem people [to support us] because they were mad, hungry and hemmed-in."<sup>29</sup>

Not surprisingly, Crosswaith's Negro Labor Committee often came into conflict with the HLU. Each group defended its own unionizing efforts, and condemned the other's. "Because of the so-called closed shop contracts with the CIO local 1125," Reid claimed, "several stores on 125th Street cannot put Negro girls to work [because the union denied blacks membership]." He criticized Crosswaith for not fighting such discrimination. Since, as Reid saw it, Harlem's black merchants could not afford to pay the prevailing union wage, the HLU signed contracts to employ blacks at lower pay. When the Moving Van Drivers' Locals 805 and 807 tried to standardize city pay rates by raising prices and wages in Harlem, the HLU organized twenty-eight black van operators into the Harlem Movers' Association, and signed a contract at lower rates. The HLU justified such contracts on grounds that it saved Harlemites money and provided more jobs for black drivers. Crosswaith fired back that it was not enough merely to win employment for blacks: "We worked for 245 years during slavery, but we got nothing for our work." By contrast, he argued, "The NLC has been responsible, not only for much of the increase in employment among Negro workers in this area, but especially in raising the wages and working standards of those workers." With less overt rancor, Crosswaith described his differences with the HLU's approach in his testimony before the Mayor's Commission: "Perhaps the only difference is that others have been putting emphasis on getting jobs for Negroes. That is not the essential solution. I am concerned with what the Negroes will get for work they do."<sup>30</sup>

Part of the antipathy can be accounted for by the opposing goals of the two groups. Since the Harlem Labor Union was committed to black nationalism, it opposed the unionizing drive of the *Amsterdam News* workers; Kemp and Reid believed it inappropriate for blacks to strike against employers of the same color. Here self-interest coincided with nationalism rather than undermining it. The NLC, the HLU's competition, had launched the strike.

The Negro Labor Committee, on the other hand, supported the *Amsterdam News* strike as part of the struggle to improve working conditions. The NLC sought the integration of blacks into the larger work force, both because its socialist leanings led it to seek unity of the working class, and because Harlem could not employ all the blacks who lived there, even were it an all-black economy. Crosswaith believed blacks' economic future lay in a strong, unionized work force that extended beyond the confines of Harlem. Until these sectarian fights could be resolved, the jobs campaign would remain stalled.

The antagonism between the two, of course, came also from competition, as they

sought to organize the same workers for their own group. In this, the NLC seemed marginally more successful in winning better contracts for its members. To cite one example: since they were already members of the HLU, the seven black workers at Bishop's Dress Shop could not join with the eight white workers there in a CIO union drive. The white CIO-won salaries rose and their hours declined, but Reid could not win the same concessions for his members. After a prolonged struggle, the black employees succeeded in switching their affiliation and received the higher salaries.<sup>31</sup>

While this bitter infighting plagued the campaign, the NUL and the NAACP continued with their own behind-the-scenes efforts to win better opportunities for black workers. Though the NAACP's most important efforts remained focused on litigation, the organization had become more activist as the Great Depression wore on, pushing government agencies and trade unions to accept qualified blacks, as well as fighting lynching and segregation. Like the NUL it also demanded that employers and unions not only hire qualified blacks, but train them. Both groups' style of letter-writing and quiet pressure did not require or utilize mass movements, but their successes were nonetheless significant.<sup>32</sup>

Black leaders and groups involved in direct action did not find these low-key methods satisfactory. Yet confrontational and often corrupt activities seemed to mainstream black leaders to have dominated the public protests. The Citizens' League, the Negro Alliance, and the HLU had aroused the energies and expectations of many in the Harlem community, but only the nationalists had succeeded in sustaining their momentum. Black leaders supporting non-nationalist solutions watched their control over Harlem's political energies weaken. The HLU's successes challenged them to reclaim the initiative, and the model of several integrationist organizations like the Negro Labor Committee showed them how. Especially as more unions accepted black workers, these black leaders came to agree with the NLC's views. As Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., wrote in 1937, "The HLU can never achieve any success for the Negro worker," as it did not demand union wage levels and actually campaigned against legitimate unions. "For anyone to strive to build a nationalist movement in America among Negroes is to commit racial suicide," he insisted. The NLC's success getting unions throughout the city to accept black members challenged black leaders to think of the jobs campaign more broadly.

The Communist party also inspired centrist black leaders to broaden their goals. During the Popular Front period, the party's new policies resembled those of the Negro Labor Committee and the Citizens' League, but embraced the wider city. Although the party had initially opposed the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign, seeing it as disruptive to working-class unity and a tool for capitalists, the Popular Front strategy forced the party to re-evaluate. In order to keep credibility in the community and with liberal black organizations, it had to participate in some fashion.<sup>33</sup>

The Communist party developed a strategy appropriate for its seemingly contradictory position of support for Harlem cooperative action and encouragement of black and white working-class unity. It demanded the hiring of blacks in Harlem establishments without firing whites. It encouraged job actions at large chain stores and public utilities rather than at small family stores where racial antagonism might

intensify and undermine class unity. Under the banner of the Committee Against Discrimination of Negro Workers on Jobs, the party led a boycott and picket of the Empire Cafeteria on 125th Street and Lenox Avenue.

Toilers of Harlem! Negro and White  
DEMONSTRATE AGAINST DISCRIMINATION!

For jobs for Negroes in Empire Cafeteria and for Unemployment Relief. Wed., September 5, 7 P.M. at 126 Street and Lenox . . .

Negro and White, demonstrate and picket for the following demands:

1. No dismissal of white workers
2. Hiring of additional Negro workers with equal pay
3. No reduction in pay

Again sectarian lines blurred: Sufi Hamid's Alliance and the UNIA participated in this picket because it sought black jobs. The cafeteria hired four black workers without letting any white workers go.

The Joint Conference Against Discriminatory Practices, a Communist-led organization that concentrated primarily on relief policies, also set up (illegal) pickets. At one Saturday demonstration in front of Weisbecker's Market at 125th Street and Eighth Avenue, the Joint Conference was joined by the Elks, the African Patriotic Union, and the Communist party. They demanded (but did not win) a 25 percent reduction in prices as well as the hiring of black clerks. These efforts, confrontational as they were (the Empire picket turned into a *mêlée* when a protester hurled a rock through the window) did bring both political awareness and jobs to Harlem. As Charles Franklin reluctantly granted: "However illegitimate or racketeering Hamid's organization may have been, it was at least striking at those very frightful conditions in its attempts to get employment for Negroes and to improve working conditions for those already employed." The same could be said for each illegal protest.<sup>34</sup>

### Rebuilding: The Second Campaign

The successes of the Communist party and of the Negro Labor Committee made their broad approach realistic and attractive to Harlem's mainstream black leaders disgusted with Hamid's and Kemp's tactics. Ironically, the extremism of Hamid, Kemp, and Reid also strengthened the integrationist organizations. Alerted to the campaign by vocal radicals, many Harlemites joined the struggle for white-collar jobs. The general opposition to confrontational or extreme tactics led many of these newcomers to embrace the more moderate positions in the jobs coalition. Thus, support for the center swelled, as evidenced by rising numbers of participants in the protests and demonstrations led by moderate groups.

All these challenges persuaded black leaders like Powell that they needed to regain the ascendancy in the jobs campaign. The time also seemed appropriate. The Harlem riot of 1935 had raised the specter of further violence if economic changes were not made. As the Mayor's Commission on Conditions in Harlem warned, "The blame [for the riot] belongs to a society that tolerates . . . unemployment, dis-

crimination in industry and the public utilities. . . . As long as these conditions remain, the public order can not and will not be safe." The riot had also heightened municipal officials' awareness of the plight of blacks in the Depression. Meanwhile, the New Deal broadened and legitimized the involvement of government in economic affairs. The blue ribbon commission appointed by Mayor LaGuardia to study Harlem's conditions and recommend policy changes, the speed-up of construction of several schools and low-cost apartment blocks in Harlem, the new responsiveness of city agencies to complaints of discrimination, and the appointment of a statewide panel to investigate conditions of the "urban colored population," all attest to this change in atmosphere. Despite continuing racism, the conscience—or self-interest—of New York's political leaders had been aroused. The opportunity for winning over white store-owners in such a climate appeared far more favorable than in 1933. Even the Urban League apparently reconsidered. James Hubert backed off from earlier positions critical of the boycott efforts, although he still distanced himself from the more confrontational tactics of the HLU.

Q. Do you favor that organizations of Negroes should boycott, especially the 125th Street stores?

A. I favor any method on the part of any group or individual so long as it is lawful. . . .

Q. A newspaper attributes to you the statement that you do not favor such methods. . . .

A. I do not recall making such a statement. . . . I question how far one could go in the use of force . . . you have seen the results obtained. Most of the good has already been lost.

The successes of both nationalist and integrationist efforts, the emergence of a CIO supportive of black issues, and the improvement of the political climate in terms of race relations heightened Harlemites' sense of their community's potential power. They were ready to mobilize. Yet the legal ban on picketing remained a barrier to further effective action by law-abiding groups until 1938. In that year the United States Supreme Court ruled in *New Negro Alliance vs. Sanitary Grocery Company* that because blacks suffered employment discrimination solely because of their race, they could in turn make special employment demands based on race and could therefore picket.

The law had always played an important, though not definitive, role in charting the course of the "Don't Buy" coalition. The Citizens' League had won victories with its pickets, victories that evaporated when the courts denied the right to picket on the basis of race. Yet the court decision alone did not destroy the Citizens' League. The end of the picket line did not have to mean an end to the coalition's progress; other solutions could have been tried. The disputes among the constituent groups over League tactics were more to blame for its collapse.

Nor did the right to picket in itself necessarily ensure further gains. The Negro Alliance, the HLU, and the Communist party continued picket activities illegally after 1934. When stopped by police, they tried impromptu sit-ins, persisting despite

frequent arrests.<sup>35</sup> Yet these groups only won small isolated victories until joined by a larger coalition.

The importance of the New Negro Alliance case was that it allowed moderate integrationist groups to reassert control over the jobs campaign. In 1935 the Citizens' League had abandoned the effort rather than resort to illegal picketing or new tactics. By doing so, it lost control of the campaign. Its constituent groups soon realized their error. By then, Hamid, Kemp, and Reid had established energetic, visible picket lines that could not be countered by subtle or private maneuvering. The Supreme Court decision restored to the mainstream groups an effective way to unite with like-minded organizations and re-enter (and dominate) the struggle. The Communist party also cooperated in this, hoping both to solidify the legitimacy of its Popular Front strategy and to keep its political vision in the forefront of the jobs campaign.

Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of the Abyssinian Baptist Church held a mass meeting on March 12, 1938, to form the Greater New York Coordinating Committee for Employment, co-chaired by Powell and William Imes of Saint James Presbyterian Church. Soon after its formation, the committee claimed to enjoy the support of over 200 organizations and 170,000 members—over three times the number in the original Citizens' League. It had the cooperation of the New York Urban League, the NAACP, the Joint Conference Against Discriminatory Practices, the Harlem YMCA, A. Philip Randolph, and the Communist party. As Powell described it, "It was honest because it was poor."<sup>36</sup>

It is likely that the Communist party helped organize and participate in the Coordinating Committee to regain the initiative on fighting job discrimination from the moderate NAACP and NUL on the one side and the nationalists on the other. Communist-organized transport unions continued to discriminate against blacks, another motive for the party to move in this direction. Thus the committee was not simply a non-ideological compromise coalition, which explains why bitter sectarian and turf battles continued even after the committee's founding. Reid, for example, a fervid anti-Communist, refused to associate his group with the committee, which in turn missed no opportunity to criticize the HLU.

Staunch unionist Frank Crosswaith also opposed the Coordinating Committee. Despite the committee's efforts not to conflict with unions, he believed "the legitimate labor movement in this area appears to be the main target. . . . Perhaps the C.P. will get some notoriety out of another race riot in Harlem, but the Negro groups will suffer [:] so will the growing trade union movement up here." The visibility of the Communist party in the committee dismayed anti-Communist Crosswaith, which helps explain his dissatisfaction. Moreover, he took the committee's activities as a personal affront. The whole effort implicitly criticized other groups working for black employment, including the NLC and organized labor. Its successes infuriated him.<sup>37</sup>

Much of the strength of the committee came from black educated and skilled workers, formerly of the middle class, who had lost their jobs in the Depression. Now in menial jobs or unemployed, they helped provide the energy and commitment necessary for political mobilization. Still, this was undeniably a movement of the working class, peopled by domestics, laborers, and service workers. Not only

did participants and eyewitnesses make this claim, sheer numbers require it to be true. The black middle class was too small to have generated this size protest alone.

The presence of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., as leader of the coalition also helped explain the committee's energy and huge numbers. Son of a dynamic and influential minister, minister in his own right of one of the largest and most prestigious churches in Harlem, leader of numerous community efforts on behalf of the poor and the unemployed, and a dynamic and charismatic speaker, Powell symbolized for thousands the noble struggle for equality in Harlem. His presence, like that of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the later civil rights movement, helped unify and direct the campaign.

The Coordinating Committee embraced many of the goals of the Citizens' League, the Negro Labor Committee, and the Communist party; it sought to employ blacks in white-owned stores without displacing whites or undermining legitimate unions, and it worked to integrate public utilities outside Harlem. It tried all of the usual tactics: negotiations, conferences, cooperative agreements. This time, success came much more easily. With such a large constituency, and with the legal right to picket restored, its requests carried clout. The extremism of Hamid and Reid made white store-owners eager to negotiate with the committee, whose demands seemed more reasonable in comparison. In fact, the successes of 1938 might not have been possible earlier, without the conflicts and the extremism that ultimately promoted united action among blacks and put pressure on merchants to negotiate with moderates. Almost immediately the Coordinating Committee won its first victories. The A&P hired a black manager; a local jewelry company hired six black typists.

The committee also employed creative tactics, especially to tackle large public utilities that could not be reached with boycotts and pickets. To persuade the energy companies to hire blacks in non-menial positions, the Coordinating Committee turned Harlem dark once a week by asking families to use candles instead of electricity on Tuesday nights, and it led hundreds in "billpayers' parades" to the gas company offices each month to pay their bills in pennies. Other tactics included asking all Harlemites to request a (legal) out-of-turn gas meter inspection simultaneously and to refuse to pay gas bills until the inspection was completed. Prior to the campaign, at Consolidated Gas, of 10,000 employees, 213 were black, working as porters. New York Edison, also with 10,000, employed just sixty-five blacks, and only as messengers, porters, and janitors. After the campaign, the newly merged Consolidated Edison hired four blacks in non-menial positions, promoted four more, and promised that "an appreciable percentage of all new Consolidated Edison employees would be Negroes." Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., hailed these successes as "the first victory in our campaign for white-collar jobs for Negroes in industry."

The Coordinating Committee then turned to the New York Telephone Company, which had refused to hire black repairmen or operators. Here it employed several strategies at once. Direct negotiations with the company made clear the community's position, while threats of retaliatory action made the company receptive to compromise. For example, the committee threatened that Harlemites would make operator-assisted telephone calls rather than dial directly, which would

increase each operator's workload by close to 70 percent, and would jam the phone lines at the moment Wall Street reported its daily figures. The cumulative effects of these pressures compelled the telephone company to re-examine its position. Quickly, it hired black clerical staff. Even these tactics were not enough, however, to force the company to hire black operators. Ultimately it took further pressure from several black groups and government agencies and the exigencies of the war to get black operators on staff.<sup>38</sup>

When necessary, the committee carried out the threat to picket. At the end of April 1938, each firm in Harlem not yet employing blacks received this letter from the committee, signed by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and the other officers:

Dear Sir:

The Coordinating Committee for Employment representing over 200 organizations in Harlem decided unanimously . . . to begin picketing each store in Harlem which does not employ Negroes. . . .

If we do not receive an answer to this letter by Friday at 2:00 your store will be picketed beginning this Saturday and every Saturday thereafter.<sup>39</sup>

After four months of negotiation with the Uptown Chamber of Commerce, the two groups reached an agreement, which stated:

To effect a fair and equitable settlement of the Negro employment problem as it affects Harlem retail establishments, the Uptown Chamber of Commerce . . . and the Greater New York Coordinating Committee for Employment . . . agree . . .

That stores not already employing between 33 and ½ percent and 40 percent colored workers in so-called white collar positions agree to do so as speedily as possible by making replacements with qualified Negroes as white employees resign or are discharged for cause. . . .

[In family-owned stores] the owners agree to engage a qualified Negro for the first new job created in their establishment.

That the stores agree not to limit the opportunities of Negro workers for advancement, . . . nor shall colored workers be discriminated against in the matter of wages.

That when stores operate under a closed shop agreement with a recognized union the owners or managers agree to use their influence with union officials to the end that Negroes may be admitted to membership. In short, there will be no pretense at denying Negroes employment in union stores on the subterfuge that to hire them would be in violation of existing union contracts. . . .

[Chain stores] will not adopt a policy of discrimination against Negroes employed in their stores located out of Harlem.

The "Memorandum of Agreement," as it was called, further required employers not to discriminate in the event of forced layoffs, and to submit all disputes to a joint arbitration committee made up of the two organizations.

For its part, the Coordinating Committee agreed that:

at no time will it demand the replacement of a white worker with a Negro except [when that worker was hired in direct violation of the agreement]. . . .

That resort to picketing, boycotts and other mass demonstrations against stores shall not be made [unless the store violates an Arbitration Committee decision].

The Coordinating Committee agrees to encourage campaigns among the masses to increase the colored trade of all cooperating stores. . . .

The Coordinating Committee agrees to use every possible means to prevent independent action against stores subscribing to this agreement by colored groups not associated with the Coordinating Committee.<sup>40</sup>

Within two months of the memorandum, 300 blacks had white-collar jobs in Harlem. Every large store on 125th Street had at least one black employee. The Chamber of Commerce reported higher sales by 1940, although this was probably due to the increased prosperity brought about by war preparations.

As for the "colored groups not associated with the Coordinating Committee," that is, the Harlem Labor Union, trouble with that organization finally eased after an agreement that Reid would join the Coordinating Committee and cease picketing stores already unionized by the AFL or CIO. He violated that agreement numerous times until District Attorney Thomas E. Dewey prosecuted him as a racketeer in 1939. Although the charges were ultimately dropped, he left the Union, and it lost its militant and nationalist character soon thereafter. (Kemp had left the group to run for New York Assembly in 1938 on a more mainstream platform. He lost by only a few votes, and died a few days later.)<sup>41</sup>

Powell and the Coordinating Committee turned next to the World's Fair, which was to be held in New York City in 1939. He asked the World's Fair Corporation to ensure the availability of non-menial jobs for blacks. When polite requests failed, blacks moved their pickets downtown for the first time, to the Fair's headquarters in the Empire State Building. Bill Robinson and chorus girls from Ethel Waters' shows joined the hundreds of lower-class and middle-class demonstrators. After two months of such efforts, Fair organizers yielded, promising positions for several hundred black clerks and other workers.<sup>42</sup>

### The Lessons of the Campaigns

The jobs campaign had meant different things to different segments of the Harlem community. To middle-class black leaders it represented an opportunity for white-collar blacks to acquire appropriate jobs. To black merchants it meant an increase in black business; to black nationalists it was a step toward a black state; to others it offered an opportunity to build a power base among the unemployed. To Socialists, Communists, and black trade unionists it diverted attention from the struggle of black workers to integrate existing unions unless the two efforts went hand in hand. This disunity of purpose and internal competition hampered the campaign and divided public opinion. Not until the members of the coalition agreed on both tactics (legal pickets, support for unions, and negotiations) and goals (the hiring of blacks without the firing of whites) did the campaign achieve success.

The 1935 riot in Harlem alerted the white community to the economic discrimination practiced against blacks and the need for some response, however small, to

avert further violence. This new willingness to cooperate helped contribute to the jobs campaign's success, but any success would have been impossible without the activist participation of Harlem blacks. The campaign allowed them to take whatever control they could of their economic future through political action and the forging of alliances in the community. In the "Don't Buy" campaign, every individual in Harlem made real choices about whether and how to become involved in the efforts to bring better employment opportunities—an empowering experience. The struggle to gain white-collar employment could not have solved Harlem's economic problems even if all the movement's programs had been implemented. Its real contribution was the political mobilization of Harlem. The campaign allowed the black community to test its strengths, refine its arguments, and try out its struggle for equal opportunity in a narrow setting that offered African-Americans some hope of having an impact.

The success of the Coordinating Committee and the jobs campaign brought new goals. Having black clerks in Harlem stores did not solve the unemployment problem, as there were not enough jobs in that community for everyone. Nor were enough Harlem men and women sufficiently educated or skilled to take advantage of such employment opportunities had they been offered. The problems were more deeply rooted. By 1944, the majority of salespeople in Harlem were black, yet Harlem's economic troubles persisted. The huge number of unemployed black workers willing to accept lower wages in order to obtain a job challenged unions to join with blacks rather than to exclude them. In this case blacks may have been unemployed because of their race, but unemployment was the issue that had to be addressed.

Furthermore, the campaign, by picketing exclusively in Harlem, did not persuade stores not located there to end their discriminatory policies. That would require new, broader, and bolder strategies—cooperation between black groups and organized labor, a recognition of working-class needs, and the expansion of the campaign beyond Harlem's boundaries.

In recognition of this, the Coordinating Committee, the Communist party, the Urban League, the NAACP, and the Negro Labor Committee had begun to move out of the black community to integrate the public utilities, working with the trade union movement and focusing on training and apprenticeship programs as well as on white-collar and skilled jobs. Cooperating this way had brought success with New York Telephone, Consolidated Edison, and the World's Fair; these groups went on in the next decade to use the techniques of the "Don't Buy" campaign to integrate more of the transit system's labor force, several large insurance companies, and department stores.<sup>43</sup>

While black nationalism retained some community support, its strength had diminished with the victories of the churches and the unions, and it would not rise again with such popular force until the late 1950s. On the other hand, the Communist party, having strengthened its base in the black community with its staunch support for black economic opportunity, then lost it with the Nazi-Soviet pact, the end of the Popular Front, and the increased virulence of Red-baiting in the 1940s. This left the moderates in the dominant position, something demonstrated by their most popular spokesperson, the younger Powell, as he swept into city office in 1941 and Congress shortly thereafter.

The Depression saw an expansion of black political action in Harlem that had begun earlier, instigated by changes both internal and external to the black community. African-Americans had undertaken numerous efforts in earlier years to gain improvements for their race. But the economic desperation of the Depression and the new willingness of government, unions, and employers to respond to organized grievances and to threats of violence or riot marked this period as a particularly active one for political organizing. This expansion brought thousands into the political process who had not participated before, and activism essentially burst the confines of traditional politics. While existing party organizations and black groups participated actively in these political efforts, many people also sought different political vehicles. Thus, the new energy had many outlets: the reinvigorated traditional parties, mass rallies, union drives, black nationalist and integrationist organizations, churches, and newly formed political groups. The boundaries between these new and ongoing structures were remarkably fluid. Not only did much of the leadership of these organizations overlap, but individual Harlemites joined with different groups, depending on the issue at hand. Class and race intersected with and reinforced each other, as did black nationalism and a commitment to improve Harlem's economic opportunity structure.

Yet conflicts among and within groups at times weakened these efforts, as when self-interest overwhelmed a commitment to nationalism, or sectarian battles vitiated programs and actions to bring about jointly supported goals. Internal struggles over class and nationalist visions and between moderate and radical perspectives provided a spectrum of opportunity for involvement, but also worked against farther-reaching structural change. Even if these internal conflicts had disappeared, the external limits on black economic advancement: racism, lack of training, the Depression, and entrenched economic and political practices preferential to white or middle-class groups, were still too great to be overcome at that time.

Despite its limitations, however, black mass action in the Depression also revealed the tremendous potential of such efforts. Harlemites struggled in this decade to alter the power relations of society, and while they did not succeed in that, they solidified a political base and experimented with tactics that would prove critical in the years to come.

While certainly not all the problems of coalition-building in a diverse population had been resolved, these political programs set the stage for more dramatic and sweeping efforts, such as the 1941 March on Washington Movement led by A. Philip Randolph, and ultimately the modern civil rights movement. All over the country, black efforts had produced improved job opportunities for the black middle class, and helped galvanize mass action on other fronts, such as housing and the distribution of relief. They also furthered the involvement of blacks in organized party politics, making possible the ascendancy of such elected leaders as Adam Powell in New York and William Dawson in Chicago.<sup>44</sup>

There were significant differences between this campaign and the modern civil rights movement, however. The efforts of the 1930s sought primarily to improve black employment opportunities. Black organizations used racial equality and non-discriminatory legislation as the tools for pursuing better opportunities, but the jobs

themselves were the goal. For the modern civil rights movement, equality was the central focus.

The tactics of the two eras also differed. In the 1930s the moderates obeyed the law and ceased all activities when they saw that continued action would violate a legal court injunction. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, intentional civil disobedience was the centerpiece of moderate efforts. The reason for these opposing approaches reflects the two movements' different goals. While a jobs campaign fought for opportunities within an existing structure, civil rights was by definition a struggle against unjust laws. The civil rights movement's moral force came from actively challenging the legal basis of racist social structures. Finally, unlike the civil rights movement, the jobs campaign did not persuade many whites to actively pursue black equality.<sup>45</sup>

Yet the victories of the civil rights movement could not have been won without the groundwork laid by these earlier efforts. The New Deal decade made the value of political organizing particularly visible. The Depression alerted the white public to the plight of those who suffered, bringing black problems into the open and ensuring that they received a sympathetic hearing. The political struggles for equal opportunity that emerged in such an environment laid an indispensable foundation for future efforts. When the time was right, new coalitions would draw on tactics first employed in unionizing and "Don't Buy" campaigns in Harlem and elsewhere, thereby fighting more effectively for equality in the decades following the Great Depression.