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## GRASSROOTS CIVIL RIGHTS & SOCIAL ACTIVISM: FBI FILES ON BENJAMIN J. DAVIS, JR

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The FBI files on Benjamin J. Davis, Jr. that make up this collection were assembled by Dr. Gerald Horne, author of *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party*, and the breadth of issues addressed by these records is astounding. Davis served as a leader in local, district, and national leadership bodies of the Communist Party USA and thus concerned himself with a broad range of organizational, political, and theoretical questions. There is news of grassroots organizing successes and failures, minutes from meetings held on all the levels on which Davis engaged, and reports from member-informers on all the major political and theoretical debates.

**Date Range:** 1941-1990

**Content:** 71,934 images

**Source Library:** Personal Collection of Gerald Horne

### **Detailed Description:**

Benjamin J. Davis (1903-1964), one of the best known African American members of the Communist Party USA and a figure central to any history of activism in Harlem in the years of the Great Depression, World War II, and the McCarthy period, was the object of intense scrutiny by the FBI and other government intelligence operations for the whole of his political life. The son of a prominent Black Atlanta leader of the Republican Party, Ben Davis began his own political career in 1933 by taking on the case for the International Labor Defense of Angelo Herndon. Herndon was a nineteen-year old Black member of the Communist Party who, because he had embarked on the organizing of a multi-racial union of farm workers, became the target of the powers that be under a Georgia law making it criminal to "incite insurrection." The law was later declared unconstitutional, but in the intervening years the Herndon case was central to the development of a Black activist milieu that looked to the Communist Party for leadership.

The racist hysteria that was nurtured during the Herndon trial left Davis vulnerable in Georgia and he soon moved to Harlem where he became central to the efforts of the Communist Party to build an organization and anti-racist movement in New York City. Davis was an

editor of the *Harlem Liberator*, the successor *Negro Liberator*, and worked on the *Daily Worker* in the late 1930's at a time when that newspaper was staffed by the many artists attracted to the Popular Front. He was part of the leadership of the depression-era National Negro Congress (NNC), deeply integrated into labor and mass movement activities at the center of Black politics in Harlem, and was elected to serve on the New York City Council in 1943 and, again, in 1945. His campaigns, which drew support from elite African American cultural figures like Joe Louis, Lena Horne, and Duke Ellington, are often seen as representing the high point of Communist Party influence in the Black community. Thus, the autobiographical notes he penned from prison, where he served three years and four months of a five-year sentence for conspiring to overthrow the federal government under the notorious Smith Act (1940), were published as *The Communist Councilman from Harlem*. Two years before he died, in 1962, there was a second attempt to convict him under a different sedition law, the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950.

The FBI files on Davis that make up this collection were assembled by Dr. Gerald Horne, author of *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994) and the breadth of issues addressed by these records is astounding. Davis served as a leader in local, district, and national leadership bodies of the Communist Party USA and thus concerned himself with a broad range of organizational, political, and theoretical questions. There is news of grassroots organizing successes and failures, minutes from meetings held on all the levels on which Davis engaged, and reports from member-informers on all the major political and theoretical debates.

Davis was a leading protagonist in the major strategic debates and factional struggles that wracked the Communist Party over these decades. During World War II years in which the US and the USSR were allies, Davis helped to lead the effort of the Communist Party to subdue labor and Black attempts at militancy in favor of wartime cooperation. His election campaign and city council tenure were flashpoints in the party fights over the ideas of Earl Browder, who coined the phrase, "Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism." Davis was part of the Communist Party central leadership with William Z. Foster after Browder's expulsion and was at the center of party life in the years of disarray following the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution by Soviet tanks. The FBI's surveillance of Davis resulted in the capture of the deliberations of the party Negro Commission. All of these discussions and debates are well-documented in these files. At the same time, a researcher will find accounts of CPUSA organizing around desegregation, housing, police brutality, labor strike support, youth work in Harlem, and analysis of events in Little Rock. In addition, there is much attention to the party's defense of itself and its members through various waves of government repression. Indeed, the relationship between work on the ground, the witch hunt, and the big national and international debates could be fruitfully explored in these records.