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# "We are Americans, too:" Interracial Relations in Detroit's Postwar Auto Industry

## **Abstract**

This analysis looks at the interracial relations and conflicts within the postwar Detroit auto industry. In doing so, it examines the role the UAW, the government, the corporations, and the workers themselves played, and how race and/or gender contributed to interactive negotiations within the employment sector at the time.

## **Keywords**

Racial Conflict, Detroit auto industry

## **Disciplines**

African American Studies | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Labor History | United States History

## **Comments**

Written for HIST 350: Modern Black Freedom Struggle.

# **“We are Americans, too”**

## **Interracial Relations in Detroit’s Postwar Auto Industry**

Andrew C. Nosti  
Professor Jill Titus  
History 350  
10/26/2015

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work  
and have not witnessed a violation of the honor code.

## **Emigration and Social Transformation**

In a social phenomenon known as the Second Great Migration, Americans flocked *en masse* to northern cities during World War II and the years immediately following. Southern African-Americans chasing an economic promised land comprised a sizeable portion of this urban influx. Between 1940 and 1950, roughly 1,597,000 southern blacks migrated to the north, and another 1,457,000 would join them throughout the next decade, bringing the twenty-year total to 3,054,000 emigrants. Detroit and its attractive auto industry, converted to defense manufacturing for the war effort, became the destination for a large chunk of these African-Americans. Between 1941 and 1945 alone, around 65,000 black migrants made their way to Detroit. This surge of emigrants helped Detroit's black population double between 1940 and 1950, increasing from 149,119 to 300,506. By 1970, Detroit's black population increased by over 500,000 from its 1940 level, growing from 9 to 45 percent of the city's total population. This inflow, combined with increased wartime production and the removal of laborers to the warfront, dramatically changed the composition of Detroit's workforce. World War II witnessed 75,000 African Americans and 180,000 women enter the city's labor pool.<sup>1</sup>

Racial anxieties and its accompanying violence permeated Detroit prior to the Second Great Migration, but the shifting nature of Detroit's demographics helped push an already volatile racial climate over the edge, both escalating pre-existing forms of racial violence and creating new ones. White identity, often simply termed whiteness, had long depended on the maintenance of social and political dominance within the community and country. White

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001): 12; Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000): 66; John Hartigan Jr., *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999): 39; Thomas J. Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940-1964," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 82, No. 2 (Sept., 1995): 553; Kevin Boyle, "The Kiss: Racial and Gender Conflict in a 1950s Automobile Factory," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (Sep., 1997): 500.

Detroit's identity rested on these same socio-political factors. Similarly, whiteness often projected its dominance upon its constructed other: blackness.<sup>2</sup> These underlying tenets of white identity, combined with already-present, prevalent, and inherently related racialized outlooks, caused white Detroiters to resent blacks, who they saw as threats to their deserved status. Opposed to accepting their new black neighbors and coworkers, white Detroiters lashed out against the perceived racial invasion. Hate strikes, public demonstrations, mob violence, and vigilantism rocked the city throughout the war years. These tensions reached a fevered climax on June 20, 1943, when race riots erupted in Belle Isle Park.

A series of tension-heightening incidents along with racialized perceptions led to the mayhem. Blacks viewed whites as oppressors who used their collective power to corral them into inadequate housing in dilapidated, segregated neighborhoods; slow and halt their entrance into the labor force and, once there, funnel them into the lowest-earning, hardest-working positions; and withhold access to public places and/or services, such as parks, bars, and restaurants. Whites, on the other hand, saw blacks as an invading force of agitators who threatened their tenuous hold on their world, forcing their way into their jobs, bringing crime into their neighborhoods, and potentially intermingling with their children – the racialized notions of miscegenation and fears of black male sexual aggression almost always influenced whites' perceptions of blacks. In the days prior to the riots, rumors of black men raping a white woman in Belle Isle Park and of white sailors throwing a black woman and her baby into Lake St. Claire ran rampant through the city

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<sup>2</sup> Hartigan, *Racial Situations*, 15. Hartigan's book provides an in-depth study on whiteness in Detroit, especially in the postwar years. He largely focuses on intraracial, instead of interracial, depictions, examining how Detroiters perceived and articulated the influx of southern "hillbillies" into their neighborhoods and the associated community deterioration that followed.

gossip mill. The combination of racial antagonism and the rumored incidents brought the tensions to a head.<sup>3</sup>

The riots lasted for three days, and it took federal aid to recapture a shaky peace. 34 people lay dead – 9 white and 25 black – and 675 injured – 345 white, 254 black, and 76 police officers. Property damage amounted to an astounding \$2 million. Neither the violence nor its cessation marked an end to Detroit's racial tensions, but some hope flowed from the bloodshed: the city, determined to avoid another outbreak in the future, established an emergency committee to determine the reasons for the riot. Then, in March 1944, Mayor Jeffries established the more permanent Detroit Interracial Committee (DIC) to serve as a city mechanism to observe racial attitudes and prevent future violence from occurring.<sup>4</sup>

Historians have produced an extensive literature on race relations in wartime Detroit, and within that literature have placed a large emphasis on the manufacturing industry. But this attention generally concludes with the conclusion of the war. After the American victory, scholars have primarily turned their attention away from Detroit's employment sector. Stephen Grant Meyer has conducted comprehensive analyses on residential segregation and related racial conflict in Detroit in the postwar years, but Meyer's focus kept him from providing an in-depth analysis on how that conflict shaped occupational negotiations. Most historians, like Meyer, pivot towards residential segregation and conflict while studying this era. Thomas J. Sugrue has perhaps provided the fullest examination of postwar Detroit's employment sector and race-related conflict, but touches upon the auto industry as a part, not the whole, of his topic, which creates a greater, broader understanding of race and employment but hinders a direct

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<sup>3</sup> Martha Wilkerson and Dominic J. Capeci, Jr., *Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1991): 144-147; Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door*, 71. Wilkerson and Capeci's book provides an in-depth analysis into the 43 Riot.

<sup>4</sup> "The Report on the Detroit Race Riot," *The University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (July, 1943): 498; Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door*, 71-72.

examination of the auto industry on its own.<sup>5</sup> The pivot of interest within most historians' analyses has provided a strong scholarly basis for employment discrimination in the Detroit auto industry before and during the war, but then mainly turns away from the employment sector and looks at housing until a return in scholarly interest starting around 1957, when black workers formed the Trade Union Leadership Conference (TULC), a full twelve years after the war ended. Obviously, blacks and whites continued to interact in the Detroit auto industry throughout this time, but a general gap within the scholarship exists.

While white women picketed and chanted through the streets in an effort to keep their neighborhoods homogenously white, their husbands largely went to work in factories where they toiled alongside the same black Detroiters that their wives – and perhaps themselves in their non-working hours – sought to keep out of their communities, whether through demonstrations, organization, threats, violence, or a combination of these tactics. These racial tensions could hardly fail to pervade the auto industry, the largest sector employer in Detroit. The white workers – both male and, at the time increasingly, female – would have carried their racial anxieties into work each day, affecting their interactions with both their white and black coworkers. A complete understanding of Detroit's racial history must include postwar employment; analysis of interracial conflict within the auto industry cannot end at the end of the war, as neither the auto industry nor racial tension got signed away with the peace treaties. In the same way that inter-war and postwar continuities and changes exist in the area of racial conflicts surrounding Detroit neighborhood access, inter-war and postwar continuities and changes exist in the racial conflicts involving Detroit's auto industry. A complete understanding of Detroit and American racial

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<sup>5</sup> Sugrue produced at least both an article and a book on the topic: "Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940-1964 in *The Journal of American History* and *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Meyer's examination spans the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and includes a host of Midwestern, Northern, Mid-Atlantic, and Western cities: *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods*.

history demands an understanding of these continuities and changes, along with their consequences.

### **Unions, Government, and Management**

By the postwar period, the United Automobile Workers (UAW), a Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) affiliate, had emerged as a major political force in America. As Detroit's Motor City nickname would imply, the city became the greatest UAW stronghold. The UAW's unparalleled prominence within the city, especially immediately prior to and during the war years, made it perhaps the most important organizational influence on employment, only rivaled by corporate management and the government. This position presented an opportunity for an interracial alliance that could unite black and white auto workers to combat a common enemy: big business. But even as this alliance produced a formidable front, it also teetered precariously close to dissolving. Not all white UAW members supported black unionization or employment equality, and not all blacks saw the UAW as an organizational savior. The complex relationship between the national organization and local branches frequently created a disconnect between the national rhetoric of equality and the Local, on-the-ground practical efforts to achieve it. Ironically, some of the national rhetoric would subsequently prove itself nothing more than empty words while Local endeavors would attain greater integration within the workplace. As evidenced by these complex relationships, dichotomies, and even contradictions, the UAW's racial history remains exceedingly difficult to sift through, sometimes displaying a remarkably progressive determination to advance the cause of equality and sometimes relegating black workers and black issues to the lower-rung of its priority list, and, at times, completely ignoring them.



The first true connections between black auto workers and the UAW stemmed from labor activism in the late 30s and early 40s. During the UAW's first great push in between 1936 and 1937, the union received minimal support from Detroit's black automotive employees. Already less likely to have a job and always more likely to face termination, the argument for collective bargaining did not convince black workers at the rates of their white counterparts. Some black workers, such as the organizer Shelton Tappes, worked tirelessly to rally more African-Americans to the union cause, but their initial attempts garnered little success. In the major demonstrations that ensued – most notably the confrontation with Chrysler in 1939 and Ford two years later – corporations would turn to unemployed blacks to act as strikebreakers and weaken the union's stance, both by continuing production and by playing off racial antagonisms. But, as black employment increased and the UAW realized the necessity of an interracial coalition to a powerful union, this strategy rebounded, and ultimately prompted greater black support for the UAW. The 1941 strike at Ford, which witnessed Ford pull back from its history of black philanthropy and leave an ally-vacuum the UAW would quickly fill, provides the most momentous catalyst for this reorientation.<sup>6</sup>

The heightened emphasis on employment discrimination from civil rights groups and, because of those civil rights groups, government agencies also helped promote black acceptance of a unionized, organized approach. As America transitioned into the war effort and converted its auto industry into a war-defense industry, groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) challenged factories' discriminatory practices,

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<sup>6</sup> August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979): 34-35, 66-67, 108-109; David M. Lewis-Colman, *Race against Liberalism: Black Workers and the UAW in Detroit* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008): 8-14, 24. The nature of this paper permits only a brief summarization of the tremendously complex process that brought black Detroiters and the UAW together at the end of the Depression years and the conversion to war production. Meier and Rudwick's work affords a reader with a much more in-depth, complicated understanding of this process.

specifically when it came to hiring and promotion. On February 29, 1940, Roy Wilkins, the Assistant Secretary for the NAACP, wrote to the president of the General Motors Corporation to address potential black employees as replacement workers, urging him to “set an example for others” by allowing “the applications of American Negro workers [to] be considered without the traditional prejudice,” and charging that GM “suffers by comparison with some other firms...in the matter of the proportion of Negro employees and the opportunities for advancement accorded them.”<sup>7</sup> The company responded in typical fashion, claiming it did not discriminate “due to race, creed or color” and citing seniority rules as a cause of difficulty for hiring and promoting black workers.<sup>8</sup> A letter from James J. McLendon to Walter White further highlights management’s discriminatory practices: “...Cadillac [has] only a few Negro employees and practically none in skilled jobs;...Chevrolet [has] only porters or janitors and is reputed to have a [illegible] pay window for Colored employees.”<sup>9</sup> In order to combat these practices, the NAACP used a combination of appeals to wartime patriotism, government organizations, such as the recently instituted federal Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) or the War Labor Board (WLB), and their newfound alliance with the UAW.

That newfound alliance remained rather rocky throughout its tenure. During the war, International leaders espoused employment equality while Local chapters and white employees often resisted what they perceived as a black intrusion; while the International union began to

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<sup>7</sup> Roy Wilkins to William S. Knudsen, Feb. 29, 1940. Discrimination in Defense Industries in Detroit, Michigan. Papers of the NAACP, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series A: Subject Files on Employment and Labor Discrimination, 1940-1955. ProQuest History Vault. 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> H. W. Anderson to Roy Wilkins, March 22, 1940. Discrimination in Defense Industries in Detroit, Michigan. Papers of the NAACP, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series A: Subject Files on Employment and Labor Discrimination, 1940-1955. ProQuest History Vault. 4. Union negotiations with auto corporations fashioned the somewhat complicated system of seniority. Seniority demanded that workers gain promotion and reemployment based on their employment history. As explored later in this paper, seniority and its inter-job categorizations would become a major barrier to black advancement and employment equality.

<sup>9</sup> James McLendon to Walter White, Jan. 4, 1941. Discrimination in Defense Industries in Detroit, Michigan. Papers of the NAACP, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series A: Subject Files on Employment and Labor Discrimination, 1940-1955. ProQuest History Vault. 38-39.

adopt non-discriminatory charters and certain Local chapters formed Fair Practice Committees, some Locals resisted the tide of tolerance and led a series of hate strikes that often resulted in reaction strikes by black workers. As the International union opposed these hate strikes and even threatened punitive measures against their leaders and participants, rumors of Klan infiltration of some Local branches and factories circulated throughout the city and the nation. Because of these resistance efforts, and because of a general lack of applied motivation, the International union never managed to fulfill many of its promises to black supporters. Occasionally deterred but never defeated, black leaders pursued a policy of increased pressure that helped place them, including the earlier mentioned Shelton Tappes, who became the recording secretary of UAW's largest Local, Local 600, in 1942, in a handful of leadership positions.<sup>10</sup>

These general trends would persist throughout the postwar years. Despite a climb from 4% of the automobile workforce at the beginning of the war to 15% at its end, corporations still utilized a slew of discriminatory practices. In May 1948, three out of four listings for unskilled jobs barred blacks. Three years later, still over half of the job orders sent to the Michigan Employment Security Commission excluded nonwhites. The Detroit Interracial Committee found "the evidence of discrimination in employment so patently obvious that an extensive survey to prove its existence would seem unnecessary and wasteful."<sup>11</sup> As late as 1954, a group of African-Americans reached out to the NAACP about getting turned away at Chrysler gates.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit*, 109, 131-134; Lewis-Colman, *Race Against Liberalism*, 22-31; Albert Deutsch, "KKK Strikes: Some Men Behind Packard 'Hate Strikes' Revealed," Packard Strike of White Workers in Protest of Hiring and Promotion of African Americans, Papers of the NAACP, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series A: Subject Files on Employment and Labor Discrimination, 1940-1955. ProQuest History Vault, 44-45.

<sup>11</sup> "Report of Memorandum and Proposed Amendments by Will Maslow of the American Jewish Congress before a Sub-Committee of the Senate Committee of Labor and Public Welfare." Protest of Taft-Hartley Acceptance of Jim Crow Laws in Local Unions, and Efforts to Amend Taft-Hartley. Papers of the NAACP, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series A: Subject Files on Employment and Labor Discrimination, 1940-1955. ProQuest History Vault. 105.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996): 94-98; Lewis-Colman, *Race Against Liberalism*, 54.

As these discriminatory practices continued, the alliance between civil rights organizations and the UAW similarly survived beyond VJ Day, as the NAACP supported efforts such as the GM strike in early 1946. However, decentralized management patterns and a union push to emphasize already-hired employees instead of hiring patterns crippled efforts to tackle discriminatory hiring practices. Perceptions of high black turnover and black absenteeism, fueled through racialized perceptions of the unreliable, lazy black worker and slightly vagrant black lifestyle, despite available evidence that indicates higher black employee stability and dependability, drove many company managers to think twice before hiring black workers. With the wartime agencies dissolved, civil rights and labor groups riled up pressure on local governments and the state legislature to pass non-discrimination bills. In 1951, the National Negro Labor Council (NNLC) joined forces with the Local 600's mostly white body to push a petition drive to get a referendum on the fall ballot to pass a fair-employment ordinance. By 1955, the pressure extended to the state legislature, as Michigan became one of twelve states to implement a fair-employment law.<sup>13</sup>

Once hired, black workers continued to experience company discrimination. Management continued to relegate black workers to the most menial jobs, often the dirtiest and most dangerous. Thomas J. Sugrue recounts one auto company official's rationale for why he primarily hired African-Americans to work in the paint room: “‘Yes, some jobs white folks will not do; so they have to take niggers in, particularly in duce work, spraying paint on car bodies. This soon kills a white man.’ Asked if it killed blacks, he responded, ‘It shortens their lives, it

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Reuther to Walter White, Jan. 4, 1946. General Motors Strike Fund, Including Walter White Service on Strike Fund and Petition of Southern Cotton Oil Workers Strike Committee for NAACP Contributions. Papers of the NAACP, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series A: Subject Files on Employment and Labor Discrimination, 1940-1955. ProQuest History Vault. 16; Lewis-Colman, *Race Against Liberalism*, 38-40, 54-58; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 96-99.

cuts them down but they're just niggers.'"<sup>14</sup> Job classification and noninterchangeable agreements added to the pattern of discriminatory racial relegation to maintain an effective segregation within the factories. Some branches, such as Local 600, managed to combat the separate seniority classifications that functioned as an excuse for management to perpetuate their in-house version of Jim Crow, but others, such as Local 3, did their best to help establish this type of seniority system.<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding this progressive example of Local 600, the disparity between Locals and the International union endured. Without shop floor pressure – so, effectively, a strong black demographic within the Local – management saw little reason to revise their seniority classifications and noninterchangeable agreements. Thus, racial advancement often only attained short-term or token solutions. Survey results from 1951 revealed that 65% of CIO members in Detroit opposed racial employment equality, a slightly higher proportion than other unions. These Local members' racist attitudes led Herbert Hill, a Labor Relations Assistant for the NAACP, to note in a letter to the president of the NAACP Detroit Branch, "I am glad that you distinguished between the International Union which has established an absolutely correct policy on racial discrimination, and the Local union leaderships which all too often violate the official policy of their International union.... As you perhaps know these matters are rather explosive ones within the UAW and can have all sorts of ramifications."<sup>16</sup> This clear distinction between the International's racial progressivism and Local branch's racial conservatism critically hindered any attempt to tackle employment discrimination.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Surgrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 99.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis-Colman, *Race Against Liberalism*, 58-60; Boyle, "The Kiss," 507.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert Hill to Edward M. Turner, Sep. 10, 1952, United Auto Workers, Including Cooperation with the NAACP and Civil Rights Legislation, Papers of the NAACP, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series A: Subject Files on Employment and Labor Discrimination, 1940-1955, ProQuest History Vault, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Kornhauser, *Detroit as the People See It: A Survey of Attitudes in an Industrial City* (Detroit, 1952): 63, as quoted in Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 19; Lewis-Colman, *Race Against Liberalism*, 59. It remains important not to

The mayoral elections of 1945 and 49 serve as perhaps the most potent pieces of evidence for the International's lack of influence over lay members and those members' racialized outlooks. In 1945, the UAW backed the liberal Richard Frankenstein against the incumbent conservative Edward Jeffries. Jeffries utilized racial messages to rally white voters against Frankenstein; his campaign and supporters distributed handbills with messages such as "Negroes Can Live Anywhere With Frankenstein Mayor. Negros – Do Your Duty Nov. 6." Jeffries combined this race-baiting with red-baiting tactics as well, and ultimately defeated Frankenstein by a narrow margin.<sup>18</sup>

Emboldened by his near-victory, Frankenstein sought City Hall again in 1949, but two other challengers joined him in a four-person race. Common council member George Edwards provided another left-of-center candidate while city treasurer Albert Cobo stood even farther to the right than Jeffries. The UAW came out in support of Edwards, contributing nearly \$30,000, printing and distributing over 1.3 million pro-Edward pamphlets, and sending union members to canvass door-to-door. Jeffries and Cobo both used the same race-baiting and red-baiting strategies to denounce Edwards and Frankenstein that won Jeffries the mayorship four years earlier. In another tight race, Cobo, the most conservative candidate, came out on top.<sup>19</sup>

The losses, although close, unveiled a shift in Detroit culture. White Detroit had turned its attention away from labor issues to housing issues, and race became the most important factor. Although Edwards received the UAW's backing, the support of the newly sprouted and

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overemphasize the role that the International UAW played in promoting employment equality. While its rhetoric supported an end to discrimination, leaders, such as the formidable Walter Reuther, often quieted black demands by claiming they sought outcomes that benefitted all workers and attempted to take control of related civil rights efforts. The International appeared much more interested in pursuing theoretical instead of practical equality. A greater examination into the International and its interactions with black activists falls beyond the scope of this inquiry, but the creation of the Trade Union Leadership Council in 1957 display the growing dissatisfaction with the pace of the union and corporation's progressive change.

<sup>18</sup> Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics," 569-570; Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics," 570; Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 14.

increasingly influential white homeowners' associations carried Cobo to victory. Some union members backed away from the International's politics. Many refused to place Edwards placards in their windows, and, in one heavily Democratic area, blue-collar workers voted for Cobo two to one. As the issue of housing gained prominence within Detroit's political arena, the UAW lost a great deal of its political clout, and, subsequently, black workers lost some of their organizational influence. In 1945 and 1949, many white Detroiters made their opposition to racial equality known, and Cobo would go on to win reelection in the following three races.<sup>20</sup>

### **"The Colored": Relations Within the Shops**

As the positions of Locals and attitudes of their members suggest, many white auto employees obstinately resisted racial equality. This racial opposition did not solely appear in the white employees' voting patterns, the popularity and support of homeowners' associations, the mixed race records of many Locals, or conducted surveys; it also saturated the shop floor. Past demonstrations of racism certainly popped up here and there throughout the auto industry, but, as time progressed, the racialized atmosphere of the shop floor grew less overt, revealed more in the subtleties of language and social interaction as opposed to explicit insults, protests, or violence.

Hate strikes constituted the most prominent and common form of white resistance to black employment advancement throughout World War II. The pressures on the factories to meet the demands of wartime production fostered an atmosphere that made workers believe they held the power in the employee-employer relationship, meaning they could easily obtain their goals by slowing or halting production and bringing the ire of the government down upon the factories. As a result, when some white workers disagreed with new black hires or, more commonly, new black promotions, they would exhibit their displeasure by walking out of the plant. Black

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<sup>20</sup> Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics," 571-572.

workers, similarly rationalizing their reactions, would frequently then walk out in protest as well, bringing production to a complete standstill and forcing management to choose a side.

The most famous of these hate strikes took place in June 1943, at the Packard Plant. As government organizations and the International coerced auto corporations into hiring and promoting more African-Americans, white workers' dissatisfaction grew. Packard's personnel director, C. E. Weiss, likely the most shamelessly bigoted official in the auto industry, used these racial resentments to undermine the union. In a series of wildcat strikes, Packard whites repeatedly expressed hostility towards the promotion of black workers, especially black women. Following union discussions, black response walkouts, and company ambiguity, 25,000 Packard whites joined together in a wildcat hate strike on June 3. Locals split over the issue while the International and government threatened punitive measures, and management, having played a role in causing the demonstrations, stood somewhat idly by. Only through the efforts of federal intervention through Colonel Strong and the suspension of thirty "ringleaders" did the hate strike come to an end on June 7. The virulence and size of the demonstration, combined with the usual resulting tokenism and gradualism, fueled greater racial resentment on both sides, evidenced by rumors of Ku Klux Klan involvement and reports of white workers saying they would rather see Japan and Germany win the war than work alongside African-Americans.<sup>21</sup>

As the war churned to a close, hate strikes decreased in frequency. In May 1953, when Robert "Buddy" Battle and William Johnson, along with Local 600, pressured the Rouge plant into promoting Steve Ayler to truck driver and to sign an agreement that top seniority employees

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<sup>21</sup> Albert Deutsch, "Hate Strike: Prejudice a Saboteur of War Production," Packard Strike of White Workers in Protest of Hiring and Promotion of African Americans, Papers of the NAACP, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series A: Subject Files on Employment and Labor Discrimination, 1940-1955, ProQuest History Vault, 42-43; Deutsch. "KKK Strikes," 44-45; Walter White to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, June 4, 1943, Packard Strike of White Workers in Protest of Hiring and Promotion of African Americans, Papers of the NAACP, Part 13: NAACP and Labor, Series A: Subject Files on Employment and Labor Discrimination, 1940-1955, ProQuest History Vault, 46; Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 162-172.



in the 90% black garage department would fill future driver positions as they opened, white unionists and workers from the transportation department threatened to strike. Black workers in the iron foundry intimated they would strike in response, which forced the company to quiet the white discontents and retain Ayler in his new position. This singular instance notwithstanding, interracial tension began to take much more inconspicuous forms. The story Kevin Boyle relates about James Major, a thirty-five-year-old black employee at Chrysler's Dodge Main Plant, displays this transition.<sup>22</sup>

On December 22, 1955, management permitted the plant workers to end their workday early and have their annual Christmas celebration. The 750 workers imbibed a significant quantity of alcohol during the festivities. Major worked in the trim department with his partner, Catherine Young, a white woman likely in her late twenties. Major and Young worked quickly, getting out in front of their production quota, so they decided to move down the line and help their friend, Leona Hunt, a thirty-two-year-old white woman, and Jim, her white partner. Following the completion of the work, Young, likely caught up in the celebratory spirit, proposed that the four share "a Christmas kiss." Jim gave Young a peck on the cheek and Major followed suit with Hunt. Following the friendly cheek-kissing, Hunt offered to get Major a drink. As she walked away two white men approached her, cursing and waving their hands in her face. A crowd soon collected around the disturbance, and, as Young neared the gathering, she heard one of the men exclaim, "If he done that to you, Mrs. Hunt, he will do it to others."<sup>23</sup> Plant officials arrived to diffuse the commotion and assess the situation, taking Hunt and Jim to the plant manager's office. Likely feeling the racial pressure of what had just occurred, Hunt filed a complaint that Major had "kissed her against her will." When questioned why she had not

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis-Colman, "Race Against Liberalism," 59-60.

<sup>23</sup> Young Statement, Jan. 6, 1956, Box 18, UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, as quoted in Boyle, "The Kiss," 497.

protested, she answered, “Because I was afraid the colored would harm me.”<sup>24</sup> Soon after, security escorted Major out of the factory, never to work there again.<sup>25</sup>

The white employees’ reactions clearly displayed their racialized antagonism to their black peers. Despite the fact that sexual harassment and assault, especially at the hands of the white male foremen, ran rampant throughout the factory, the white employees reacted violently when they saw Major kiss Hunt. The black beast mythos of the sexually aggressive black male likely led to this especially harsh reaction. Instead of an affront to Hunt’s bodily rights, the white male workers viewed the peck as a challenge to prevailing racial mores. Resentment towards Major specifically may have played a role as well. Major and Young had developed a close bond through their occupational partnership, taking their breaks together and even sporadically meeting one another after work in bars in Detroit’s African-American sections. Rumors spread that Young, whose husband served in the navy, had entered into an adulterous affair with Major. As more and more women entered the workforce, workplace inter-sex friendships and relationships became increasingly common, but the interracial nature of Major and Young’s made it taboo. These factors caused Major to become nothing more than “the colored.”<sup>26</sup>

This event and its outcomes represent much more than a singular incident during Chrysler’s 1955 Christmas celebrations. Throughout the postwar years a crisis of white male identity took hold. As John Hartigan, Jr. explains, “Through the drawing of racial boundaries, whites reinforced their own fragile racial identity.”<sup>27</sup> The idea of whiteness necessitates the idea of distinct races, primarily its opposite, blackness. As whiteness played a major role in the construction of white identity, blackness played a major role in the projection of an “Other,” or

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<sup>24</sup> Leona Hunt Statement, Jan. 21, 1956, Box 4, UAW Local 3 Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, as quoted in Boyle, “The Kiss,” 520.

<sup>25</sup> Boyle, “The Kiss,” 496-497.

<sup>26</sup> Boyle, “The Kiss,” 517-518

<sup>27</sup> Hartigan, “Racial Situations,” 37.

subgroup wholly opposed and different to another. The social construction of the Other, in this case, blackness, has long served as a foundational block to interracial struggle, an understanding of “us versus them” which justifies the existence and perpetuation of this struggle. Detroit’s auto industry had no special boundary to keep this struggle from infiltrating its floors.<sup>28</sup> By 1940, semiskilled white auto workers believed that they, not management, had established the color line, indicating their solidarity within their identified whiteness and a pride in their racial victory. The struggle to promote themselves meant a struggle to disparage the Other, in this case, black workers. White men had long defined themselves through their economic and social superiority, but, as black men and white women appeared in larger and larger numbers in traditionally white male roles, the identity of the white American man eroded.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time as white male auto industry workers’ racial identity faced new trials, economic realities similarly challenged their economic stability, threatening their ability to maintain their traditional role of breadwinner. Large labor turnover after the war, increased automation, and the first hints of Detroit’s imminent deindustrialization left many workers anxious over their economic prospects, and many of Detroit’s white men subconsciously combined these anxieties with their racial and gender ones and displaced them onto the black men and white women they viewed as undermining their social authority. One Chrysler employee displayed this displacement when he told Young, who, to the consternation of her

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<sup>28</sup> As displayed by earlier references to hiring practices and corporate interactions, the people running the auto industry largely fell under this mode of thinking, and some even took advantage of it to generate strife within the rank-and-file and promote their own interests.

<sup>29</sup> Boyle, “The Kiss,” 502-504. Gender roles often have the same socio-cultural rationale as racial roles. The construction of male requires a construction of female, as each exists relationally to the other: male is male because male is not female, and vice versa. This binary opposition promoted and sustained mutually exclusive gender conceptions, and thus mutually exclusive gender roles, which, as in race, played a pivotal role in gendered perceptions of employment.

coworkers, continued to defend her friend after his termination, that she “should have refused to work with James Major right from the day [they] were put together on the job.”<sup>30</sup>

This feeling of racial encroachment must have felt particularly alarming for the skilled and semiskilled laborers in the factories, who had long exuded a special gender and racial pride in their work. White workers had remained largely content to allow African-Americans to occupy the lower rung of occupational work, serving within unskilled fields. But skilled and semiskilled workers ardently believed that they, and only they, could satisfactorily complete their tasks. They depicted blacks as too undisciplined and women too weak to do their work. But new technology diminished the pride of some skilled and semiskilled workers, such as the replacement of tack spitters’ hammers and tacks with the staple gun, permanently altering the craft they had worked so hard to master and took such pride in. As Boyle put it, “By 1955, the trim department’s white workingmen must have felt their world was crumbling around them.”<sup>31</sup>

These white workers also witnessed the loss of their union dominance, displayed by the increasing authority of the International and the heightened presence and pressures from black members. Almost everything white male workers had taken pride in seemed on the verge of disappearance. Their economic standing, social superiority, union dominance, political sway, and even neighborhood communities appeared threatened by racial advancement. Despite the perpetuation of persistent and pervasive racial inequality, such as minimal promotions, lessened employment prospects, and continued union resistance, whites, especially men, perceived blacks as a clear and eminent threat to the survival of their world. This perception created hostilities on the auto industry’s shop floors that led to racial conflicts like the one confronting James Major at Chrysler’s Dodge Main Plant in 1955.

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<sup>30</sup> Young Statement, as quoted in Boyle, “The Kiss,” 497; Sugrue; *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 143; Boyle, “The Kiss,”

<sup>31</sup> Boyle, “The Kiss,” 516, 503-506.

### **“On the Forgotten List”: African-American Women**

As the auto industry increasingly opened its floors to black men and white women, black women sought to attach themselves to the movement towards employment diversification. Auto corporations, however, exhibited steadfast reluctance to hire and retain black women. The phrase “last hired, first fired” exemplifies African-American women’s employment prospects in the auto industry. Throughout this period, almost all groups appeared opposed or, at best, marginally supportive of employment efforts of black women. African-American men relied on gender stereotypes to justify their disapproval; white women utilized racial ones; and white men combined the two. This staunch wall presented a barrier that chiefly kept black women from entering the auto labor force. Some black Detroit women did manage to trickle into the auto industry, and their voices, along with the silence resulting from others’ purposeful absence, leave historical echoes as loud as the shouts of the hate strikers, the impassioned exhortations of racial progressives and activists, and the clamor of the factory floor machinery.

While black male workers primarily faced pushback on the issue of promotion, black women had problems stepping foot into the factories. A 1943 UAW survey found that only 74 out of 280 (26.4%) production establishments that employed women would hire black women, and the auto industry stood as one of the most adamant of industrial these forces against black female employment. Regardless of whether the women received more training or had better qualifications, auto corporations almost universally hired white women first. In August 1942, Gloster Current, a Detroit NAACP officer, complained to the War Manpower Commission (WMC) about Ford discrimination against black women while hiring thousands of white women at the Willow Run Bomber Plant. Lillie Trim, who had amassed 178 hours of riveting training, had to witness white women with 64 hours or less get hired while companies shunted her aside.

Louise Thomas, exhausted by discrimination, took her grievances to the *Detroit Tribune*, one of the city's major black newspapers:

I have spent long hours and sacrifices to get this defense training, which time I could have used in other ways, but I have not been hired. If I were a white woman, instead of a Negro, my school credentials and my O.K. slip for work at the Ford Willow Run Plant would mean something and I would now be working on a defense job at Willow Run, riveting war weapons to help our nation win the war. It is time for those in authority to get behind these issues and help get a square deal for Negro women in [the] defense industry. We, too, are Americans.<sup>32</sup>

Between 1941 and 1945, forty-nine African-American women logged complaints against Packard, General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. In most of these cases management denied the role of discrimination or used the excuse of walk-outs and racial tensions to maintain their practices. If they did hire black women, their predictions of white backlash had a startling accuracy.<sup>33</sup>

Since management predominantly segregated factories along gender lines, white women became the most vocal rivals of black women seeking employment equality. White women focused their attention on maintaining a distance between themselves and their black counterparts, objecting to working closely alongside them or sharing facilities on the grounds of hygiene and disease, as white women commonly viewed black women as disreputable and promiscuous. Evelyn Scanlon, a representative for UAW Local 3, articulated these concerns at the Women's Conference in February 1942: "I don't think we should bring the problem of negro women into this meeting. I don't think we should consider bringing them into the shops – if we bring them in even in this crisis we'd always have them to contend with. And you know what that means – we'd be working right beside them, we'd be using the same rest rooms, etc. I'm

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<sup>32</sup> "Workers—Shortage Cry is Farce to Trained Jobless Women," *Detroit Tribune*, October 24, 1942, 1, as cited in Megan Taylor Shockley, "Working for Democracy: Working-Class African-American Women, Citizenship, and Civil Rights in Detroit, 1940-1954," *Michigan Historical Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Fall, 2003):126.

<sup>33</sup> Karen Tucker Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers During World War II," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (June, 1982): 84-85, 88, 93; Shockley, "Working for Democracy," 140-141.

against it.”<sup>34</sup> White women frequently enacted hate strikes of their own when black women joined their ranks. One such hate strike occurred on February 12, 1943, when Vera Sutton, Bernice Kirksey, and Pauline Johnson became drill-press operators at Chrysler’s Highland Park Plant. Beyond resistance to their employment itself, when black women arrived at the factory they faced animosity and further discrimination in calls for segregated facilities. Tensions would sometimes spill over into altercations between black and white workers and, no matter who initiated the fight, management generally punished only the black participants.<sup>35</sup>

As displayed by Louise Thomas’s entreaty in her published statement, black women, like black men, regularly turned to the union and government organizations to assist them in their cause. When Chrysler placed Sutton, Kirksey, and Johnson back into a training program in response to that February 12 walk-out, they appealed to the UAW, which then petitioned the FEPC. Facing government and union pressure, Chrysler backed down and the women returned to work. During the 1943 Packard Strike, black women in the plant worked with the UAW to persuade the FEPC to abolish segregated bathrooms. Some black women, such as Lillian Hatcher, who ascended to the Local 742 executive board, managed to climb the union ranks. While a union official and representative, Hatcher devoted a great deal of time to lobbying the government, the union, and corporations to equalize wages along gender lines and to eliminate gendered job classifications. Other women, often through the network of the UAW’s Women Bureau, joined Hatcher in her push, demanding an end to differential treatment and a plantwide seniority system to replace the departmental one.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Transcript of Women’s Conference, February 7, 1942, 40, Box 2, UAW War Policy Division, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, as cited in Shockley, “Working for Democracy,” 135.\*

<sup>35</sup> Anderson, “Last Hired, First Fired,” 86; Shockley, “Working for Democracy,” 134, 144, 146.

<sup>36</sup> Shockley, “Working for Democracy,” 139, 141, 143, 148; Lewis-Colman, “Race Against Liberalism,” 40-41.

In spite of these gains and alliances, when the war ended and production decreased, layoffs disproportionately and severely affected black women. Companies returned to prewar gender practices and disregarded many women's seniority in the lay-off and rehiring process. In 1946, Louise Hamilton transferred to a new position at the Ford River Rouge plant after working there for two-and-a-half years and compiling over 1,440 hours of defense-work training. An hour into her new job, management fired her for failing to keep up with the production line. Hamilton filed a grievance with Local 600 and, almost a year later, received her job back. Between 1947 and 1953, at least three other African-American women lobbied the UAW to get their jobs back after discriminatory firings, and two of those cases achieved success.<sup>37</sup>

Despite those instances, due to a rightward shift and associated red-baiting, the union and civil rights organizations backed off their firmer stances of black female advancement in the postwar years. One woman summarized this process of abandonment in a 1950 letter to Mayor Cobo: "...as soon as V. J. Day Came, it seem [sic] as if my family and I have been put on the forgotten list."<sup>38</sup> Black women turned to their patriotic service during the war to encourage support for their continued employment, but their appeals mostly fell on deaf ears.<sup>39</sup>

In wartime and postwar Detroit, black women increasingly linked employment to citizenship and sought jobs within the industrial instead of domestic sector. Turned away by industry, scorned by whites, overlooked by black men, and deserted by unions and government, this became a grueling, uphill battle. In 1952, Beatrice Woodruff voiced her disillusionment in a letter to the vice-president of the UAW: "I am a sewing machine operator 'power sewing machine that is.' I worked in a factory during the war. The main thing is [sic] I want in a good

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<sup>37</sup> Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired," 95; Shockley, "Working for Democracy," 150-151.

<sup>38</sup> Sweetie Hall to Albert Cobo, October 12, 1950, Folder 50-48E, Box 7, Series 1, Part 1, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, as quoted in Shockley, "Working for Democracy," 153.

<sup>39</sup> Anderson, "Working for Democracy," 153-154.



job is I want it to be a union shop! I am working in a small cleaners now, inspecting and doing the minor sewing, working around seven hours a day and underpaid! I am colored; which is a handicap.... I don't look for special favors, but I do want to live!"<sup>40</sup> Many black women expressed similar struggles to Beatrice Woodruff, but most went ignored and forgotten.

### **Different Challenges, Same Victims**

Throughout the postwar years, white and black auto employees continued their struggle over the racial composition of the workplace and the union. The improved, if still not nearly equal, economic prospects of African-American Detroiters during this time reflect their relative success on this issue. Through greater executive representation within the union, an alliance with the International, grassroots activism, and a steadfast determination to challenge the racial status quo, black auto workers managed to blur the color line within the industry, breaking into traditionally white departments and receiving higher wages, though still comparatively lower than those of their white coworkers. But these victories never produced their envisioned long-term purposes. Throughout the 50s, a slew of related social and economic phenomena combined to limit racial advancement in Detroit.

As white Detroiters failed to maintain their racially homogenous communities, many fled out of the inner-city and into the new frontier of American suburbia. Racialized fears of property depreciation, crime, and disease, along with opportunistic and morally reprehensible real estate agents, spurred this process, now known as "white flight." Between 1950 and 1990, Detroit lost 1.4 million of its white residents. The clearly defined white superiority within the workplace, the community, and the political sphere had begun to collapse, abrading the American white identity.

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<sup>40</sup> Beatrice Woodruff to Guy Nunn, November 22, 1952, Folder 11, Box 14, UAW Fair Practices Papers, as quoted in Shockley, "Working for Democracy," 154.

Perhaps in search of themselves as well as new homes, these white Detroiters attempted to reestablish and re-segregate itself by flocking to out-lying suburban locales.<sup>41</sup>

While the racial make-up of Detroit experienced a transformative transition, the auto industry also underwent tremendous change. From the mid-50s onwards, automation became an ever-present menace to job security within the auto industry. Foreign competition also began to cut into American superiority. At the same time, auto corporations fled the city and shadowed white workers into more suburban regions, doing so to avoid the urban-centered power of the union and to follow their more desirable, at least to them, employee base. The combination of these factors caused many to lose their jobs – Detroit lost almost half its manufacturing jobs in the 50s – and the union its sway. As usual, minorities suffered the most.<sup>42</sup>

The deindustrialization and re-segregation of Detroit and their resulting deterioration of the city debilitated racial advancement. When the city permanently changed, black Detroit lost many of the gains it fought so hard for over the preceding decades. With the UAW crippled, the corporations gone, and the government and public's attention turned toward the South and the USSR, black Detroiters found themselves abandoned and staring down more years of economic insecurity. Almost as soon as African-Americans gained access and opportunity within the auto industry, the jobs disappeared. Instead of standing at the gates of industry and on the shop floors, black workers turned back to unemployment lines as they tried to find new ways to survive.

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<sup>41</sup> Hartigan, Jr., "Racial Situations," 10. For a greater understanding of white resistance and white flight, see Meyer's *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door*. The PBS series *Race – The Power of an Illusion* serves as a strong and interesting stepping stone towards understanding the process through which America racially separated into the white suburbs and the black inner-cities and explores the lasting consequences of this process.

<sup>42</sup> John C. Leggett, *Class, Race, and Labor: Working-Class Consciousness in Detroit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968): 55-56; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 143.

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