



<http://gdc.gale.com/archivesunbound/>

## FIGHT FOR RACIAL JUSTICE AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS CONGRESS

---



The Civil Rights Congress (CRC) was established in 1946 to, among other things, "combat all forms of discrimination against...labor, the Negro people and the Jewish people, and racial, political, religious, and national minorities." The CRC arose out of the merger of three groups with ties to the Communist Party, the International Labor Defense (ILD), the National Negro Congress, and the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties. CRC campaigns helped pioneer many of the tactics that civil rights movement activists would employ in the late 1950s and 1960s. The CRC folded in 1955 under pressure from the U.S. Attorney General and the House Un-American Activities Committee, which accused the organization of being subversive.

**Date Range:** 1946-1955

**Content:** 115,378 images

**Source Library:** Schomburg Center, New York Public Library

### **Detailed Description:**

Founded in Detroit in 1946, the Civil Rights Congress (CRC) arose out of the merger of three groups with ties to the Communist Party USA: the International Labor Defense (ILD), the National Negro Congress, and the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties to, among other things, "combat all forms of discrimination against...labor, the Negro people and the Jewish people, and racial, political, religious, and national minorities." Embodying the spirit and tactics of all three of its predecessors, the CRC concentrated on legal defense and mass political action on behalf of victims of legal frame-ups. It briefly became a major force in post-WWII battles for civil rights for African Americans and civil liberties for white and black labor movement radicals, before becoming a victim of Cold War anticommunism and government repression. Former ILD secretary William Patterson led the group throughout its existence.

Major Civil Rights Congress campaigns on behalf of black defendants included the cases of Willie McGee, the Martinsville Seven, the Trenton Six, and Rosa Lee Graham. The CRC was also instrumental in publicizing the lynching of Emmett Till and pressing authorities for prosecution of his murderers. CRC campaigns helped pioneer many of the tactics that civil rights movement activists would employ in the late 1950s and 1960s. Beyond this, the CRC

was among the first organizations to expose American racism in the international arena and to connect it to United States Cold War foreign policy in the decolonizing world. In 1951 these efforts climaxed when William Patterson presented his landmark study "We Charge Genocide" to the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Civil Rights Congress "red" cases centered largely on victims of various legislative efforts to suppress suspected members of the Communist Party such as the Smith Act, the McCarran Act, and the House Un-American Activities Committee. Throughout its campaigns the CRC often clashed with mainstream civil rights and civil liberties groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The CRC also battled internally over the issue of prioritizing "black" vs. "red" cases and endured charges of sectarianism on the Left for its perceived unwillingness to defend accused Trotskyists. By the mid 1950s the CRC was increasingly forced to defend its own members and affiliates against government prosecution. The financial strain of these efforts ultimately brought about the organization's dissolution in 1956.

The records in this collection represent the files of the national office of the Congress, based in New York City, including several hundred case files; publications produced and received by the Congress; files of the Literature Department; Executive Director William Patterson's correspondence files; correspondence and other materials from Civil Rights Congress chapters around the country, including case files of the New York chapter; and files of the New York headquarters of the Communist Party of the United States of America, created during the trial of twelve Communist leaders, 1948-1949, including two black members, Benjamin J. Davis and Henry Winston, consisting of correspondence, transcripts, legal briefs, and printed material.