THE BLACK FOURTH ESTATE: CLASS AND THE SHAPING OF THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE IN THE SECOND QUARTER OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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John Sengstacke of the *Chicago Defender* had his finger on the pulse of what appeared relevant and timely to black journalism. Acting with the instincts of a true newspaperman, he gathered together representatives from twenty regional and national black newspapers for a meeting of the minds in a crucial time for the black press. These editors met not as competitors, but as concerned newsmen desiring to defend a set of principles that would allow them to continue fighting their cause of first-class citizenship. The five day conference for the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA) held in Chicago in February 1940 proved mostly fruitful. The death of Robert S. Abbot, the founder of the *Chicago Defender*, and the unfounded allegations of journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner Westbrook Pegler only slightly overshadowed the meeting. Pegler alleged that the black press in America had abandoned its country when they aligned their cause to the fight against fascism in Europe and drudged up reminders that the fight for freedom began at home.[1] Pegler's indictment, originally intended to discredit the Black Fourth

[1] Armistead S. Pride and Clint C. Wilson II, *A History of the Black Press* (Washington D.C.: Howard University, 1997), 185-191.

Estate, had unintentionally elevated the black press to notoriety.[2] By 1940, the black press had recognized a growing need to communicate with one another and share ideas on a host of issues including advertising, foreign correspondence, and the production costs associated with maintaining increased circulations. Though the conference presented an image of unity amongst the various black presses, social and political ideologies kept them from being entirely united.[3] National publications projected conservative or moderate views on civil rights issues whereas local and community-based newspapers championed a liberal viewpoint sometimes mirroring the opinions of militant publications.[4] Sengstacke's determination to unify the black press began after a long decade in which the black community had endured an economic depression, and struggled to leave the memory of making the world "safe for democracy" behind them.[5] During this decade, African American men and women turned to the black press for information typically omitted from mainstream journalism. The Black Fourth Estate served as a guidepost for African American communities who remained poised to grasp first-class citizenship, but the message journalists delivered was not always unified.

Over the last decade, scholarship on the modern civil rights movement has been guided by historians who showed interest in exploring the movement's radical roots. Recent literature examines the "long civil rights movement" by way of expanding its time line and framing it within the New Deal era

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[2] The Fourth Estate is a reference to the press as a notable institution in a societal hierarchy. The use of the term Black Fourth Estate denotes that the Black press is a separate institution apart from the white mainstream press making notable contributions to black journalism and the black community.

[3] Ronald E. Wolseley, *Black Press, U.S.A.*, 2nd ed. (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University, 1990), 20.

[4] Ibid.

[5] African American men who served in World War I had returned to the States expecting the same liberties and rights they had fought to preserve abroad.

and the Great Society.[6] This approach allows historians to consider the contributions of labor unions, working-class blacks, and the influence of the Communist Party. Scholars focus on two prominent categories – black insurgent politics and resistance and class tension between working and middle-class blacks in urban cities. These studies are an invaluable source for understanding the black freedom struggle and its transition to the post-World War II movement. Absent from the books, however, are the messages and the messengers who were framing the civil rights movement—the black press.

Black insurgent politics and resistance to institutional racism are addressed in historical studies by Beth Tompkins Bates, Martha Biondi, Harper Barnes, and Cameron McWhirter.[7] These scholars focus on the impact of insurgency on the black community and the efforts of working-class blacks to organize themselves for the purpose of seeking first-class citizenship. Additionally, they demonstrate the power of resistance that elevated African Americans to fight for first-class citizenship and brought them in closer proximity to the post-Civil War promises of inclusion and freedom. Their work suggests that mass protest, resistance, and the organization of labor unions contributed to the black freedom struggle of the early twentieth

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[6] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005): 1233-64.

[7] Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). Bates and Biondi demonstrate the importance of mass-based protest in meeting the demands of first-class citizenship and its centrality to the modern civil rights movement. Harper Barnes, *Never Been a Time: The 1917 Race Riots That Sparked the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Walker and Company, 2008); Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: Holt, 2011). Barnes and McWhirter successfully demonstrate working-class black resistance but do not connect this to the Black Power Movement of the late twentieth century.

century while also shedding light on the gaps in the long civil rights movement, which marginalized its radical components.

A second group of scholars focus on the tension between working-class and middle-class blacks in urban cities. These historians mainly direct their research to urban cities heavily impacted by the Great Migration beginning in 1910.[8] Chicago, St. Louis, Cleveland, and New York become the focus in studies by Davarian L. Baldwin, Clarence Lang, Kimberley L. Phillips, and Touré F. Reed. These works explore the role of the "New Negro" and examine how class played a significant role during their freedom struggle. Middle-class blacks, in an attempt to gain first-class citizenship, promoted the "politics of respectability" which often propped up the interests of middle-class whites. In contrast, working-class blacks eschewed the advice about proper behavior leveled at them and, despite the tension, played a key role in the freedom struggle. This last group of historians considers the importance of class and how it divided the participants of the black freedom struggle between the 1930s to the 1960s. However, to better understand class tension among African Americans, historians must look at their sources in a different way by comparing the conflicted messages that came from the black press.

Historians of the civil rights movement use black newspapers often as an invaluable source of information for

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[8] Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics & Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009). Baldwin and Lang address class tension in terms of how each group identified with themselves and how those identities conflicted with each other. Kimberley L. Phillips, *Alabama North: African -American Migrants, Community and working-class activism in Cleveland, 1915-45* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999); Touré F. Reed, *Not Alms But Opportunity: The Urban League & the Politics of Racial Uplift* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). Phillips and Reed present strong arguments that indicate that politics of racial uplift created a social and economic divide among African Americans.

studying African American history. Few sources focus primarily on African Americans and the issues that affected them before and after Reconstruction. As a result, historians have privileged newspapers that highlighted the voices of black Americans. The major issues presented in newspapers include employment, housing, education, and leadership. Historians have an opportunity to interrogate the black press, namely by looking beyond the headlines. Race, an issue which has dominated the pages of black newspapers since the *Freedom's Journal* in 1827, has also monopolized historians' focus. This weekly publication, featured articles that dealt with exploitation, mistreatment, and limitations meted out on slaves.[9] By the early twentieth century, black newspapers sharpened their focus and printed stories that challenged African Americans to claim the promise of first-class citizenship using race as a motivating factor. Historians who study the black press have made no distinction between the views of local and national publications since both presses agreed on issues concerning race. Moreover, scholars have overlooked class as a contributing factor to the black freedom struggle. Does a narrative focused on class tension among African Americans, with shared goals of freedom, opportunity, and first-class citizenship, present a different approach to understanding the black freedom struggle? Both local and national papers engaged in class discourses that provide a window into class and community among African Americans in the 1930s. By analyzing and comparing the local and national black presses, a new understanding of the black freedom struggle emerges. This project looks at the tension between working and middle-class blacks by examining the discourses of class in both the local and national black press.

Black newspapers provide an excellent source for understanding how class featured prominently in the relationship between their community and its desire for first-class citizenship. This project considers articles from nine black newspapers published during the mid 1920s and 1930s. Local black newspapers provided a nuanced look at the issues that concerned

[9] Wolseley, 9.

the working class. The strength of these papers comes from the journalist's proximity to their audience and their ability to gauge the success of their message. Regional black leaders voiced working-class apprehensions over housing and job discrimination using local newspapers as their outlets.[10] In contrast, national black newspapers tackled broader issues, reflecting a wide range of U.S. concerns. Issues like New Deal legislation and the fight against fascism abroad enabled the national press to reach a larger audience. National publications headquartered in major cities like New York, Baltimore and Chicago relied on sensational headlines and "red ink" to grab their audience.[11] Conversely, national publications located in the South exercised caution regarding excessive controversy as an effort to retain advertising dollars generated by white-owned businesses leery of race propaganda.[12] National newspapers situated in the North campaigned vigorously to draw southern blacks to urban cities and assimilate them in the workplace. National publications in the South urged blacks to stay home and promoted agriculture as a viable means of economic subsistence. These contrasts raised the issue of class as national newspapers competed to define the values of laboring blacks across a regional divide. While an analysis of both the local and national black press demonstrates that the concerns of both presses

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[10] The local black newspapers examined in this study include *Baltimore Afro-American*, 1893- 1988, was a weekly newspaper published in Baltimore, Maryland. *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 1934-2005, was a weekly newspaper published in Los Angeles, Ca. *New York Amsterdam News*, 1922-1993. *Philadelphia Tribune*, 1912-2001.

[11] Early twentieth century newspapers often used red ink in their headlines to grab the reader's attention. The stories that followed either highlighted a controversial subject matter or promoted propaganda.

[12] National black newspapers considered in this study include *Atlanta Daily World*, 1931-2003, a semi-weekly newspaper published in Atlanta, Georgia; *Chicago Defender*, 1910-1975, published in Chicago Illinois; *Cleveland Call & Post*, 1934-1991 published in Cleveland, Ohio; *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 1921-2003, published in Norfolk Virginia; and *Pittsburgh Courier*, 1911-2001, published in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania.

appeared identical, a close examination of the language used by each press reveals the nuances that kept the black press in America from establishing a united force in the black freedom struggle.

The black press had a visible strength in its presentation with the creation of a daily, weekly, or bi-monthly public address that shaped public opinion and the discourse of the freedom struggle. In essence, it harnessed the power of the written word and, when coupled with the frequency of its message, served as a form of propaganda to further its cause. Undoubtedly, race became the trumpet that heralded the cause of first-class citizenship and fueled the propaganda. But if historians are interested in examining the weaknesses of the black freedom struggle of the early twentieth century, then race should not be its singular focus. Whereas race generally united the black press in the struggle for freedom, notions of class divided it.

Black newspapers captured voices of the middle class, instructing their working-class counterparts on the best methods for achieving first-class citizenship. Though difficult to determine how the message of the local and national black presses resonated with their intended audiences, what the newspapers reveal is that both presses, acting separately, attempted to unify the black community through their disparate understandings of class. Language created the vehicle for both presses to unify African Americans, and the key to disseminate their respective messages, but the language each press used lacked unity. As a result, regional and national presses furthered a divide between middle and working-class blacks while their notions of class remained mutually exclusive. Local publications generally promoted education as the means by which blacks could amass power. On the other hand, national publications urged the working class to accept their diminished role in the work place and empower themselves by aligning their objectives in solidarity to working-class whites. Nonetheless, for the masses who divined the pages of the black press out of curiosity, or simply seeking information, the stories carried three basic themes, namely that African Americans were victims, they lacked leadership, and that through leadership, either individuals or organizations could empower themselves. These stories held

importance to all African Americans and to the newspapers that carried them, but each press' different perceptions of class changed the tone of the arguments and kept the black press from being united for the cause of first-class citizenship.

The First Great Migration of 1910 brought southern blacks to the North for greater economic opportunities in industry. By 1930, an economic depression limited employment opportunities for laboring blacks even as an increased presence of African Americans in urban cities created tension between working-class blacks and whites. In 1932, African Americans tuned on their radios and listened as a wealthy aristocrat made promises of a New Deal and economic equality for all. New Deal programs gave black Americans opportunities in the arts as writers, musicians, artists, and actors, but it neglected laboring blacks in its crowning achievement of the Works Project Administration (WPA). Criticism of New Deal programs permeated the black press during the 1930s even as the Roosevelt Administration courted African Americans and appealed to them to join the Democratic Party. By the late 1930s, black Americans not only joined ranks with the Democratic Party, they also became a visible presence in civil service—three times the amount when Herbert Hoover left office in 1932.[13] In this decade, labor unions, black-run organizations, and the Communist Party (CP) courted African Americans seeking to empower both skilled and unskilled laborers. During the Depression, the CP was influential in securing jobs for African Americans by leading grassroots fights in many cities for relief, public works, and emergency housing, along with its efforts to organize several labor strikes in the early 1930s that helped to initiate the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).[14] By 1935, the Wagner Act, and the CIO challenged the traditions of white craft labor organizations and racially segregated dual-unionism promoted under the American Federation of Labor (AFL).[15] The decade of the 30s witnessed

[13] Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 67.
[14] Biondi, 4-5.
[15] Singh, 67.

increasing numbers of African Americans voicing discontent along with active resistance to institutionalized inequality.

When Alain Leroy Locke penned *The New Negro* in 1925 in the midst of what later became known as the Harlem Renaissance, black Americans realized that the opportunity to make changes to their social, political, and economic endeavors arrived. But even as black Americans struggled to define themselves in the public sphere, the political arena, and the labor market, they fought to secure equality amidst a growing tide of racism and brutal acts of terror. Lynchings dominated the headlines of the black press even as they campaigned vigorously to end decades of terror that plagued the black community. This decade stood witness to middle-class blacks and entrepreneurs who breathed new life into the black press in the second quarter of the twentieth century and seized the moment "to define [themselves] and [their] community amid American modernism."[16]

The black press and victimization

During the black freedom struggle, both the national and local black press portrayed African Americans as victims of the economy and signaled a need for the entire black community to rise above its victim status. Both presses invoked language that portrayed working and middle-class blacks as victims of a poor economy, but differed in their approach. The national black press used language that evoked a sense of despair for African Americans. An article in the *Chicago Defender* discussed how the stock market crash had caused "economic turmoil for thousands" and how it "parallels the case of the American Negro" who continuously "fac[ed] a perpetual crisis [and questioned] whether he [was] going forward or standing still."[17] National papers often conveyed a sense of urgency when discussing the victimization of working and middle-class blacks and their relation to a poor economy. Journalist George S. Schuyler criticized mainstream newspapers who in the wake of

[16] Todd Vogel ed., *Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 6.

[17] George S. Schuyler, "Making Our Breaks," *Chicago Defender*, January 11, 1930.

the stock market crash called for a 'return to normalcy' as a way to prop up American businesses. He argued that "the Negro cannot afford to go back to normalcy" stressing "national necessity and justice" for African Americans "to obtain fair play from the majority group."[18] Local black presses did little to dispute the notion of African Americans as victims of a poor economy. However, the need to dramatize the language, in terms of urgency and despair, had paled in comparison to their nobler goal.

Local black presses framed their discourse on victim status using plain language in order to educate the community. These papers dismissed the value of domestic service as a viable source of employment. Rather, local papers printed stories that highlighted increasing numbers of African Americans employed in industrial, clerical, or public jobs. An article in the *New York Amsterdam News* informed readers that the New York Urban League (NYUL) helped fill "over 500 jobs" and planned to train "a definite number of apprentices [for] lessons on operating machines."[19] Undoubtedly, the NYUL increased employment for African Americans, but there existed a class component associated with its efforts to place the unemployed in the workforce. As noted by Touré F. Reed, by 1926, the NYUL discontinued its "Domestic Placement Work" choosing to focus on placement in the "better occupations." This decision placed 906 African Americans in industrial, clerical, or public jobs but only 59 in domestic or personal service. This reflected the League's "callousness to the needs of lower-class African Americans."[20] In addition, the local black press demonstrated the need to inform the working class that their victim status need not remain permanent and that through proper training and education they could raise their status. An article in the *Philadelphia Tribune* praised the efforts of young people who engaged in a "crusade to carry economic knowledge to the Negroes of Harlem" and informed them of the need to support a living wage and better working conditions—ideals that were not directed to

[18] Ibid.
[19] "Hundreds of Jobless Given Work," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 3, 1930.
[20] Reed, 72.

those in domestic service.[21] Nevertheless, the notion of African Americans as victims, touted by both presses, became the engine to drive economic change and further the cause of first-class citizenship.

Both the national and local black press extended the language of victimization to the poor wage status of African Americans. Local papers used fierce repetition when discussing poor wage status, and they trained their message of exploitation on working-class blacks. An editorial in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* criticized New Deal legislation that set the value of unskilled labor for public works at $19.00 per month and raised fears that the edict would prompt public employees to "beat down their wages."[22] This in turn would force working-class blacks to work at a much lower pay scale than desired. The journalist argued that employers overlooked skilled workers entitled to "higher-bracket classifications" and assigned them to "common labor projects at [the] lowest wages."[23] An article in the *New York Amsterdam News* echoed this sentiment calling for "a more tolerant attitude" and asked industrial companies to include in their employment policies "Negroes in white collar classifications."[24] Local publications made class a divisive issue regarding labor, arguing that employers used laboring blacks to "beat down the status of all workers."[25] The local press emerged as guardians of the working class, doing more than depict African Americans as victims of the labor market. It also reminded them to demand more and never be satisfied with the status quo. Boasting of its contributions to the community, an editorial in the *New York Amsterdam News* told its journalists that they must view their employment with the paper as a "stepping stone in the progress of the Negro in the business world" and that in time they would "graduat[e] to larger

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[21] "Young People Back Pullman Porters' Union," *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 22, 1927.

[22] "Return to Slavery," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 23, 1935.

[23] "Same Old Deal," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 12, 1935.

[24] "Leaders Express Hope for Race In 1940," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 30, 1939.

[25] William Pickens, "Solidarity of Workers," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 22, 1926.

commercial enterprises."[26] Indeed, local black papers portrayed the labor market for African Americans as a place of victimization, and they used the strongest language possible to deliver this point. One editorial referred to the government's role in keeping down wages as an act that came "a little short of slavery."[27]

The national black press portrayed the labor market and the wage status of African Americans in the workplace much differently than the local press. National publications recognized the inequality of African Americans in the workplace but their primary focus involved the economic health of middle and professional-class blacks. An article in the *Chicago Defender* ignored the plight of the working class in the labor market and concentrated solely on the income disparity between middle-class blacks and whites. The article noted that "the average income for middle class Negroes is much lower than that for whites of the same class" comparing the middle-class Negro "on par with that of the white mechanic class: printers, painters, chauffeurs, and the like." [28] National publications exercised caution when discussing middle-class blacks. Editors of black newspapers as middle-class African Americans demonstrated their bias and focused only on positive aspects of this group of African Americans. An article praised "the professional classes" for their ability to "survive comfortably" made possible by a "reserve of money and credit based upon superior earning power."[29] The *Atlanta Daily World* voiced sympathy for "the upper-class Negroes—the doctors, dentists, school teachers, and small business men [who] were only slightly untouched by

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[26] "Talking It Over," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 26, 1935.
[27] "Leaders Express Hope for Race In 1940," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 30, 1939.
[27] "Solidarity of Workers."
[27] "Talking It Over."
[27] "Return to Slavery."
[28] "Let's Quit Pretending," *Chicago Defender*, January 4, 1930.
[29] "Race Hard Hit by Job Shortage," *Chicago Defender*, March 22, 1930.

business depressions…but now feeling the blow."[30] The article pointed out the disparity between school teacher's willingness to work and the scarcity of jobs available to them.[31] In contrast, the national press referred to laboring blacks as the "domestic" or "servant" class who were "less able" to cope with the problems of unemployment as the professional class because of their inability to "lay up a reserve of money for such contingencies."[32] Indeed, national publications made a distinction between black laborers and professionals in the middle class by controlling the language and perception of class for African Americans. Although the national black press dodged the issues of a volatile labor market and inequality of wages raised by the local press, they failed to deflect the blows that came their way on the subject of leadership.

The black press and leadership

The subject of leadership surfaced as an important issue to local and national black presses. This issue divided middle and working-class blacks as both groups differed on the notion of power. National publications pushed the idea of African Americans in leadership regardless of whether or not they promoted working-class values. The *Atlanta Daily World* described the ideal leader as possessing "the courage and diplomacy of Booker T. Washington."[33] Nonetheless, the article interjected religious undertones by invoking images of Moses and called for "a great God [to] raise up a leader" someone who will lead them away from the trials and tribulations of being "impoverished, despised, and deluded from the foundation of the

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[30] "Schuyler is Very, Very Downcast," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 23, 1932.

[31] Ibid.

[32] "Race Hard Hit by Job Shortage."

[33] "The Penalty of Non-leadership," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 29, 1935. By referencing Booker T. Washington in this editorial, the author had clearly defined the type of conservative leadership that is best suited for all African Americans, leadership which advocates assimilation for working and middle-class blacks.

American Nation."[34] National publications often lacked clarity in their definition of an ideal black leader, but they quickly made distinctions of what or who a leader should not resemble. The *Chicago Defender* lashed out at Marcus Garvey and accused him of "misleading a lot of ignorant colored people [and] …trying to make trouble on the inside of the colored race in the U.S.A." when he advocated that all African Americans should turn their backs on the white man.[35] The "modern Moses" as one national publication wrote must lead the black race toward "economic prosperity [and] the proper task of leadership [leads to] economic power."[36] However, the article voiced skepticism that such leadership existed and claimed that "the [black] leader of today" had not succeeded to help his people reach "economic prosperity" because he had failed "to practice what he so loudly preach[ed] namely: Cooperation in business enterprises." [37] Simply put, professionals and community leaders purchased items from white-owned businesses and deposited their money in white-owned banks instead of investing in their own community.

National papers appeared skeptical of the quality of leadership that would come from black intellectuals and they took every opportunity to voice their opposition. An editorial in a national publication noted the abundance of "intellectual timber" but contended that this group lacked the necessary skills to solve the problems faced by African Americans. [38] The *Chicago Defender* warned readers that "if …progress is bogged in the mire of misunderstanding the 'Talented Tenth' of Aframerica, who boast of their race patriotism and group loyalty, will be to blame."[39] Black intellectuals, according to the article, served as a detriment to the progress of civil rights. The primary

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Roscoe Simmons, "Good Bye Landis 'A Little Learning' Garvey vs. Uncle Sam," *Chicago Defender*, February 25, 1922.

[36] A.H. Gordon, "For a New Moses," *Chicago Defender*, April 14, 1928.

[37] Ibid.

[38] "The Penalty of Non-Leadership."

[39] George S. Schuyler, "Making Our Breaks." The Talented Tenth refers to a phrase used by W.E.B Du Boise who advocated black leadership by way of education.

concern voiced in national publications focused on the issue that the "destiny" of African Americans should rest "not in white leadership" but leadership that came from its own community. The "battle" this time would not center on slavery, but a "battle for economic freedom."[40] The black national press stressed the importance of drafting African Americans in the service of leadership, but they qualified potential leaders by alienating black intellectuals who dismissed the lure of white leadership, power, and money.

The local press adopted a different perspective regarding leadership largely because the language invoked principles and values that resonated with the working class. Publications also educated readers on the notion of successful leadership. An editorial in a local publication defined the ideal black leader as someone who possessed "the spirit of sacrifice and suffering of a Gandhi, and the courage, knowledge, and determination of a Lenin." Indeed, New York's Harlem and the leadership of Tammany Hall brought to the surface the frustrations of working-class blacks toward their representation. Local publications stressed the importance of a new leader whose obligations would include a consideration for "the full equality of colored workers" and that "real leadership" equated to "real service to the people." Local publications defined leadership in much broader terms. They believed that leadership must incorporate a "world vision, buttressed with a broad social, economic and political philosophy" aimed at making working-class blacks see that their solution was "economic in nature" as well as "international in scope." [41] The *Philadelphia Tribune* asserted that economics played a key factor for consideration by black leaders in order to secure "freedom" which would result in a "happier and more abundant life."[42] Local papers not only defined the characteristics of successful leadership, but offered

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[40] J. Blaine Poindexter, "Congressman Hamilton Fish Pleased With Progress of Race During Past 65 Years," *Chicago Defender*, February 18, 1928.

[41] A. Phillip Randolph, "The Negro Is A worker," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 6, 1935.

[42] Thomas L. Dabney, "Negro Leaders Must Come From Ranks," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 27, 1927.

recognition as well. One editorial sang the praises of Augustus F. Hawkins, a black assemblyman from California who "fought for the best interest of the consumer, the working man, and the small taxpayer."[43] Local publications supported the underdog and those who championed their cause. They highlighted the altruism of leaders like Hawkins, using themes like concern for the common man. In doing so, publishers shifted the focus to the black electorate and the need for leaders who would be representative of the black community. Nevertheless, this notion of proper representation often led to a discussion of leadership that stood in opposition to the masses.

Local presses not only exposed the corruption often accompanied by leadership and opposed by the masses, it offered solutions. The article that praised Hawkins for his "recognition of the needs of the masses," chastised leaders who allocated "fat jobs to a chosen few."[44] Indeed, this practice transcended racial differences and set a clear distinction of how class exposed a belief that the needs of a superior class of individuals took precedence over the needs of the masses. The *Philadelphia Tribune* addressed this issue when it admonished "Negro leaders…for their dishonesty in dealing with Negro workers" and warned the "Negro masses" not to rely on their leaders. Rather, it advised them to concentrate on the development of their leadership "from their own ranks."[45] An editorial that endorsed Assemblyman Hawkins as a defender of working-class blacks, admonished former Assemblyman Frederick M. Roberts for a "legislative career…spent in the service of reactionary business [and] hopelessly out of step with the time."[46] The emergence of "Black Politics" and the power of the black electorate in the 1940s came about as a result of the massive northern and western migrations and the 1944 Supreme Court decision in Smith v. Allwright that ruled white-only primaries violated the Fifteenth Amendment.[47] Local presses addressed the issue of character for leaders, which the national press simply

[43] *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 17, 1936.
[44] "Negro Leaders Must Come From Ranks."
[45] Ibid.
[46] "Keep Him Home," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 17, 1936.
[47] Biondi, 40.

ignored. They acknowledged that the black community needed "strong, wise, honest leadership within the race" but more importantly, a leader who could unite all groups of people.[48] However, leadership encompassed only part of the story in which class weighed in on. In order to gain first-class citizenship the masses would need to empower themselves.

The black press and empowerment

Empowerment for the black community appeared in both the national and local black press. African Americans hinged their strategy for first-class citizenship on racial uplift, but the motivation for this concept raised strong disagreements among local and national papers. Both presses argued that solidarity among workers furthered agency among working-class blacks, but they differed in their presentation of this tactic. National publications strongly believed that the black community, powerless to fight on its own, needed to form bonds with influential whites. The *Chicago Defender* informed readers that blacks required supportive white leaders to give "sound advice, skillful and whole-hearted support and powerful influence" largely because "the Negro group in America will never be strong enough physically, intellectually, or financially to isolate itself and survive."[49] National papers argued that working-class blacks could benefit from their association with communist ideologies.

National papers adopted the language of left-leaning political ideologies to project solidarity and support fringe labor unions. One article discussed the views of the American Negro Labor Congress and its hope that "colored workers" would unite with "white workers of the world." The article articulated that the purpose of this union would ignore race and focus on what "Communists" referred to as "class struggle."[50] National papers created enemies that working-class blacks could relate to. In their support of the Trade Union Unity, a communist labor organization, a national publication warned of the "struggle

[48] "Leaders Express Hope For Race In 1940."
[49] George S. Schuyler, "Making Our Breaks."
[50] "Organizer of American Negro Labor Congress Addresses Pittsburghers," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 9, 1925.

against our capitalist enemy, the bosses and their government."[51] This article stressed the importance of "Negro and white workers...to take their destiny in their own hands by organizing under the revolutionary leadership of the Communist party."[52] The *Chicago Defender* argued in defense of "full social, economic and political equality of the Negro masses" explaining that "Negro workers [are] part of the American working class in the struggle against the capitalist system."[53] Feelings of fear and powerlessness filled the pages of national papers in order to motivate working-class blacks. National presses included gender with this tactic.

Indeed, language was an important tool in selling the idea of union membership to African Americans and the motivation for solidarity often became one of gender over race. The *Chicago Defender* noted this in an article entitled "the Negro working woman" which argued for the support of unions by working-class women who were "prepared to fight" and were "[trained] on the picket line in Passaic, in New York and Chicago."[54] To garner this support, the article called attention to "the heartless cruelties" leveled at African Americans and referred to behavior that aligned itself to "terrorist methods" that defined working-class women as "a slave working class."[55]

The local press supported working-class solidarity, but used positive and spiritual tones to sell this idea to working-class blacks. The *Philadelphia Tribune* called for "young graduates and under-graduates, fraters and sorors, teachers, social workers, doctors and lawyers" to support black-run unions.[56] Local papers accepted working-class solidarity as a method to ensure "real emancipation for black people, nearly all of whom are in the working class" while avoiding demeaning language like national

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[51] Harold Williams, "Our Misleaders," *Chicago Defender*, May 24, 1930.

[52] Ibid.

[53] "Trade Union Unity League Calls Labor Conference," *Chicago Defender*, January 18, 1930.

[54] "The Negro Working Woman," *Chicago Defender*, April 9, 1927.

[55] Ibid.

[56] "Young People Back Pullman Porters' Union," *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 22, 1927.

publications. They argued that the mutual interests of working-class blacks and whites would come to fruition when "[They] work[ed] together in harmony."[57] At times, the language used in newspapers evoked spiritual undertones to appeal to the sensibilities of working-class blacks. One article noted that "the only 'salvation' is active, planned cooperation between all workers" and those who were not organized were "at the 'mercy' of grasping employers." [58] Undoubtedly, local publications remained aware of the role that churches and spirituality played in the lives of African Americans. A "Nonmaterial" phenomenon such as Christian morals shaped internal communal standards among African Americans and became a way in which they identified and located class.[59] But solidarity did not stand on its own as the only issue of empowerment that waxed the pages of the press.

The Black Fourth Estate had to decide whether or not an alliance with trade unions could help African Americans reach first-class status. Consequently, local and national black papers criticized the American Federation of Labor (AFL) for excluding working-class blacks and favoring skilled white workers. The *Baltimore African-American* a local publication criticized the AFL for denying membership to working-class blacks under "normal conditions" but welcoming them as strikebreakers, and earning the brand of "scabs" as a result. [60] This journalist reminded his readers of the AFL's practice to exclude skilled black laborers like plumbers, machinists, and railway mail clerks from their organization. [61] National publications echoed this dissent when they called the AFL "social fascists" who created "a wave of terror" intended to "divide the Negro and white workers from uniting and demanding better economic and social

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[57] William Pickens, "Solidarity of Workers."

[58] A. Clayton Powel Jr., "Justice is a Racket Enter Class Hatred Color Matters But Little Workers Must Unite," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 14, 1946; "Congratulations Porters!" *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 5, 1936.

[59] Lang, 6.

[60] "A.F.L. Is Blamed For Decrease In Negro Unions," *Baltimore African-American*, January 18, 1930.

[61] Ibid.

conditions."[62] As noted by Beth Tompkins Bates, during the interwar years from the 1920s to the early 1940s, 90 % of white workers favored the union effort and that twenty-four national labor unions, ten of them affiliates of the AFL, barred blacks completely.[63] However, local paper's criticism of trade unions warned that big labor unions endangered African-American empowerment. The *New York Amsterdam News* warned readers that union labor threatened "Negro labor" largely because it had "monopolized all government projects" and because it had "made demands on private business" that displaced working-class blacks.[64] This theme appeared in an editorial in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* as a criticism toward the AFL which "exclud[ed] Negroes on the basis of their merit [and encouraged] independent employers to continue the practice."[65] Indeed, the black press aimed sharp criticism towards craft unionism, but also critiqued prominent organizations leveled at uplifting the black community.

Support of the National Urban League (NUL), a notable black-run organization, remained an area of contention between local and national papers. National papers criticized NUL for their ineffective efforts to help laboring blacks. The *Norfolk Journal and Guide* referred to them as "a mere scab agency" that operated "as a supply base furnishing to employers unorganized Negro workers with which to beat down the wages, hours, and working conditions erected by union workers."[66] By noting the distinction of working-class blacks as strikebreakers and highlighting the pejorative term "scab" in their articles, national publications made class the issue that kept African Americans from full citizenship rights. On the other hand, local papers supported the Urban League because they promoted organized labor. An article in the *New York Amsterdam News* urged NUL leadership to "join with the league [to] formulat[e] a workable

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[62] Harold Williams, "Our Misleaders."
[63] Bates, 5-6.
[64] Benjamin Jefferson Davis, "New Deal Viewed as a Dirty Deal," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 15, 1935.
[65] *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 26, 1935.
[66] "The Negro Wage Earner And The Urban League," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, March 16, 1929.

program that would insure confidence in the integrity of the labor leaders and a more democratic stand on the part of labor organizations."[67] As suggested by Touré F. Reed, organizers of the Urban League believed that organized labor presented an opportunity to adjust the attitudes of black and white workers. Affiliation with the AFL could potentially equip Afro-Americans with the social checks and skills that individuals and the race needed to flourish in industrial society.[68] But even as the local press touted the efforts of the Urban League, it argued in support of other organizations that championed working-class blacks.

The local press supported organizations that empowered working-class blacks. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* urged Negro labor to "rally [behind] John L. Lewis of the committee for industrial organization in its present dispute with the executive council of the American Federation of Labor." The article further noted that pressure placed on Negro workers to "dissolve and cease its efforts on behalf of industrial unionism within the Federation" met with adversity by Workers' Councils and other labor organizations. Nonetheless, these groups urged workers "to send immediate protest to President William Green and other A.F. of L. officers."[69] By 1933, John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers (UMW) was joined by advocates of industrial unionism to urge the Federation to broaden its base and organize workers irrespective of skills.[70] Lewis and others argued that the AFL craft unions became counterproductive to labor solidarity because they imbued workers with a narrow trade consciousness.[71] After 1935, black workers enjoyed new opportunities in industrial work, and achieved a greater presence in organized labor because of the strides made by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).[72] However, local papers saved their highest praise for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

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[67] "Organized Labor Must Open Door," *New York Amsterdam News*, May, 27, 1925.
[68] Reed, 86.
[69] "Negro Workers Urged to Aid Industrial Fight," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 18, 1936.
[70] Reed, 128.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Lang, 68, 75.

(BSCP), a labor organization that promoted the welfare of the working class. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* urged Pullman employees to vote for Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters an organization they felt would "insure [them] genuine representation" and give workers the "right kind of representation [to] control the union."[73] With control in mind, the press urged its readers to embrace the ways they could empower themselves. Trade unions offered one approach to empower laborers, but a far more effective method utilized the purchasing power of the black community.

National and local press explained that black consumerism defined class but national publications criticized both middle and working-class blacks for their lack of prudence. The *Chicago Defender* warned the middle and working class to "quit spending like they're rich" and to abandon the "old American custom of trying to keep up with the Joneses."[74] Undoubtedly, this language evoked feelings of class by comparing African Americans to privileged whites. National publications advised black communities that diligent use of their money would result in greater personal freedom. In contrast, local papers defended consumers and urged them to support "Negro businesses [and] improve security and standards of services of Negro business."[75] By the 1930s, the Chicago *Whip's* slogan "Spend Your Money Where You Can Work" instilled in the working class a new directive in black communities where white merchants did business[76] However, noting the disparity of Negro workers above the level of porter or handyman in their own community, the *New York Amsterdam News* changed this slogan to "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work."[77] Local publications took the time to educate their readers on the importance of their purchasing power. A local publication espoused the benefits of co-operatives to "protect the interest of the Negro" and supported the actions of working-class consumers "to buy back the goods [they had] helped to create

[73] "Return to Slavery."
[74] "Let's Quit Pretending."
[75] "Leaders Express Hope for Race In 1940."
[76] Pride and Wilson II, 142.
[77] Ibid.

with [their] labor power."[78] Historian Davarian L. Baldwin explains that, "the desire for autonomous black cultural production through economic control and consumer strategies was prevalent in urban cities and a salient aspect of the New Negro consciousness which sought to break free from white economic dependence."[79] The local black press believed that black consumerism empowered all classes of African Americans, especially the working class. It provided them with an important tool for achieving first-class-citizenship—purchasing power. It urged "the masses of the community" to go beyond the notion of "receiving the goods they purchase with wages [by sharing] in the profit of the business."[80] Martha Biondi notes that the Consumer Protective Committee (CPC) formed in 1947 to contest "unscrupulous" white-owned businesses in Harlem. The CPC garnered support from the local black press and champion the idea of Harlem as a community of black merchants.[81] However, both presses stressed to their readers that utilizing their consumer power was not enough to achieve first-class citizenship. The Black Fourth Estate reminded them that the egalitarian goals of the black community could only be achieved through proper behavior.

Politics of respectability played a crucial role in the lives of African Americans, a theme stressed by the national and local black presses. An article in a national publication promoted "a program of building up esteem, respect and understanding."[82] National publications often included demeaning language in their articles when promoting the importance of respectable behavior. The *Chicago Defender* demeaned African Americans as children. One article stated that "the American Negro [had] just about grown up [yet had] soberly realize[d] the significance of a man's responsibilities."[83] Local publications advocated respectable behavior for African Americans but they couched it

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[78] A. Phillip Randolph, "The Negro is a Worker."
[79] Baldwin, 7.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Biondi, 90.
[82] George S. Schuyler, "Making Our Breaks."
[83] "Racial Consciousness Takes New Turn, Says Journalist," *Chicago Defender*, July 6, 1929.

in language that promoted positive themes that benefited the community. An article in the local press stressed the importance of "cooperation of the Negro community" in an effort to "elevate neighborhood standards of living…increase public respect…and aspirations of our Negro citizens."[84] The language of the local press framed respectability in terms and ideas such as "the virtues of tolerance, truthfulness, unselfishness, and honesty" a noticeable contrast from the national black press' perceptions of respectability.[85]

The press served as an invaluable source of information for African Americans in the first quarter through the mid-twentieth century because it framed the arguments and defined the issues that kept black America from experiencing first-class citizenship. In making their case to the black community, middle-class black journalists and editors differed in their perceptions of working-class blacks. Both presses portrayed African Americans as victims, but the solutions they offered to elevate their status differed dramatically. National papers used fear tactics to motivate working-class blacks. Regional presses stressed education as the best way for the black community to achieve first-class citizenship. Once the black presses solidified their separate definitions of black victims, they each conveyed the need for leadership. National papers looked for leaders who personified a "black Moses" and argued that black leaders, regardless of their political ideology, served as a savior to the black community. Local papers avoided colorful language to describe their ideal leader but evoked principles and values that represented working-class blacks. Both presses found common ground concerning issues of working-class solidarity, black consumerism, proper behavior, and distrust of white-craft unionism, but used different language to sell ideas of empowerment. The national black press engaged in demeaning language because they believed it would motivate African Americans to fight for first-class citizenship. On the other hand, local papers incorporated positive language to inspire working-class blacks to demand equality. Class can be divisive regardless

[84] "Leaders Express Hope for Race In 1940."
[85] Ibid.

of race or ethnicity, but African Americans, more than any group, needed to put class divides behind and find unity for their cause. What took precedence for both presses centered on their determination to defend first-class citizenship as each saw fit. Each press carefully selected language to define victimization, leadership, and empowerment. The language that they elected marginalized working-class blacks. When class comes under the microscope instead of race a different story emerges in the black press. The story challenges historians to examine the division in the black community over the fight for first-class citizenship. Nonetheless, the mixed messages that waxed the pages of local and national black papers created a divide. The black freedom struggle of the early twentieth century had the potential to accelerate civil rights for African Americans had it not been mired in the struggle to define class. The messengers failed to take into consideration an important aspect of their message—the audience.

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