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AFRICAN AMERICA, COMMUNISTS, AND THE NATIONAL NEGRO CONGRESS, 1933-1947



The National Negro Congress was established in 1936 to "secure the right of the Negro people to be free from Jim Crowism, segregation, discrimination, lynching, and mob violence" and "to promote the spirit of unity and cooperation between Negro and white people." It was conceived as a national coalition of church, labor, and civil rights organizations that would coordinate protest action in the face of deteriorating economic conditions for blacks.

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Detailed Description:

The idea of a representative assembly for all of black America began with John P. Davis, a militant civil rights activist of the 1920s and 1930s. At a Howard University conference in Washington, D.C., in 1935, Davis, Ralph Bunche, and other prominent African Americans decided to push ahead. A year later the first National Negro Congress met in Chicago and included some 817 delegates representing 585 religious, labor, civic, and fraternal groups. They intended to pursue racial justice at home and abroad by securing "...the right of the Negro people to be free from Jim Crowism, segregation, discrimination, lynching, and mob violence..." and "...to promote the spirit of unity and cooperation between Negro and white people." Prominent members included not only Bunche and Davis, who served as executive secretary, but A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Randolph was elected president.

If this ambitious coalition held great promise given the particular problems African Americans faced during the Great Depression years, its scope also made it vulnerable to factionalism. Predictably, the nation's most prominent civil rights group, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), saw the National Negro Congress as a rival and kept its distance. Roy Wilkins, nonetheless, attended the Chicago convention as an observer and several local NAACP activists were more directly involved. Davis had more success courting the National Urban League and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO),

focusing on a working-class constituency that the NAACP largely ignored even during the Depression's depths. That focus, however, led to an increasing Communist Party presence.

The National Negro Congress's accomplishments were substantial given the constraints of the times. On the grassroots level, the Congress helped organize boycotts, rent strikes, and other direct action protests against racial discrimination. Meanwhile, Davis convinced the CIO to recruit African American members and the WPA Federal Writers Project to guarantee positions for African American writers. Whether organizing voting drives in New York or condemning imperialism in Africa and fascism in Germany, the National Negro Congress was very active through the late 1930s, emerging as a force that could not be ignored. With President Franklin D. Roosevelt sending greetings to its annual meetings, even the NAACP's Walter White felt compelled to participate.

Yet, the National Negro Congress fell apart as quickly as it had come together. The Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 led to a raucous debate culminating in Randolph's decision to leave the organization and begin work on an all-black March on Washington movement. When other prominent members left and general membership plummeted, what was left of the National Negro Congress remained largely in Communist hands. In 1946, the Congress joined two other organizations, the International Labor Defense and the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties, to form the Civil Rights Congress. Under pressure from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, the Subversive Activities Control Board, and the Internal Revenue Service, the Civil Rights Congress closed its doors for good in 1956, citing declining membership and the legal costs of defending itself against the Cold War's investigatory apparatus.

This collection comprises the files of John P. Davis, Edward Strong, and Revels Cayton, as well as financial records. Included with the National Negro Congress records are Davis' files from the Negro Industrial League, 1933, of which he had been executive secretary; Davis' files from the Joint Committee on National Recovery, 1933-1935, an ad-hoc lobby to protect black interests in the federal government; and his subject/reference files on different aspects of the "Negro question." Also, records of the Negro Labor Victory Committee, 1942-1945, including files of Charles A. Collins, executive secretary, and M. Moran Weston, field secretary, consisting of correspondence, subject/organization files, and printed matter.

The Negro Labor Victory Committee, founded in 1942, was an organization of black and white trade union officials from the American Federation of Labor, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and the Railroad Brotherhoods. It was organized to encourage black workers to fight for equality within organized labor, government, and the Armed Forces.